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**THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION AND HUMAN  
EMPOWERMENT: A TEXTUAL AND PRACTICAL  
EVALUATION**

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This thesis has been submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Ph.D. degree in the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Afro-Asiatic Studies, Sign Language and Language Practice, at the University of the Free State.

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# THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION AND HUMAN EMPOWERMENT: A TEXTUAL AND PRACTICAL EVALUATION

## 600 WORD SUMMARY IN AFRIKAANS AND ENGLISH

Key terms are underlined in both the Afrikaans and English section.

### AFRIKAANSE OPSOMMING

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is the hoof- en mees belangrike voorstander van die Hermeneutiek van Suspisie. Hierdie hermeneutiek se hoofdoelwit is die bevryding en bemagtiging van vroue en ander onderdrukte groepe, en het as basis die Bybelse teks. Tekste moet geïnterpreteer word op dieselfde manier as 'n moordtoneel ten einde bewyse te vind van verlore stemme, asook leidrade wat die bevryding van gemarginaliseerde partye sal bewerkstelling. Tekste moet voorts gelees word teen hul androsentriese grein ten einde nuwe betekenis te verkry wat nog nie vantevore aan die religieuse gemeenskap verklaar is nie. Die hermeneutiek van suspisie bestaan uit vier bewegings/stappe: suspisie, herinnering, proklamasie, en kreatiewe verbeelding en aktualisering. Suspisie behels die lees van 'n teks met lense wat gekleur word deur agterdog, en 'n kritiese naby-lees teen die grein van die androsentriese teks. Die stap van Herinnering leer vroue en ander lesers om hul verlede te onthou, asook die werk en stryd van mense wat hul voorafgegaan het. Dit moedig lesers/vroue voorts aan om die stemme van Bybelse partye wat deur die androsentriese grein van die teks stilgemaak is, te onthou. Proklamasie behels die verklaring dat alle tekste wat nie die bevryding van vroue en ander gemarginaliseerde groepe bewerkstellig nie, nie die Woord van God is nie, maar woorde van mans. Kreatiewe verbeelding en aktualisering gee mense die geleentheid om die teks te laat leef deur middel van gedigte, toneelstukke, skilderye, liedere, ens.

Ten spyte van die feit dat Fiorenza se hermeneutiek bekend is in akademiese kringe in die buiteland, is dit in Suid-Afrika beperk tot 'n klein akademiese gemeenskap. By die Universiteit van die Vrystaat, byvoorbeeld, is daar geen stoel vir feministiese teologie nie, ten spyte van die feit dat dit een van die vinnigste groeiende velde binne Teologie vandag is. Die gewone gelowige weet niks van hierdie teologie nie en word nooit blootgestel aan die beginsels daarvan nie.

In hierdie studie wou ek vasstel of Fiorenza se hermeneutiek leerbaar is aan gewone gelowiges, of sulke mense hoegenaamd geïnteresserd is in hierdie hermeneutiek, en of dit die manier waarop hulle tekste lees, kan verander. Ek wou ook verder toets of die beginsels van hierdie hermeneutiek toepasbaar was op Ou Testamentiese narratiewe, aangesien Fiorenza self meestal met die Nuwe Testament werk. Fiorenza is voorts ook Katoliek, en dit moes getoets word of haar beginsels, veral met betrekking tot Proklamasie, enigsens aanvaarbaar is vir 'n Protestantse gehoor.

Die resultaat van die praktiese evaluering word in detail in die tesis bespreek, maar kom in kort op die volgende neer:

1. Die gehoor aan wie dit geleer was, was in staat om die beginsels van die hermeneutiek van suspisie te verstaan, maar daar is gevind dat dit tyd neem om hierdie beginsels in die leesstrategie te assimileer tot sò 'n mate dat dit deel word van die natuurlike proses van lees van teks en wêreld.
2. Die gehoor was nie bereid om toe te gee dat tekste wat nie bevryding bewerkstellig nie, woorde van mans is in plaas van die Woord van God nie.
3. Die hermeneutiek van suspisie kon suksesvol toegepas word op die narratiewe van die Ou Testament, en die vraagstensil wat ek ontwikkel het om hierdie proses te vereenvoudig was van groot hulp vir die gewone leser.

Die gewone Afrikaanse, middelklas, vroulike gelowige het min kennis of bewussyn van haar religieuse agtergrond en ly gevolglik onder dieselfde oorgeërfde piëteit as haar voormoeders. In die laaste 100 jaar het hierdie vrou geensins gevorder op die pad na bevryding nie. Die hermeneutiek van suspisie kan hierdie toestand teenwerk, maar tyd is nodig om dit te inkorporeer in die religieuse beeld van die gewone gelowige.

### ENGLISH SUMMARY

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is the main and most prominent proponent of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion. This hermeneutics has as aim the liberation and empowerment of women and other subjugated groups, and starts from the base of the Biblical text. Texts must be interpreted in the same way as a murder scene in order to find traces of lost voices and clues which will enable the liberation of marginalized parties. Texts must also be read against their androcentric grain in order to glean new meanings that have not before been proclaimed to the religious community. The hermeneutics of suspicion consists of four main movements/steps: suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and creative imagination and actualization. Suspicion entails the reading of a text with lenses coloured by suspicion, and a critical close reading against the grain of the androcentric text. The step of Remembrance teaches women and other readers to remember their past and the work and struggles of parties that have gone before them. It furthermore encourages readers/women to remember the voices of the Biblical parties that have been silenced by the androcentric grain of the text. Proclamation involves the declaration that all texts that do not enable the liberation of women and other marginalized groups, are not the Word of God but the words of men. Creative imagination and actualization gives people the opportunity to bring the text to life by means of poems, plays, paintings, songs, etc.

Despite the fact that Fiorenza's hermeneutics is well-known in academic circles overseas, it is limited to small academic communities locally. At the University of the Free State, for example, there is no chair for feminist theology — this despite the fact that it is one of the fastest-growing fields within theology today. The ordinary lay believer knows little to nothing about this theology, and is never given any exposure to its tenets. In this study I wanted to test whether Fiorenza's hermeneutics is teachable to a group of lay believers, whether such believers are interested in this hermeneutics and whether it can change the way they read the text. I furthermore wanted to test the principles of this hermeneutics on the text of Old Testament narratives, since Fiorenza herself works mainly with the New Testament. Fiorenza is additionally Catholic, and it had to be tested whether her principles, especially with regards to her step of Proclamation, were acceptable to a Protestant audience.

The result of this practical evaluation is listed in detail in the work, but in short amounts to the following:

1. The audience it was taught to was able to grasp the principles of the hermeneutics of suspicion, but it was found that it takes time to assimilate these principles into the reading strategy to such a degree that it becomes a natural way of reading the text and the world.
2. The audience was not willing to concede that texts that do not work liberation in hand are words of men and not the Word of God.
3. The hermeneutics of suspicion could successfully be used on the narratives of the Old Testament, and the questions stencil I developed to aid in this process was able to greatly simplify this process for the lay reader.

The ordinary Afrikaans, middle class, female believer has little knowledge or awareness of her religious heritage and resultingly suffers unknowingly under the same inherited piety of her foremothers. She has progressed little towards liberation in the past 100 years. The hermeneutics of suspicion can aid to combat this situation, but time is needed to incorporate this into the religious every-day life of the lay believer.

Throughout this work, use has been made of the artwork of Janet McKenzie. Ms McKenzie kindly gave permission for the use of her artwork, and it may not be reproduced without the permission of the artist.

In this thesis I also include a CD of a radio interview held with Philip Kotzé on the topic of Feminist Theology.

Each chapter furthermore has a few striking quotations taken from works that were studied.

With the above, I endeavour to make this work multi-faceted, including audio, visual and literary elements, in the true ideal of feminist study.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

1.1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.2. METHOD OF PRESENTATION FOLLOWED	2
1.3. FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM	4
1.3.1. The Problem	4
1.3.2. Aim of the Study	6
1.3.3. Motivation	8
1.4. METHODOLOGY	9
1.5. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY	14
1.6. DESIGN	15
1.7. INTRODUCTION ON FEMINISM	18
1.8. SHORT DISCUSSION ON THE PLACE AND AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN FEMINIST STUDY	46
1.9. FEMINISM AND THE CHURCH	51
1.10. FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY	52
1.11. SHORT INTRODUCTION ON READING AGAINST THE GRAIN	55
1.12. SHORT INTRODUCTION ON FEMINIST THEOLOGY'S COMMITTED STANDPOINT	58
1.13. FEMINIST THEOLOGY'S LINKS WITH OTHER SCIENCES	62
1.13.1. Ecotheology	63
1.13.2. Ecojustice	65
1.13.3. Ecofeminism	65
1.13.4. Quantum Theology	69
1.14. FEMINIST EMPHASIS ON DIFFERENCE	69
1.15. CERTAIN CONCEPTS EXPLAINED	71

## CHAPTER 2

### THE STATE OF SOCIETY THAT MAKES A FEMINIST THEOLOGY NECESSARY

2.1. INTRODUCTION	82
2.2. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PATRIARCHY	85
2.2.1. The Bible as patriarchal text	90
2.2.2. Gender relations of the Ancient Near East reviewed	91
2.2.3. Influence of Patriarchy on the Church	94
2.2.4. Patriarchy's influence on women's labour	102
2.3. WOMEN'S PROBLEMATIC LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR HISTORY	106
2.4. RETRIEVING POSITIVE FEMALE IMAGES OF GOD	111
2.5. USING THE PARADIGM OF JESUS TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION	113
2.6. WHAT POWER DOES WOMAN HAVE?	115
2.7. THE UNIQUENESS OF THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA	117
2.7.1. The guilt women bear	119
2.7.2. The violence women bear	120

2.7.3. African culture and theology	124
2.7.4. The problems of translation	126
2.7.5. Criticism of local theological scholarship	126
2.7.5.1. Locally, the myth of neutrality persists	129
2.7.5.2. Detached theology's inability to aid transformation	130
2.7.5.3. Schüssler Fiorenza's alternative	131
2.8. CONCLUDING REMARK	132

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE DEVELOPMENT AND POSITION OF FEMINIST CRITICISM**

3.1. INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF THE CHAPTER	135
3.2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST CRITICISM	136
3.2.1. The Waves of feminism	137
3.2.1.1. First wave	137
3.2.1.2. Second wave	139
3.2.1.2.1. Liberal feminism	140
3.2.1.2.2. Cultural feminism	141
3.2.1.2.3. Radical feminism	141
3.2.1.2.4. Socialist feminism	142
3.2.1.3. Third wave	144
3.2.1.3.1. Attention to difference	144
3.2.1.3.2. Ecofeminism	144
3.2.1.3.3. Women's experience as source of knowledge	145
3.2.1.4. Contemporary feminist theology	148
3.2.1.4.1. Revolutionary feminist theology	148
3.2.1.4.2. Reformist Christian feminist theology	149
3.2.1.4.3. Reconstructionist Christian feminist theology	150
3.3. THE NATURE OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY	151
3.3.1. Ecofeminism	152
3.3.2. Identity	154
3.3.3. Putting feminist theology into practice	155
3.4. THE STRUCTURE OF WESTERN SOCIETY	158
3.5. FEMINISM'S ADVOCACY STANCE	164
3.5.1. Neutrality exposed as myth	164
3.5.2. Feminism's committed nature	164
3.5.3. Reading and interpreting are not objective	165
3.5.4. Feminism sees the Bible as a patriarchal text	167
3.6. CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY	167
3.6.1. Sexism	169
3.6.2. Influence of feminism on society	170
3.7. FEMINISM AND THE BIBLE	173
3.7.1. The background	173
3.7.2. Challenges to academic feminism	174
3.7.3. Challenges in the African context	176
3.7.4. The importance of the Bible	178
3.7.5. The Bible as Word of God	184
3.7.6. Suspicion of the Biblical text	191
3.7.7. Reading the Bible holistically	198

3.7.8. Rhetorical criticism	199
3.7.9. Internal critics in the Bible	200
3.7.10. Feminist criticism of language	201
3.8. THE VIEW OF AND LANGUAGE FOR GOD	204
3.8.1. Reinterpretation of traditional imagery	214
3.8.2. Revising God-language	215
3.9. THE VIEW HELD OF WOMEN IN RELIGION	244
3.9.1. Bodies in religion (Symbolism)	256
3.10. FEMINISM ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT	261
3.11. IDENTIFYING THE SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN	268
3.11.1. Women's cooperation in their own subjugation	265
3.12. FEMINISM AND DIVERSITY AMONG WOMEN	266
3.13. THE ULTIMATE AIM OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY	270
3.13.1. Liberation of the mind	271
3.13.2. Liberation from social oppression	272
3.13.3. Feminist liberation theology	273
3.13.4. Challenges in the African context	275
3.13.5. Hermeneutics and interpretation	278
3.13.6. Reading the text	282
3.13.7. Liberation and the Church	286
3.14. FEMINISM AND PIETY — A WORD OF WARNING	289
3.14.1. The new Church	296
3.15. CONCLUDING REMARK	297

## CHAPTER 4

### DOMINANT READING STRATEGIES AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA

4.1. INTRODUCTION	299
4.2. VARIOUS APPROACHES TO NARRATIVE TEXTS	300
4.2.1. Narrative theory	300
4.2.2. Performative language theory	301
4.2.3. Historical criticism	302
4.2.3.1. Fiorenza's reading behind the text	303
4.2.3.2. Fiorenza's problems with historical criticism	304
4.3. WOMEN'S NEED TO REDEFINE THEIR HISTORY	305
4.4. WOMEN'S PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP TO LANGUAGE	306
4.5. CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY	307
4.6. THE SHIFT IN THEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS	311
4.6.1. The doctrinal paradigm	318
4.6.2. The historical paradigm	318
4.6.3. The pastoral-theological paradigm	318
4.7. SITUATING ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY	320
4.7.1. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and the authority of the Bible	320
4.7.2. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's position of commitment to liberation	324

4.8. MOVING TOWARDS A CRITICAL FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION	328
4.8.1. The hermeneutic "dance"	328
4.8.2. Revisiting the activity of reading and interpretation	335
4.8.3. Becoming a conscious, suspicious reader	342
4.8.4. Feminism and intertextuality	346
4.8.5. Using female experience as measure of authority	348
4.8.6. Moving beyond the text to social-historical context	357
4.8.7. The problem of "canon-within-the-canon"	363
4.8.8. The <i>ekklēsia</i> of women	366
4.9. THE PRINCIPLES WITHIN ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA'S WORK	371
4.9.1. The hermeneutics of suspicion	373
4.9.2. The hermeneutics of remembrance	375
4.9.3. The hermeneutics of proclamation	377
4.9.4. The hermeneutics of creative imagination and actualization	378
4.10. EVALUATION OF ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA'S HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION FOR SOUTH AFRICA	380

## CHAPTER 5

### CRITICAL READING OF SELECTED NARRATIVE TEXTS — THE APPLICATION OF MY WORKING MODEL

5.1. INTRODUCTION	386
5.1.1. Questions about suspicion	390
5.1.2. Questions about remembrance	390
5.1.3. Questions about proclamation	391
5.1.4. Questions about actualization	391
5.2. GENESIS 2-3: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT EVE	391
5.2.1. Eve in Tradition	391
5.2.2. Patriarchy in the text	395
5.2.3. Eve and the Author	397
5.2.4. Ideals of subversive readings	398
5.2.5. "Man" in language	401
5.2.6. "Man" from earth	402
5.2.7. Woman from Man	403
5.2.8. Woman as helper	404
5.2.9. Animal naming	405
5.2.10. Sexuality in Eden	407
5.2.11. Man and Woman in Genesis	409
5.2.12. God Talks	413
5.2.13. God and Woman	415
5.2.14. The Fall in Genesis	416
5.2.15. Men's rulership	419
5.2.16. Eve the Mother	421
5.2.17. Female knowledge	421
5.2.18. Questions asked to the text	424
5.3. GENESIS 19: THE NARRATIVES ABOUT LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS	427

5.3.1. The problem of the modern reader	427
5.3.2. Lot and his daughters in Sodom and the cave	428
5.3.3. Patriarchal apology & traditional explanation of events	429
5.3.4. Reading in a broad feminist perspective	429
5.3.4.1. The messengers	431
5.3.4.2. Lot	431
5.3.4.3. Men of the city	431
5.3.5. The problematic offering of the daughters	433
5.3.6. Xenophobia	434
5.3.7. Results of a broader reading	435
5.3.8. The daughters trick Lot	435
5.3.9. Reading in a broad feminist perspective — comedy	436
5.3.10. Questions asked to the text	438
<b>5.4. GENESIS 16 &amp; 21: THE NARRATIVES ABOUT HAGAR</b>	<b>440</b>
5.4.1. Sarai infertile	441
5.4.2. Hagar the surrogate mother	441
5.4.3. Hagar flees into the desert	442
5.4.4. The covenant with Hagar	443
5.4.5. Hagar is sent away	445
5.4.6. Abraham listens without hearing	446
5.4.7. Hagar and Sarah	447
5.4.8. Power abuse	448
5.4.9. Women are not perfect and should not be portrayed as such	448
5.4.10. Patriarchy overshadows women	449
5.4.11. Hagar builds a house	451
5.4.12. Hagar the hero	452
5.4.13. Hagar's story in African Christianity	452
5.4.14. Contemporary grassroots readings of Hagar	454
5.4.14.1. Caucasian women interpret the text	454
5.4.14.2. Latina women interpret the text	455
5.4.14.3. Black South African women interpret the text	456
5.4.15. Questions asked to the text	456
<b>5.5. GENESIS 22: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE</b>	<b>458</b>
5.5.1. Abraham's sacrifice problematized	459
5.5.2. Biblical parental roles	460
5.5.3. The high value of obedience	461
5.5.4. The result of the sacrifice	461
5.5.5. The result of female absence and other exclusions	462
5.5.6. Questions asked to the text	464
<b>5.6. GENESIS 31: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RACHEL</b>	<b>465</b>
5.6.1. Motherhood and female value	466
5.6.2. The women's complaint	467
5.6.3. Rachel steals the <i>teraphim</i>	467
5.6.4. Rachel's double words	468
5.6.5. Women's secondary status in the story	470
5.6.6. Rachel fights the patriarchal grain of the text	470
5.6.7. Social shifts implied by Rachel's action	471
5.6.8. Questions asked to the text	471
<b>5.7. GENESIS 34: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DINAH'S RAPE</b>	<b>473</b>
5.7.1. Verse 1	474
5.7.2. Verse 2a	474

5.7.3. Verse 2b	475
5.7.4. Verse 3	476
5.7.5. Reading Dinah's narrative as a feminist	477
5.7.6. The patriarchal undergirding of rape	477
5.7.7. Blaming the victim	479
5.7.8. Rape in Western society	479
5.7.9. Questions asked to the text	480
<b>5.8. GENESIS 38: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT TAMAR</b>	<b>481</b>
5.8.1. The Hebrew widow	483
5.8.2. Tamar's action defined	484
5.8.3. Female ingenuity towers above patriarchal convention	485
5.8.4. Is Tamar a trickster?	485
5.8.5. Ironic wordplay in Tamar's narrative	486
5.8.6. Who plays the fool to the trickster?	486
5.8.7. Feminist theology in Tamar's narrative	487
5.8.8. Questions asked to the text	487
<b>5.9. EXODUS 1-2: THE WOMEN IN THE LIFE OF MOSES</b>	<b>489</b>
5.9.1. Women act from the start	490
5.9.2. The beginning of Moses' story	491
5.9.3. Moving towards a feminist reading	494
5.9.4. Women used in a patriarchal text	495
5.9.5. Women refuse to be silenced by the text	496
5.9.6. Miriam a prominent woman	498
5.9.7. Questions asked to the text	499
<b>5.10. JUDGES 4-5: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DEBORAH</b>	<b>501</b>
5.10.1. Deborah the exemplary judge	502
5.10.2. Who wrote Deborah's story?	502
5.10.3. Wordplay in Deborah's song	503
5.10.4. Patriarchal efforts to fashion Deborah a husband	503
5.10.5. Deborah the leader	504
5.10.6. Questions asked to the text	505
<b>5.11. JUDGES 4-5: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT Jael</b>	<b>507</b>
5.11.1. Two worlds mix	507
5.11.2. Sexual tones in the tale	508
5.11.3. Jael from feminist perspective	509
5.11.4. Questions asked to the text	510
<b>5.12. JUDGES 11: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER</b>	<b>512</b>
5.12.1. The daughter's ritual	513
5.12.2. Resistance to the text	514
5.12.3. Multiple sacrifices of the daughter	515
5.12.4. Jephthah's perfect daughter	516
5.12.5. The text shields Jephthah	516
5.12.6. Patriarchy steals the daughter	517
5.12.7. Problems with Jephthah	518
5.12.8. Laments of the modern age	519
5.12.9. A feminist reading of Jephthah	519
5.12.10. Questions asked to the text	521
<b>5.13. JUDGES 16.4-22: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DELILAH</b>	<b>523</b>
5.13.1. What do we know about Delilah?	523
5.13.2. Delilah exploits Samson	524
5.13.3. Delilah exploited by the patriarchal writer	524

5.13.4. Delilah exposes the reader's presuppositions	525
5.13.5. A feminist reading of Delilah	527
5.13.6. Is Delilah really the central problem?	528
5.13.7. Delilah's problematic betrayal	528
5.13.8. Questions asked to the text	529
5.14. JUDGES 19-21: THE LEVITE'S WIFE	532
5.14.1. How do feminist theologians explain and exegete this tale?	532
5.14.2. Criticism of feminist theologians' exegesis of this tale	533
5.14.3. Six major developments	535
5.14.3.1. One	535
5.14.3.2. Two	535
5.14.3.3. Three	536
5.14.3.4. Four	536
5.14.3.5. Five	537
5.14.3.6. Six	537
5.14.4. Questions asked to the text	538
5.15. RUTH: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RUTH	540
5.15.1. Ruth's oath has a life of its own	541
5.15.2. Ruth's commitment to Naomi scrutinized	542
5.15.3. The influence of a man on the bond	543
5.15.4. Naomi's complex roles	544
5.15.5. Ruth's complex roles	545
5.15.6. Boaz's complex roles	546
5.15.7. The text and the Law	546
5.15.8. The text does not escape patriarchy	547
5.15.9. Female characters resist patriarchy	548
5.15.10. The Levirate Law criticized	549
5.15.11. The story of Ruth in African culture	550
5.15.12. Questions asked to the text	551
5.16. ESTHER: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT ESTHER	554
5.16.1. Negative patriarchal commentary	554
5.16.2. Positive commentary	555
5.16.3. Political and social background to Esther	555
5.16.4. How Esther gains favour	556
5.16.5. Esther the wise daughter	556
5.16.6. Esther the trickster	557
5.16.7. Esther's tale for African readers	557
5.16.8. Esther's tale for children	558
5.16.9. Questions asked to the text	559
5.17. 1 SAMUEL 18 – 2 SAMUEL 6: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT MICHAL	561
5.17.1. Readers should beware of simplification	562
5.17.2. Did Michal love David?	562
5.17.3. Did David love Michal?	563
5.17.4. Silence about Michal's feelings	564
5.17.5. Michal's outburst scrutinized	565
5.17.6. Michal isolated from other women	566
5.17.7. Michal's textual confinement	567
5.17.8. Final remarks	568
5.17.9. Questions asked to the text	568
5.18. 2 SAMUEL 11.1-5: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT BATHSHEBA	570
5.18.1. Patriarchal interest in the story	570

5.18.2. What was the nature of their interaction?	571
5.18.3. Ways of raping Bathsheba in the text	572
5.18.4. Patriarchy blames the victim	572
5.18.5. Does God blame Bathsheba?	573
5.18.6. Patriarchal considerations dominate the text	573
5.18.7. Final remarks	574
5.18.8. Questions asked to the text	574
5.19. CONCLUSION	576
5.19.1. The stencil of questions evaluated	576
5.19.1.1. Questions about suspicion	577
5.19.1.2. Questions about remembrance	578
5.19.1.3. Questions about proclamation	578
5.19.1.4. Questions about actualization	579

## CHAPTER 6

### A CRITIQUE (THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL) OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY'S MAIN FOCUS POINTS, AND A TESTING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

6.1. INTRODUCTION	581
6.2. WRONG CONCLUSIONS USED BY FEMINIST THEOLOGY AS BASIS FOR CRITIQUE	582
6.2.1. The influence of Role-Model Theology on feminist theological thinking	584
6.2.2. The "Christification" of Creation as a result of Role-Model Theology	585
6.2.3. Praxis of the Christification of Creation in the Church — an example	589
6.2.4. The Evangelical standpoint as opposed to the Feminist standpoint	590
6.3. THE PROBLEMATIC MALENESS OF GOD	593
6.4. LANGUAGE DOES NOT MAKE REALITY	595
6.5. HOW FAR CAN THE TEXT BE PULLED BY BOTH SIDES?	599
6.6. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FEMALE PIETY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT	601
6.6.1. Characteristics of the piety of our Foremothers	602
6.6.2. Catharina Allegonda Van Lier (1768-1801)	605
6.6.3. Hester Venter (B1750)	606
6.6.4. Magdalena Jonker (1765-1831)	607
6.6.5. Matilda Smith (1749-1821)	607
6.6.6. Susanna Smit (1799-1863)	609
6.6.7. Tant Alie of the Transvaal (1866-1908)	611
6.6.8. Johanna Brandt (1876-1964)	612
6.6.9. Marie du Toit (1880-1931)	614
6.6.10. Looking back at our Foremothers	615
6.7. THE RELIGIOUS INHERITANCE OF NATIVE FOREMOTHERS	616
6.7.1. Krotoa	616
6.7.2. Vehettge Tikkuie	617
6.7.3. Segatisho	618



6.7.4. Princess Emma	618
6.7.5. Libuseng Lebaka-Ketshabile	619
6.7.6. The Pink Ladies	620
6.8. INTRODUCING A NEW LIBERATIVE PIETY	622
6.8.1. Initial problems encountered	622
6.8.2. Introducing alternative images of God	624
6.8.3. Introducing the concept of equality	625
6.8.4. Openness to new insights	627
6.8.5. Support in Church and Community	627
6.8.6. Results of the questionnaires	628
6.9. FEMALE PIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA — PAST TO PRESENT	629
6.9.1. Evaluating Fiorenza's hermeneutic in the South African context	630

## CHAPTER 7

### A CRITICAL GLANCE BACKWARDS AND A LOOK AT THE WAY FORWARD

7.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER	634
7.2. THEOLOGICAL CHANGES	635
7.3. NEW IMAGES	636
7.4. THE ROLE OF SIN	637
7.5. WOMEN'S BODIES IN RELIGION AND SOCIETY	638
7.6. THE PROBLEM OF INTERNALIZING OPPRESSION	641
7.7. WHAT IS EXPECTED OF MEN?	641
7.8. THE CHALLENGES TO AND IN AFRICA	643
7.9. A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IDEA OF READING WITH SUSPICION	644
7.10. SOLUTIONS OFFERED	647
7.10.1. From what must we be saved?	648
7.10.2. Whose neighbours are we?	649
7.10.3. Are we free to be moral?	649
7.11. CHILDREN – THE NEXT GENERATION	650
7.12. THE EKKLĒSIA	652
7.13. UBUNTU	655
7.14. GROUP WORK	658
7.15. CONCLUSION	674

## 8. ADDENDUM

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION ACCOMPANYING EVERY CHAPTER

Group discussion topics to chapter 1	680
Group discussion topics to chapter 2	682
Group discussion topics to chapter 3	685
Group discussion topics to chapter 4	687
Group discussion topics to chapter 5	688

Group discussion topics to chapter 6

704

**9. LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED**

707



**JESUS OF THE PEOPLE**  
JANET MCKENZIE

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY**

### **1.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, attention will be given to introducing the reader to the field of feminism. This introduction will paint in broad strokes that which will be filled in with greater detail in later chapters. This chapter will also acquaint the reader with the method of presentation to be followed, the context against which this study is undertaken, and the methodology to be used.

For years I have been battling to understand the academic concepts of hermeneutics, critical rhetoric, feminism, feminist theology, feminist criticism, deconstruction, postmodernism and much more. I am an educated middle-class white woman living in South Africa, a country on the southernmost tip of Africa. English is my second language after Afrikaans. I am married, have two children, and have never been hungry in my life. I realise that this sets me apart from 98% of the population on my continent.

Why this autobiographical statement at the start? In accordance with the principles of feminist criticism, one needs to point out to the reader where one is standing, from what perspective one is looking at the problem, and the context that has led one to occupy the space one does.

The arguments I have come across during my years of study have been very enlightening and broadened my mind and view considerably. I have also experienced it giving me insight into the dynamics of the faith I hold and the way it impacts my life. I have managed to become less naive of society, the media, and especially traditional Christian theology and Church praxis. As a woman who has to a large extent grown up in a Church that to this day does not ordain women in the ministry, I know intimately all the struggles and frustrations of the female in the faith, and the inner dynamics of getting to know (and even harder – love!) a God who was seemingly not approachable in any way.

Chapter one paints in broad strokes the field of feminist theology and feminist philosophy. **True to the nature of the type of study to be undertaken, it is necessary to refer to certain philosophies and presuppositions time and again, in greater detail, as they become relevant to an argument.** The broad strokes to be painted in this chapter entail a view of what feminist theology is, how it perceives and handles the Biblical text, the nature of its relationship to the Church, its connection to other sciences, and the foremost proponent of the method I will be investigating and utilizing. Of special concern to me is to gauge at the end, whether this philosophy is, if doable and applicable, equally received among Christians who might hold a different view of the Biblical text.

Knowing what I know now, and having lived for years the impact of this knowledge in my life, I have had to ponder the way in which to present this current study.

## **1.2. METHOD OF PRESENTATION FOLLOWED**

Traditional views in the academic world hold that Doctorate studies have to be very scientific, written in scientific (does that mean difficult to comprehend and explain to others?) language. I have worked through many books that have probably never been handled by any one other than a scholar looking for specific information, and communicating that knowledge only to the chosen few sitting in University benches. In communication of this work my ambition is to be able to reach a wider audience than just the academic studying the topic of feminist theology. One of the very attractive philosophies of feminism is: Whoever decided what scientific language and presentation looks like, did not speak for all of us!

The ideal is to be able to impart knowledge from this study to the women and men in my world, the people I come across, the people who can benefit from it the most. These people would be theology students, hoping to impact future communities of faith, domestic workers, housewives, young professionals, divorced women with children, people tired of the Christian faith, cynics and scorched people, even mature believers who attend Bible study groups regularly, and the like. I realise that this is a broad spectrum indeed, and that in South Africa this task is even more intricate than first insights might imply. Not only are women's experiences different from men's, but it quickly became clear that women's experiences differ along lines of language, culture, economic class, academic history etc, to name but a few.

The feminist viewpoint in structures of research is that power structures within the academy have necessitated validating our thinking by rooting it in malestream sources, and presenting it along malestream lines (Christ in Mantin 2002:118). This malestream way of presenting academic knowledge has traditionally been seen as the only way of conducting and presenting reputable and trustworthy research. Anything differing from this method was suspect and inferior. Some parts of such a study can be presented in easily accessible language which can make for interesting reading for any person, but other areas of focus within the field requires that one use more formalized (academic) language and definitions that are not always used in society. For this reason, some key definitions have been explained at the end of this first chapter. Keeping in mind the desire to keep many arguments simple, it must be admitted that it is not always possible. In order to bring a great deal of the material to the lay listener, it would be necessary to conduct a seminar in which these aspects can be presented to the audience in a less formalized, academic fashion, which I did in August of 2005. Despite my desire to further keep the language simple, complex terms had to be used, which would require more concentration from the reader than just a casual reading. I am quite sure that any reader, however, will be able to comprehend the material if her/his interest is sufficient. "Big words" are a part of what makes feminist theology claim integrity for itself, as the illustration from the life of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza illustrates.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes about two scenes from her past when a professor commented on her use of "big" and "difficult" words when she used the term *hermeneutics*, and the description of her work's "*Germanic stylistic heavy-handedness*" with its high level of exegetical-historical difficulty and theoretical sophistication (Schüssler Fiorenza 2000:xv-xvi) which was criticized by highly trained colleagues but not by audiences without theological education. I had a similiar experience one evening in 2004. In a class for making lead glass windows I once shared a table with a 50-year old male judge. When we started talking and I used the word "substantial", he immediately remarked on this "big" word I was using. Later, when he asked me what my doctorate was about and I responded that it was in the field of feminist theology, his immediate reaction was worth its weight in gold, since it was unmeditated and the first natural reaction to spring to mind:

"What are you women always fretting about feminism? You have everything now, what more do you want?"

This reaction represents the mindset of many males in the professional walk of life, who are simply unable to comprehend what the fuss is about and why women are still not satisfied with everything they have access to and what they seem to have accomplished. It also illustrates the antagonism about further discussing the topic. But despite living in a country with the most liberal Constitution in the world, later statistics will make it quite clear that the work to liberate women has only just begun.

Biblical hermeneutics may be said to be simply a method of reading the Bible. But that method must be explicated and organized. One or another method has always been practiced, of course, but often without explicit awareness of it. The reader will come to see that there is no such thing as a nonhermeneutic reading of the Bible. And this will itself be a great step forward (Croatto 1987:ix-x).

My own desire was to make this study an easily accessible, step-by-step "handbook" on getting to know some of the inner workings of a specific type of feminism, and how to make that impact the reader's way of handling the Bible, knowing God, experiencing the Church, and understanding the rest of the world. If I managed to do this, it would have been a great achievement. The ideal is for this work to read easily, and to be relaxing enough to be read as a bedside book! (Is that not where we read the Bible most of the time in modern day life?), but this is not always possible. Some arguments have to be, by their very nature, quite technical, and for this I wish the reader to have understanding.

### **1.3. FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM**

#### **1.3.1. The Problem**

The study of feminism and feminist hermeneutics in South Africa is relatively small in scope. There are few students in the field and exposure to the field has been limited. At present this field carries only an academic profile, and a limited one at that. Despite a boom in the topic of feminism and feminist theology internationally, South African academics focusing on this topic are few and far between.

My interest lies among my own peer group. How do people like myself, sharing the same background and speaking the same language, having grown up in the same

Church, experience feminist theology? I have found a number of questions to be helpful in honing the problem:

- How eager are lay people (ordinary readers) to learn the tenets of a hermeneutics of suspicion?
- How effectively can the contours and principles of a hermeneutics of suspicion be taught to a lay audience?
- How does a Protestant (Calvinist) audience experience the proposals brought by a hermeneutics of suspicion with regards to the naming and identification of God the Father, the authority of the Bible, the contours of the Church, and the liberation from oppression?
- Can Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion be used on the narratives of the Old Testament?
- Can a list of questions be drawn from this hermeneutics, to serve as a template for use on all such narratives in order to create a type of self-help set of questions?

In description of the context as has been put forth in chapter 1 thus far, the problem surfaces, and it is initially best clarified as a list of various questions:

1. In light of the international context against which feminist theology operates, how far did we progress in South Africa? Specifically, how far did we progress when we measure the piety of the average lay believer? Has feminist theology gained any ground in the piety of South African believers?
2. How do we sensitize the unsophisticated reading public to aspects in the Biblical narrative that are ignored/hidden in the text and that relate to silenced female voices?
3. How does the reading strategy of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza enable the readers of Old Testament narratives to become conscious readers, handling the text with suspicion and working towards their own liberation?
4. How receptive are lay believers to Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion?
5. Can lay believers easily learn the tenets of a hermeneutics of suspicion, and does this easily become part of the faith life of lay believers?
6. The ideal is to steer away from a position of dominance of the facilitator/theologian working with a group. Members of the group should become active participants in creating their own theologies of liberation and emancipation. How successful is this endeavour?



The title of this thesis is: The hermeneutics of suspicion and human empowerment — a textual and practical evaluation. From this one can gather that the problem revolves around the current state of feminist hermeneutics and its empowering prospects — specifically this study explores whether a particular feminist hermeneutics, namely the hermeneutics of suspicion, contributes to the scene and whether it is able to provide a basis for an interpretation model for Scripture in the hope that it would sensitize and empower lay reader communities. Can the hermeneutics of suspicion as put forth by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza serve as model for use by lay reader communities, while at the same time empowering them, sensitizing them, liberating them and making them suspicious readers?

### **1.3.2. Aim of the Study**

Another aspect when one formulates the problem has to do with the nature of theology as different from other sciences. After all, even feminist theology needs to concede that not all viewpoints are equal, and, ultimately, we cannot lose sight of the fact that, at least as far as the goal of theology should go, people's souls are at stake. On the one hand the traditional self-understanding of theology makes sense in as far as one is sensitive to the desire to understand the text in the best way (as God intended it to be understood) so that people can know God in the right way, live as He wills, and reach heaven. Or is this even the goal of modern theology? It seems to me that this goal has shifted and that, since heaven and hell is no longer a reality people admit to, that the whole orientation of theology has shifted from a sense of "getting sinners to know God and go to heaven" to a rather modern humanism with God as the ultimate last resort and life raft after all other needs have been seen to in human terms.

All religions have to answer three basic questions:

1. Who creates life?
2. Who brings evil into the world?
3. Who mediates between humans and the supernatural? To whom do the gods speak?

The metaphors and symbols that answer these questions have changed through the ages:

1. Emphasis in ancient times started moving from the vulva to the seed of man.
2. There was a move away from the tree of life to the tree of knowledge, and

3. Celebration moved from the Sacred Marriage to the Biblical Covenants (Lerner 1986:146).

Does feminist theology answer the spiritual needs of people it is presented to? Does the hermeneutics presented by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Hermeneutics of Suspicion) meet the expectation of the audience? Is the audience interested in it at all? This is, to my knowledge, the first time a study will be undertaken to specifically test the Hermeneutics of Suspicion on Old Testament narratives, and then specifically test it in a religious setting made up of a group of interested volunteers, and get feedback from the "ordinary"/lay reader audience. I believe a study of this subject has become indispensable in the light of the unfamiliarity that exists about this problem.

In order to achieve this goal it is necessary to make a study of feminist philosophy and feminist hermeneutics to bridge the gap between reader and text. General objectives of the study will entail:

1. A study of feminist philosophy.
2. The connection between hermeneutics, suspicion and feminist philosophy.
3. How this paradigm is translated to lay readers.

Specific objectives of the study will entail:

- 1) Designing a practical model for the reading of the Old Testament texts from the perspective above.
- 2) Within the hermeneutics of suspicion attention will be given to the following:
  - i) Plotting androcentric language within the text.
  - ii) Identifying patriarchal elements within the text.
  - iii) Pointing out social criticism within the text.
  - iv) Identifying elements of ideology in the text.
- 3) This model is to be refined until it can be tested with concrete groups. The model will be tested through empirical field work by means of group sessions.
- 4) Practical hints and results are to be given after the field work. This will include possible successes and shortcomings of the model.
- 5) How can this model and study field ultimately be used by groups of readers in a way that enhances personal empowerment and liberation from experienced oppressive situations.

Specific aims that this study has in mind include:

1. Testing the ease with which a hermeneutics of suspicion can be taught to a lay (non-academic) audience.
2. Testing the reception of this hermeneutics among a group of volunteers from a different dogmatic background (Protestant/Calvinist).
3. Testing the degree of empowerment, consciousness and liberation resulting from this contact.
4. Drawing up a set of questions echoing this hermeneutics, that can be used as a template on all Old Testament narratives, in order to be used by any person wanting to utilize this hermeneutics (lay people included).
5. Teaching a lay audience to ask new questions to the text.
6. Empowering the lay audience to confidently dialogue with the ancient text.
7. Interpreting this dynamic between a hermeneutics of suspicion, a South African Afrikaans audience, and the Biblical text, and reporting on the results.

In light of the aims of this study, one needs to identify the reasons why such a study is an important and necessary undertaking.

### **1.3.3. Motivation**

I found this specific study which I am presenting necessary to measure whether feminism and feminist philosophy, which has up to now been mainly Eurocentric in scope, can be contextualized in the African context (in a specific setting within the South African context). This field has also been limited to academic discussion. Can it be easily accessed by the inexperienced or naïve reader (West calls this reader the "ordinary reader")? The purpose of this study is to develop and evaluate a productive model to use on Old Testament texts in order to make them accessible to lay readers and to ultimately empower these individuals to social transformation in the own and broader existence.

Literature that will be referred to, includes literature from local as well as overseas academic sources. A major motivation for this study is that light will be cast on the interaction between a feminist hermeneutics, the Biblical text, and a lay audience. Since I am a white, middle-class, educated, Afrikaner, Afrikaans female, this needs to be seen as not just a contextualisation of myself and my work, but also needs to point out the limitations thereof. It will be stated time and again during the course of this work that women from different settings need to take ownership of their own feminist theology and work out the contours of their experiences, oppression,

liberation etc for themselves. The point is also made by Black feminist theologians that white feminist theologians tend to speak on their behalf, claiming their work to represent the "black" experience. I have no ambition or desire to make such a claim. I am thoroughly aware of the limitations of my background, as well as the specific viewpoints and interests it has awarded me.

In light of this fact, careful consideration has been given to the amount of work used of Black liberation and feminist theologians from the African continent specifically, and I have come to the conclusion that they, in their turn, also do not necessarily speak for me or represent my interests. Mention is made of such work where it forms part of the argument, but the study does not and cannot go into the "African experience of oppression in its various forms" in depth for this obvious reason.

After the above look at the formulation of the problem as put forth in this study, a description of the methodology to be used is required. Firstly, a broad look at various methodological options will be given, after which the scope will be narrowed to explain the methodology of this particular study.

#### **1.4. METHODOLOGY**

A research methodology defines what the activity of research is, how to proceed, how to measure progress, and what constitutes success. Most good pieces balance several methodologies. A fine line must be walked between too much theory, possibly irrelevant to any real problem, and voluminous implementation, which can represent an incoherent mix of ad-hoc solutions. It must be kept in mind that methodologies are social (MIT AI Lab).

The two main methods are quantitative methodologies and qualitative methodologies. Under these reside various options to choose from:

##### **1. Quantitative Methodologies**

Quantitative methodologies involve those methodologies, such as closed surveys, structured interviews and sociograms which enable data to be collected, measured and compared with a standard (Society and Culture Association). It also includes statistical analysis, performance data, attitude data, observational and census data (Maczewski 2003:10; Wikipedia). A quantitative approach is one in which the researcher primarily uses post-positivist claims for developing knowledge (i.e. cause

and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories) (Creswell 2003:19).

## **2. Qualitative Methodologies**

Qualitative methodologies involve a phenomenological perspective whereby researchers aim to understand, report and evaluate the meaning of events for people in particular situations, that is, how their social world is structured by the participants in it. The focus of qualitative methodologies is the way in which participants (rather than the researcher) interpret their experiences and construct reality. Examples of this are an unstructured interview, focus group, open-ended questionnaire and participant observation (Society and Culture Association). This methodology also includes text and image analysis, emerging methods, and audiovisual data (Maczewski 2003:14;Wikipedia). Creswell defines this methodology as one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e. political, issue-oriented, collaborative or change oriented) or both (Creswell 2003:18). Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:3). Characteristics of qualitative methodologies are that they take place in a natural setting, and use multiple methods that are interpretive. They furthermore are emergent rather than tightly prefigured, and are fundamentally interpretive (the researcher plays the role of interpreter). In this methodology, the researcher views the social phenomena holistically, and reflects upon the own location (Maczewski 2003:30). Qualitative methodologies can give insights into complex, interactional processes. They vary in their goals (describing a culture, describing a case, creating a theory) but their research methods are often similar. Mix and match is also becoming increasingly popular (Maczewski 2003:35).

The methodology one chooses depends on the researcher's beliefs and values, the research goals, the questions asked by the researcher, the researcher's skills, and eventually also time and funds (Maczewski 2003:15). Research findings depend on the research questions asked, the researcher and the methods used. Different research methodologies are useful for different questions and usually complement each other to illuminate different aspects of the whole picture (Maczewski 2003:36).

**1.**

The methodology followed in this work is qualitative in nature, and will use a variety of methods within this model. In this study I aim to evaluate the meaning of a hermeneutics of suspicion for the people it will be presented to. The particular situation this will take place in, is a setting of Bible study and discussion around a topic chosen by myself. The focus falls on how participants interpret their experiences and interact with the text by means of this hermeneutics, if at all. In summary it can be said that this first aspect is a qualitative conceptual analysis, involving engagement with the theory of feminist hermeneutics and including critical analysis of theoretical views.

**2.**

The practical side of this study flows from a strong and broad theoretical base. This theoretical base is comprehensive enough to offer the reader without any academic knowledge, a good insight into the playing field of the science and the pressing questions of the time. One first needs to explain to the reader how the context of a hermeneutics of suspicion fits into the broader field of feminist theology, how this field is situated in the broader academic world and how it has come to develop the way it has, coming to a critical stance towards patriarchy. The theoretical part of the study is furthermore extensive and comprehensive in order to maintain a high level of academic integrity. From the theory then flows the practical testing of the work, which ultimately brings one back to theory in the form of feedback on what has been done, and the way to proceed forward with possibly new alternatives in mind.

**3.**

My methodology has an interpretive character, since I aim to interpret the interaction between reader, text and knowledge of a new hermeneutical system, and use various mixes of methods as the situations differ. This interpretative/hermeneutical dimension pertains to the frame of reading and reception, and the application to texts.

**4.**

In this work use is made of an interview method, but in this case the interview has been conducted with me with questions I myself have pointed out to the interviewer. It involves a radio interview with Philip Kotze on OFM, a local radio station in the area where I did my field and theoretical work, and is included for the reader. It is in an audio format with the added aim to broaden the presentation into not just text, but

also audio categories. As the listener will note, questions were formulated for a lay audience and introduces the field to them in such a way as to interest the listener with no knowledge of this field whatsoever. A further aspect includes the artwork of Janet McKenzie, which is additionally used in order to bring a visual aspect to the book, and throughout, the study is interspersed with quotations from writers in the field of feminist criticism to add a literary (almost poetic) dimension that would bring the work in line with the ideals of a multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary handling and presentation of the topic.

## 5.

A measure of participant observation is used in the practical side of the work, but the form it takes is that of participant-as-observer. I was a part of the Bible study sessions with the group, and the participants knew that I would use this interaction and refer to it in my study. My role was not just that of a silent observer. In the beginning I took an active part in communicating the principles of the hermeneutics of suspicion to the members of the group, and in explaining to them the history of feminism and some key characteristics of feminist criticism. This part of the presentation consisted of a selective summary of the theoretical aspect of the work as presented to the reader. It was only afterwards, when the group started to interact with the text and their input was desired, that I stood back. The study used the method of a focus group in its practical side. In this regard one might see the methodology of qualitative data collection at work in order to measure success/failure of the practical model of empowering text dissemination. There were no individual interviews with group members, and questions that were handled in such sessions are the ones listed in chapter 5.

## 6.

My work is furthermore ethnographic in nature. This entails that I am a part of/immersed in the subculture under study, in this case the Afrikaans, Dutch Reformed/Protestant believer. This group was not observed every day, but contact sessions involved a three-hour session once every Sunday for a whole month. Group members were unwilling and unable to commit for a longer period of time. The group met in the library of a local high school. The "course" started out with a detailed communication of information with regards to a brief history of the development and focus points of feminist criticism, a hermeneutics of suspicion and the characteristics of a feminist critical handling of the Biblical text was lectured on, as well as the standpoint of feminism with regards to the authority of said text. In

order to do this, extensive theoretical research was needed from the side of the presenter. In other sessions selected texts were studied in depth within a group discussion context and all members were given the chance to contribute their thoughts and doing so in a safe environment. I also refer to the work of Janet Sprong in later chapters since she undertook a similar study in Betlehem with people sharing a like background, although her Church members were affiliated with the Methodist Church in South Africa. The difference between my work and hers is that I specifically focused on the hermeneutics of suspicion, and tested the questions I formulated on Old Testament narratives, but more will be said about this in chapters 5 - 7.

To amplify the statement earlier on — the methodology chosen reflects the beliefs, values, goals, questions and skills of the researcher. Ultimately time and funds also play a major role. Group members were willing to participate, but could do so for only a month. Time considerations were defining in the way the practical side of the work was presented and the results from that. Funds are also important. In order to advertise my course I took to the radio. Invitations were additionally sent to Churches and this is expanded on in chapter 6. I did not advertise in national magazines or local newspapers. The questions I asked and the way I went about asking it, ultimately reflect a lot of who I am. I tried not to let my own background interfere in the group's interaction with the process of dialogue between a hermeneutics of suspicion, the text and themselves. Different methodologies were used in different aspects of the study as listed above.

The question arises of how progress is to be measured. In a work ethnographic in nature, one does not have an independent measure or standard against which to measure the progress of the group and their walk towards liberation, consciousness and critical thinking. One can only report on such progress from one's own perspective as involved bystander and companion-on-the-journey. I trust that the results and interpretation as given throughout chapters 6 and 7 will give the reader an insight into the experiences of the group.

What will constitute success? Any feedback will be something new to offer the field of feminist criticism. We are sailing in uncharted territory. The number of people signing up and participating in the course will offer an indication of the measure of interest in the field out there. The exposure given to the invitations I sent out and the response to the radio interview in which I invite people to attend will furthermore



show how people react to such an invitation. Do preachers show interest in feminist theology, do they let their congregation members know about its principles, do they communicate the availability of free courses in this field to their flock? If invited via the airwaves, do people listen and respond? Do they show an interest to attend? Even from this one can learn a lot and this feedback will be given. One would obviously hope for hundreds of people to attend, but even if only a small group or a few individuals sign up, this is in and of itself a success when one tries to measure the interest in the field and its reception in the broader community.

Success will also be a spontaneous, open interaction with the text. If believers find themselves able to explore the text and use the principles of a hermeneutics of suspicion, this will show that such a hermeneutics is doable and can be easily communicated to lay people. If, however, group members show resistance or difficulty digesting the principles (the extensive theoretical part of the work simplified and communicated lecture style), this also successfully shows the difficulty with which this hermeneutics is received in the community of believers.

Any interpretable feedback will successfully show something new since it has not been academically recorded how a middle-class Afrikaans, Protestant audience interacts with a hermeneutics of suspicion.

What would be the aim and ideals of the study? The next section explains what I wish this work to contribute to the academic endeavour.

### **1.5. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

To my knowledge, the hermeneutics of suspicion has never specifically been taught to a lay Afrikaans audience. I have myself, as a student of theology, not encountered it even to be part of the mainstream curriculum of theology taught at my local university. My conclusion is that this hermeneutics is prey to the pitfall of feminist theology being assimilated to death. By relegating this to a special side file marked "women issues", it is isolated and eventually forgotten (this will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter). With the exception of a few academics focused on feminist theology, mainstream academics simply do not know much about this, and the resulting ignorance of lay Christians is even more marked.

The hermeneutics of suspicion is the most dominant reading strategy in the world of feminist theology, but (lay) people are unaware of it. The Afrikaans population making up the members of until recently the most dominant/prominent Church in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church, are blissfully unaware of the tenets of feminist theology and what it offers them. It has never been tested whether such an audience would be interested in getting to know the principles of feminist theology, and whether they would be eager receivers of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

The hermeneutics of suspicion has furthermore, to my knowledge, not been used on Old Testament narratives in a setting of dialogue (West calls this "reading with") with a lay audience. How would such an interaction look and what can be gleaned from this contact? Fiorenza also writes from a Catholic background, and although dogmatics is not the focus of this study, it needs to be tested whether a group of non-Catholic believers (Protestant/Calvinistic in this case) share the same considerations as Fiorenza.

To report on these issues, would be filling a gap in the work of feminist theology on the local academic scene. This work would be, to my knowledge, the first report-back on how user-friendly Fiorenza's hermeneutics really is to a peer group of Afrikaans lay believers.

The questions and apologetics for the importance of understanding such a study at all, and situating it within a context of feminist theology, is expanded on in chapter 2.

Brief mention is henceforth made of the design this work takes.

## **1.6. DESIGN**

This chapter started out by painting the broad backdrop against which feminist study is conducted. It paints in broad strokes the scope of the playing field. It then starts moving into the detail slowly: I touched on various key aspects that are central to feminist theology and which distinguishes it from many other study fields. Feminist theology's links with other sciences are sketched briefly, and the reader gets an idea of the bigger picture as well as the position feminist theology fulfils within this picture.

In measuring the success with which Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion can be taught to a lay audience, and the responsiveness on their part to this specific hermeneutics, a few limitations come to the fore.

- This study will not work with New Testament texts, but only with Old Testament narratives, and then not all, but a selected few.
- The way in which dialogue with the text is handled, does not aim to be an extensive exegesis, but is rather eclectic and heuristic since it has a specific aim at the end. The aim is to eventually compile a compendium of help by means of a body of questions that can aid the reader/student and which can serve as guide when handling such texts. I found that a person can feel quite lost at sea when the expectation is simply: ask questions of the text, but no clear guidelines or previous footsteps exist that can be followed. In this regard I hope that the questions accompanying each chapter in the Addendum will make a great difference in the ease with which groups can dialogue with the text.
- The ideal is to escape the dominance of the course facilitator/theologian when working with a group, but at this time it is not completely viable: I choose the starting texts, and their questions are the products of my imagination. I would like to come away from a position of dominance, control and control of the reading strategy. The end will show how effectively this can be done, but since at the outset I do not have groups requesting specific texts and working around topics, I am the sole responsible body making the choices at the outset. In this regard, my work differs from that done by Gerald West in Kwazulu-Natal, since his is a situation of groups with strong identities contacting the theologian with an invitation to read the Bible with the group. More will be said about this situation in chapter 7.

How does the train of thought look in this study?

Chapter 1 gives a broad introduction to the field of study. Chapter 2 sketches social questions that demonstrate the need in society for a feminist theology. Women live in a patriarchal world, and this has a profound effect on all dimensions of being a female human being, but especially their religious consciousness and religious self-image. Chapter 3 examines the development and present position of feminist criticism, its impact on the way we read the Bible, on religion, the community and social transformation. These two chapters share a lot of intrinsic arguments that are



**THE WHITE LILIES**  
JANET MCKENZIE

central to the feminist argument. The move is, once again, one of a hermeneutic dance, taking steps backwards and forwards in an ever expanding circle. Points which are mentioned are expanded on in later chapters, where they are once again relevant and central to the argument. Chapter 4 explains the dominant reading strategies and situates the hermeneutics of suspicion by Fiorenza amidst this. In chapter 5 certain narrative texts from the Old Testament are read in a feminist way, with lenses of suspicion and a list of questions that enables the reader to start questioning the texts given. Chapter 6 gives a critique of feminist reading strategies and examines the religious past of women in South Africa. The chapter introduces the hermeneutics of suspicion to lay women in group format and tests how effective this hermeneutics can be communicated and how it is received. Chapter 7 looks towards the future and ways we can use Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion in the South African context. Where do we start? To whom do we teach it? How do we teach it? How do others use it and practice it, sometimes unknowingly? The study has an added addendum which contains extra questions I have envisioned for group discussion work.

If this process is pictured, it would start with a broad base and slowly draw to a point of finer focus.

Broad introduction to the field of study

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The need in society for a feminist theology and why this study is necessary and relevant for the South African context

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The development and current position of feminist criticism

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The dominant reading strategies and positioning of Fiorenza's hermeneutic

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## Reading of narrative texts in the Old Testament

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## Critique of feminist reading strategies and hermeneutics of suspicion tested

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## Looking at the way forward

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## Addendum of questions to aid in feminist critical reading

A main characteristic of feminist theology is its stance of suspicion towards the texts that form religious identity and that have played a role in the subjugation of women. This chapter would be incomplete without a brief introduction on this central issue, which will be expanded on later as the argument unfolds.

### 1.7. INTRODUCTION ON FEMINISM

In what follows, an overview is given of the contextualization of the study. Here I am describing in broad strokes some of the points against which a hermeneutics of suspicion functions and from whence it springs.

The devaluing of women is bound up with the patterns of patriarchy. In Western thought, these patterns are built upon a social structure which held that only the free, propertied male could be a full citizen. This influence comes from the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322BC), who described the natural organization of society as a hierarchy of graded subordinations. Aristotle argued that, according to nature, it is fitting for the soul to govern the body, the master to govern the slave, and the male to govern the female. In every case one side (the first) is superior while the other (second side) is inferior. This thinking was uncritically adopted by the Western world (Clifford 2001:19) and shapes the very nature of dualistic thought, which will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. In Africa, the origin of the strong patriarchal structure of society is not due to Greek philosophy or Western thought. One rather finds a unique feature where culture is strongly patriarchal without

dualisms as is found in Western thought, since African culture and religion is traditionally an interstructured unit. African thought does not classically show tendencies of segregation of life into different segments where one is superior to the other. A deeper analysis of this phenomenon unfortunately falls outside of the parameters of this study, but it must be pointed out that African patriarchy does not share the same history as does Western patriarchy. In the South African context, however, we find a unique blend of Western and African culture and history, which necessitates the reckoning of both factors. Colonialism played a role in the lives of Africans, but played no such role in the lives of white women in the colony who were also victims of a patriarchal society, althoughbeit in a different way. From the nature of my own history, it would naturally flow that I would focus more on the Western influences of our patriarchal society, trying all the time to keep in mind the balance brought into the South African context by women who are victimized by a different history altogether.

The devaluing of women is not solely traceable to Greek thought. Religion makes up the second aspect that led to women's lesser status. Gerda Lerner states in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* that during the establishment of the covenant, the symbolism and contract between God and humanity assumed the subordinate position of women and their exclusion from the metaphysical covenant. Their only access to God and the holy community was then through motherhood. This devaluing of women in relation to the Divine (as opposed to the value of women in relationship to fertility goddesses) became one founding metaphor for Western civilization. The second metaphor was the Aristotelian philosophy of women as incomplete and damaged humans of a different order than men. The rise of these two metaphors made it seem natural for women to be subjugated, and led to the establishment of patriarchy as an ideology but also as a reality (Lerner 1986:10).

Rosemary Ruether writes on the topic of patriarchy, and defines it as "*the rule of the father*". In her definition, it refers to systems of legal, social, economic and political relations that validate and enforce the sovereignty of male heads of families over dependent persons in the household (Ruether 1996:205). When one looks at this definition of patriarchy in the South African context, it becomes clear that this view is in sync with African culture.

The exclusion of women from public political and cultural offices, as well as from the higher education that prepared men for such offices accounts for the almost

exclusively male elite formation of public culture under patriarchy and the definition of women from this male viewpoint (Ruether 1996:205-206). In our modern societies there remain many remnants of a patriarchal society. Women are still seen as the primary house workers and child raisers, and their capacity to compete economically with men is limited as a result. This is especially true in South Africa where most children are raised by their African mother without any father figure. Most children never meet their fathers, and most women never get the benefit of child maintenance. Cultural patterns still limit women's equality and ratify the view that women are subordinated to men as a gender group. This subordination is interstructured with class and racial subordination (Ruether 1996:206).

The critique is often expressed that feminist criticism does not demarcate the lines of its criticism clearly. This is not always possible, since the focus of such criticism is so intertwined with so many other aspects of life itself. Patriarchy does not fall into a neat category of its own. Its influence spills over into other societal and religious structures to such a degree that while mentioning the one, the other has to be drawn into the argument. Patriarchy has had a great influence on religion, since religions developed within contexts of patriarchal society. Christianity, for instance, has inherited patriarchal religious patterns from both Greek and Roman philosophy, and law from the Hebrew world (Ruether 1996:206).

In cases of discrimination based on race, class or sex, the arousing of public conscience to the inequalities, and the discovery of root causes and the processes that maintain them, is a necessary step towards attitude change (Bennett 1989:23).

The most difficult area of discrimination lies beyond the reach of legal action, and lies in the realm of the social customs of the family, Church and communal life where subtle and overt pressures influence the aspirations and motivations of women. Children learn sex-role expectations at a young age, and these role expectations influence human impulses throughout life (Bennett 1989:22).

Feminism pointed out that the influence of religion in the perception about and of women can hardly be overemphasized. It flowed naturally that religion criticism would make up a great part of the liberation task of feminist theology.

Feminist criticism of religion began at the obvious place — the explicit statements of female inferiority and subordination that were made in religious contexts. These



statements led to the identification of the image of God as male to be the most obvious and at the same time the most subtle sexist influence in religion. Women made themselves unpopular by proclaiming that traditional language about God is sexist. They were told that God transcends sexuality and that the problem is a false one. Yet the language problem persists, and attention is given to it in a separate chapter. Mary Daly brought the problem to the forefront in the 1970's with her book *After the Death of God the Father* (1971), while the recent rise of Goddess religions around the globe keeps attention on the topic (Christ & Plaskow 1979:4).

Whence the mandate to criticise theology and the Church? Any Christian feminist spirituality has as presupposition our own and the Christian community's constant need for renewal and conversion. Christian existence, Church and theology are in constant need of prophetic critique (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:147).

Women must stop accepting that their lives are run by the men who run our Churches, the corporations who project our images, or the men in powerful positions who control our destinies (Collins 1979:153).

Today, feminist theologies challenge the patriarchal distortion of Christianity, and criticizes the legitimization of patriarchy as God's will and the "natural order". It redefines patriarchal relations as sinful distortions of good human relations and as an apostasy from God's true mandate for creation. Feminist theology goes on to build on the partial liberation of women in modern societies and calls for this liberation to be completed in society, Church and theology (Ruether 1996:206).

The institutions of culture were constructed by men with no regard for the experiences of women. This realization led to the feminist questioning of even the most sacrosanct institutions (Christ & Plaskow 1979:6). The critical view taken to religion also made it clear that both great traditions of Western faith, Protestant as well as Catholic, were equally patriarchal, albeit in different ways and with different focus points.

Protestantism rejected the nominalist theology with its concept of *natura pura*. It rather returned to a strict Augustinianism of universal sinfulness and the inability of human nature to win grace by good works. "Human nature" then means a fallen or sinful human nature. Christ alone represents transcendent grace and is the dispenser of mercy to a sinful humanity (Ruether 1975:55). In Protestantism the

super- and subordination between God and creatures (Christ and the Church) is represented by a hierarchical, omnipotent, masculine God and a self-abnegating, "feminine" humanity (Ruether 1975:56).

Anne Bennett problematized the praxis of a male identification of God in her capacity as lay member of the Church in America. She stated that half of the human race grows up with an exalted ego because God is always associated with their image, a male image, and referred to by the same pronouns used for them, namely male pronouns. She asked whether it might not be possible that the drive for superior status and dominance by males could be rooted in the identification of the male with the attributes of God when He is called "Mighty Conqueror, All-Powerful, and Almighty" (Bennett 1989:26).

On the Catholic front, Pope John Paul II, in his work "On Ordination and Women", once again affirmed a recurring theme in many of his writings on women. He linked the fundamental equality of women and men with complementarity. Women are equal to men, but their roles are complementary. The use of complementarity as the principle for assigning Church roles makes the biological differences necessary for human reproduction the determining factor. The shortcoming of the principle of complementarity is its potential for promoting hierarchical sexual dualism, rooted in long-standing gender stereotypes, as if it were part of God's will for the Church (Clifford 2001:145).

The very images held of God as Father had to become the focus of critique. In this respect, feminist thinkers have divided opinions on the matter. Some have found the image of God as Father so offensive that they have felt bound to leave Christianity altogether. Some have aligned with Goddess religions. Still others have made it their life's work to enhance female images of God in their respective religious traditions.

The expression "*kyriarchal*" comes from the Greek *kyrios* and means "Master". It is used as an expression for God in the New Testament, and by analogy is used to describe the family master. Resultingly the family father stands for and represents the heavenly Father (Tepedino 2001:85-86).

Mary Daly pointed out that the maleness of God and Jesus reinforce the power of men in society. Despite insistence that God is not male, the symbols for God carry

their own meaning. In her book *Beyond God the Father* she makes the argument that the medium is the message. Daly finds the gender, but also the character and attributes of God, offensive (Christ & Plaskow 1979:23).

Yet we cannot seem to just ignore God or cease to speak about (him). Sartre wrote that man *is* fundamentally the desire to be God, and thus gave expression to the most radical passion in human life, namely to be a god who does not and cannot exist (Daly 1979:213).

The man and the masculine principle understand itself as the image of God because the Jewish-Christian tradition presented the Divine in an anthropomorphical way as masculine. The male qualities of strength, power, omniscience and controlling everything are ascribed to God. He is King of Kings and Master of Masters. His Son incarnates as a man, and the result is that the majority of Christians experience God as masculine and in accordance with characteristics attributed to men (Tepedino 2001:89).

Sophisticated thinkers have never identified God with a parent in heaven. Despite this, images have a way of surviving in the imagination in such a way that a person can function on two levels simultaneously, even though they appear contradictory. One can speak of God as "spirit" and yet imagine "him" as belonging to the male sex. Refined and abstract conceptualisations can have these primitive images at their root, influencing them greatly (Daly 1979:56).

Even in this current day, theologians sometimes use the incarnation of God as male as an argument to prove the superiority of the male sex. The underlying assumption to such an argument is that God could not become incarnate as the "inferior" sex, and the fact that He did not do so, serves to further reinforce the belief in male supremacy. As male dominance in society is gradually eroded, some serious challenges will be faced by this traditional "unsaid" assumption (Daly 1979:58-59).

Why the preoccupation with the image of God as Father? The answer lies in the fact that this masculine and patriarchal image has serious consequences for women:

1. It legitimates and reinforces the social patriarchal structures in family, Churches and society.

2. It justifies the androcentric world view in relation to men's superiority and women's inferiority. The logic leads to the conclusion that the masculine becomes sacred.
3. Men are enabled to play the role of God as his representatives in the world.
4. Women are presented as dependents and sinners.
5. Women are denied the experiences of having their sexual identity affirmed as God's image, and this diminishes them in dignity and self-esteem.
6. The Divine Mystery is reduced to the metaphor of the dominant male (Patriarch). This image of God is an idol, and a source of injustice and slavery for women, the poor, Afros and indigenous peoples (Tepedino 2001:89-90).

Susan Thistlethwaite writes about God:

God conceived as supreme ruler over all from whom other authorities take their cue is a theology of violence. Hierarchy introduces hierarchy (Thistlethwaite in Albrecht 2002:18).

Mary Daly states that the Judaic-Christian belief system has served to legitimate a sexually imbalanced patriarchal society. The image of the Father God made the mechanisms within society for subjugating women seem right. If God is a Father ruling His people from heaven, then it is in the nature of things that society be male dominated. The theologian Karl Barth even wrote that woman is ontologically subordinate to man. Within this context we find the mystic function of the husband dominating his wife representing God himself. The real dynamic behind the curtains, is that the values of a society is projected into a belief system, which in turn justifies the social infrastructure. The belief system opposes social change which robs it of its plausibility, but despite this, change does occur in society, and ideologies can die, even though this does not happen easily (Daly 1979:54).

This last insight of Mary Daly is extremely important. She identified the heart of the problem: society is projected onto a belief system, which in turn justifies the social infrastructure. If her insight is correct, it would explain the position of reformative feminist theologians who can still remain within the Christian faith. They would have identified the core of the belief system to be free of patriarchy and androcentrism.

Women have tried to find acceptable answers to the androcentrism within religion in various ways. One option has been to expand on the female images that exist

already. Rita M Gross states her conviction that images of God as a male person without complementing images of God as a female person are both a mirror and a legitimation of the oppression and eclipsing of women (Gross 1979:168).

The problem is not a new one, and neither are the answers found to it. In each generation we can find women who have had to problematize God as Father and resultant patriarchy in religion. In their various ways, they have found answers to the problem. One example is in the person and writings of Anna Jameson (1794-1860), who was a professional writer and adviser of the Langham Place Feminists who campaigned for women's employment, education and property rights. Their views were published in the magazines *The English Woman's Journal* and *The Victoria Magazine*. Jameson lectured on women's employment, sisters of charity and the communion of labour, and her lectures are seen as her greatest contributions to the feminist political cause (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:48).

Anna Jameson saw Christianity as the "Cult of Christ" and "the highest type of manhood" and a religion of the heart, as set out in her *Commonplace Book* (1855). She aimed to show in her *Legends of the Madonna* (1852) the equal importance of Christ's counterpart Mary as the archetype of perfect womanhood. She also aimed to show the psychological and historical importance of including female qualities in the Divine (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:51).

Anna Jameson comes to closely resemble Feuerbach, namely that a feminine principle in the Godhead became psychologically necessary for the early Christians. She differs from Feuerbach in her conception of God as a spiritual power and not merely a projection of human nature. She supports her argument with an analysis of centuries of art, and shows that the female principle of the Godhead is represented by a woman, Mary, and not Jesus (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:52).

Feuerbach in her turn identified the "mild, gentle, forgiving, conciliating" qualities with the "womanly sentiment of God" (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:53).

Even further back in time stands the work of Julian of Norwich, who lived in the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. She recognized the maleness of the historical Jesus, but experienced her cohumanity in which she shared His human nature not in his maleness, but in His capacity of suffering, which lay beyond sexuality without excluding it. Her special use of the term "Mother Jesus" is relevant to us today. She

associated mothering metaphors both with Jesus and God. Her thinking was that, while a human mother suckles with her own milk, Jesus, our beloved Mother, feeds us with Himself by means of the sacrament. The human mother may put her child to her breast, but our Mother Jesus leads us into His open breast through His open side (McLaughlin 1979:101-102).

Julian of Norwich saw all human relationships to be taken up in this new sense of God. God is rejoicing to be our Father, and rejoicing to be our Mother, rejoicing also to be our Husband. Christ also rejoices to be our Brother and Saviour. It is interesting to note that the only relationship missing from her writings, is that of sisterhood (McLaughlin 1979:102).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gives a good rationale for the reformist position in her work *Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity and Catholic Vision*. She gives Daly's radical critique of Christianity as being sexist serious attention, but searches her own *experience* within the faith to come to the conclusion that Daly is mistaken. Fiorenza gives attention to the aspects within Catholicism that supported her growth. She did not experience God as an authoritarian Other along the lines of Daly, but rather as the creator and nurturer of life that is so central to feminist spirituality. While the Father was increasingly imaged in a patriarchal manner, the Catholic faith had the figure of Mary to compensate and allow experience of the Divine as female (Christ & Plaskow 1979:132).

If it is so that Christianity preaches a God of love who liberates every person, we have to speak of this God in non-patriarchal, non-sexist terms. Language about God can and does change if it is rooted in a living faith and community (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:139).

Catholicism has a tradition of Mariology that is lacking from Protestant tradition. The question is whether Mariology is the answer to the problem of a mainly male-centred tradition. Can focus on Mary guarantee a better balance between the genders in the faith? A further question is whether Mariology is a tendency unique to Catholic faith, and whether Mary is the current articulation of a goddess religion that goes back in time to the first religions. Jameson, Fuller and even Eliot placed the tradition of the Madonna in an older tradition than the Catholic. Fuller linked her to the Great Goddesses (virgin-mother Ceres). Eliot identifies her with Dinah, who in turn closely resembles the goddess Diana. Jameson claimed that worship of the Madonna and

the preceding mother-goddesses is an acknowledgement of a higher as well as gentler power than that of the strong hand and the might of a male godhead (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:69-70). These writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century come to an opposite conclusion to that of Mary Daly, namely that the Madonna is not the pale reflection of the goddess, but the culturally available Christian version, and, according to Jameson, the culmination of earlier mythologies (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:70).

The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich suggested that Protestantism was too one-sidedly masculine, and needed some of the elements of the feminine symbols of Catholicism to balance it. Psychologist CG Jung saw the doctrine of the assumption of Mary as the symbolic reintegration of the fatal polarities in Western consciousness between masculine and feminine, body and spirit, and earth and heaven. Theologian Mary Daly rejected Christology as a redemptive symbol for women, but did suggest that a revisioning of Mariological doctrines might offer redemptive options (Ruether 1975:36).

Despite Mariology's liberating possibilities, it is interesting to note that it is especially in Churches with a high Mariology, where the most negativity towards women is found. Protestant Churches without Mariology, do in fact ordain women (Ruether 1975:37).

The Old Testament gives an account of the multiple times Israel was led astray from their service to Yahweh by the fertility cults. After the assassination of 400 Baal priests in 852BC, Elijah and Elisha rallied the nation to the sole worship of Yahweh once again. Later religious revivals followed under Hoseah, Amos and Isaiah. In this time the idea grew of an intolerance towards other gods and cults. The bull was outlawed, and Hoseah's metaphor served to affix the fertility idea to Yahweh by transposing the covenant idea and turned it into Yahweh's marriage with Israel. The sinfulness of Israel became synonymous with "whoring", and served to fully embed patriarchal sexual metaphors in religious thought (Lerner 1986:166).

Rosemary Ruether identified Yahwism as the religion that repressed the divine female role integral to cults of contemporary nations (Ruether 1979:47). The ancient patterns of death and resurrection were cut loose from earthly patterns and instead became a historical pattern of wrath and redemption. Female imagery of nearby cults was completely repressed, but survived in a new form as the symbol of Israel as

the Bride of Yahweh in the covenant. This bride was subordinate and dependent on the (male) Lord of Hosts who reigned in the heavens without a consort (Ruether 1979:48).

Louis Epstein wrote that, in Bible times, men and women tended the flocks together, met at watering wells, worshipped together in the Temple, shared public celebrations, ate together, and attended weddings and funerals together during the time of the patriarchs. Segregation in the Temple begins only in the time of the Second Temple which had a woman's court outside the Temple. This public court is then explained as a public place for those who had no share in the ritual. This was the place where women assembled as part of the public (Lerner 1986:178).

From the start of the Biblical covenant, it was defined as a male covenant, despite the fact that Yahweh's gender was unspecified. The early writers of the texts selected metaphors, symbols and explanations from the many sources available to them, and their exact meaning at that time is not so much important as the meaning that following generations attached to them (Lerner 1986:178). God is the source of creativity according to the Hebrew Bible. He created both male and female, but covenanted and contracted only with males. The symbol of this covenant, circumcision, expresses this reality (Lerner 1986:200).

Only males could mediate between people and God, which found expression in the all-male priesthood, and the various ways women were excluded from religious ritual (segregated seats in the Temple, no woman could form part of the *minyan*, women could not do Temple service). Women were denied equal access to religious learning and the priesthood, and thus were denied the ability to interpret and alter religious belief systems (Lerner 1986:201).

A great belief system that inserted itself in the religion was during the formation of Yahwism. In the creation of monotheism, a break had to be orchestrated with creativity and procreativity. A result flowing from the eventual patriarchal systems that arose after the fall of goddess religions, was the connections between female sexuality and human weakness and evil (Lerner 1986:201). Gerda Lerner traces the negative view of women back to this time and this fundamental building block of religion.



Although male authorship cannot simply be equated with patriarchal suppression of women, the fact remains that women could not take the pen in hand and write the books of the Bible. This fact reflects the patriarchal influences and androcentric biases of those who wrote the Biblical texts. The application of a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion highlights the fact that the principal actors, preservers of communal memories, and writers, were men, most of whom occupied positions of privilege in patriarchal societies. Not only were the writers of the books male, so also were those who decided what books to put into the Bible (Clifford 2001:59).

At the start of the chapter I put forth the problem of dogma which colours all views that come after. The view held of the Bible is one such dogma. The Bible cannot be discarded, but its negative use in the past makes it a dangerous tool against women. Letty Russell strongly emphasizes that the whole Bible is to be taken seriously, especially because of the possibility of the Bible's use as a tool for the oppression of women. But Russell indicates her reluctance to consider the Bible as the Word of God, evoking consent or faith, if it contributes to the continuation of racism, classism, and sexism (Russell 1985:16). In this view she is not alone. Many feminists would agree with her, as do Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow. If the Bible and religious tradition happen to teach sexism, then it is a possibility that, contrary to past claims, these traditions have not been inspired by God (Christ & Plaskow 1979:7).

In 1895 Elizabeth Cady Stanton started writing *The Woman's Bible*, which is a series of commentaries on Biblical passages that pertain to women. Stanton's work grew out of her firm conviction that women's political and economic subordination has ideological as well as religious roots. She felt that the basic Biblical view of creation and redemption was degrading to women, and that women could only be liberated if the Bible could be understood from a feminist perspective and repudiated as revelation (Christ & Plaskow 1979:19).

When she wrote her *Women's Bible*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had as committee member a certain Ursula Gestefeld, who was convinced that the Bible teaches the equality of men and women. She verbalised the hermeneutic principle as such: *If the question is asked "What is your authority for this view of the Bible?" the answer is "I have none but the internal evidence of the book itself"*. Cady Stanton herself stated that the Bible could not be rejected or accepted as a whole. Stanton insisted that each text be read and accepted or rejected on own merits. In her response on the

*Woman's Bible*, Frances E Willard vocalised the feminist insight that men read their own selfish interests into the book (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:85).

Keeping this in mind, is it possible to escape the creation of a feminist canon within a canon? The problem will be discussed in further detail in chapter 4 when Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work will be discussed.

The arguments put forth by Tribble and Fiorenza are at the same time radical and conservative. They are radical in transforming traditional interpretations of texts for new feminist purposes, but they are conservative in the belief that, once the true meaning of Scripture is found or the reality it points towards, we are bound by this as normative (Christ & Plaskow 1979:65). Despite their conservative outlook, both theologians are reserved in calling "normative" Scripture the Word of God.

On the one hand one has the problem of the Bible being used against women, while at the same time it should be said that the negative view held of women goes back even further. Gerda Lerner traces patriarchy back to ancient times and finds its root to be the fall of goddess religions that had to make way for male gods. But Classical Greek thought left a deep mark on the Western psyche which cannot be overestimated. This deeply held conviction of the inferiority and Otherness of women has reached into religion and even coloured the way the Bible has traditionally been interpreted. Feminist theologians should also look beyond the Biblical text and find the ideologies and cultural building blocks behind it that influence its interpretation.

Classical dualism became the model for the oppression of women. Culture-creating males identified the positive sides of the dualism with themselves and identified the negative sides of the dualism with women, over whom they claimed a right to rule (Christ & Plaskow 1979:5).

Rosemary Ruether developed her theory that sexism is rooted in the dualistic worldview that grew out of the dramatic religious changes of the first millennium BC. The breakdown of tribal culture led to the end of the holistic perspective that was characteristic of early human societies. Man and woman, nature and culture etc became split off from each other and were ordered in hierarchic fashion. The culture-creating groups were male, and they identified the positive side of each dualism with maleness. Women became identified with nature and the material realm which was seen as inferior to the transcendent male spirit. From this a new language of female

subjugation was born (Christ & Plaskow 1979:21-22). In Christian theology, the female nature was organised with the negative side of the dualisms between flesh and spirit, demons and angels (Ruether 1975:92).

The alienation of the masculine from the feminine is the primary sexual symbolism that sums up all dualisms. Psychic traits like intellectuality, transcendent spirit and autonomous will were identified with maleness, and left femaleness with the opposites of bodiliness, sensuality and subjugation. Through the ages male and female have been societally conditioned to act out their lives and capacities within this antithesis (Ruether 1979:44).

Rosemary Ruether sees the culmination of this dualistic religious thinking in the contemporary urban earth where both abstract science and revolution are the products of the will to transcend and dominate the social and natural world. The spirit of humans has as theological self-image and guilty conscience a vision of an exclusively male God who creates out of nothing, transcends nature, and dominates history. Humans hang onto this all-powerful God of wrath and grace as miserable, crestfallen sinners (Ruether 1979:49).

Christianity produces what Rosemary Ruether calls a schizophrenic view of women. Women are split into sublimated spiritual femininity (Virgin Mary) and actual fleshly women (fallen Eve). Actual sexuality is seen as dirty while the repressed sexual feelings are expressed by the spiritual sacred marriage of the virgin soul with Christ. In Catholicism, the love of Mary does not correct, but rather presupposes the hatred of real women (Ruether 1975:18).

Ruether epitomizes a great number of feminist theologians in her view. Traditionally, the apology for the Otherness of woman has been held to be the argument of the dual nature of male and female. As was mentioned before, this view, for instance, was strongly held by Pope John Paul II. Due to its influence even in modern Protestant traditions, and its wide acceptance among lay Christians in their view of male and female, this dual nature theory should be discussed. The "two natures" concept of humanity holds that male and female are equal but different. This "dual nature" concept shows the complementarity as well as the polarity between male and female. Only women and men together, achieve human wholeness. The concept is taken from Genesis 1:27 in as far as this Old Testament passage is taken as dogmatic statement and not etiological explanation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:142).

The above theological anthropology shows correlation with Jungian depth psychology, which holds the view of male and female archetypes (principles) embedded in a collective unconscious. These archetypes express human reality as well as divine reality. Archetype signifies a presence of divine force within the human soul. When we thus mention female roles, we must also say that these roles also express an aspect of the divine (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:142-143).

In traditional theological anthropology, women presented evil and temptation. In this "dual nature" anthropology, women are sources of wholeness, life and salvation. Feminists who found their identity within this view, insisted on the replacement of the "Father" God by the Mother Goddess. The danger here is that there is no escaping from the same patterns of gnostic dualism which maintains two ultimate principles and creative powers (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:143).

The failure of the "two natures" concept of humanity lies in the myth it holds of female power. Both the fear and demonization of women, and the praise and exaltation of female qualities, have as presupposition the myth of the magic life power of the female (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:143). As women, we are not magical or powerful. We are simply equally human in all the positive and negative aspects that may entail. By rejecting a dual nature theology, one rejects a view of women that would associate them with mystical powers and special traits, albeit unconscious.

Human beings will tend to link their societal systems of power with their religious ontology. Power seeks authority and authority cannot be seen to lie outside the boundaries of what society deems as true, good and real. In this manner, much injustice has been justified on religious grounds. But at the same time people have measured power in society against their measure of what is good and true, and found the power lacking (Byrne 1995:162).

Feminists have drawn attention to their conviction that sexism in religion is a symptom of deep-rooted sexism within the human psyche. Yet this sexism does not invalidate the need for ritual, symbol and myth (Christ & Plaskow 1979:1). Religion must be reformed or reconstructed to support the human dignity of women. Yet, following the realization of the importance of religion, must come the sense of injustice that religion is sexist and that it has a powerful influence on society (Christ & Plaskow 1979:3).

Another point that needs to be confronted is that institutionalized cultural violence has ensured that women are not only victims but also, more often than not, perpetrators. Who enforces inhuman rituals on widows in Africa and Asia? Who are the excisors of the female? Who are the instigators of divorce or polygamy when wives are unable to give birth to children or, specifically, to male children? These are areas of *women's* violence against women. We have to break the vicious circle of women violating other women in the name of culture. We cannot continue to bemoan the socialization we have had when lives are at stake. That is what some of our African governments do when they blame every tragedy on colonialism and refuse to be accountable for their own part in the calamity of our continent. Women must come of age, confront ourselves, and address women as the cause of oppression. This is not a refusal to address male oppression, but rather a way of empowering women to remove the log in our own eyes so that we can see clearly the log in other people's eyes.

Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro 2001:107

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Feminist critique identifies the Church as one institution that has often misused its power against women and various marginalized parties. Certainly the history of the Church does not indicate sinlessness. While some feminists feel that an institution with such a history of misogyny should be written off as beyond hope of redemption, there are others who maintain that the Church can benefit by criticism.

The first feminist criticism of religion grew out of this sense of injustice at the sexism within religion. Women sensed their exclusion from traditional religious practice or theology. Women who felt called to be rabbis, pastors or priests were denied these vocations. Orthodox Jewish women were denied full participation in worship and seated behind a screen, while Catholic and Protestant women who wanted to serve communion were rather allowed to serve Church suppers. Everywhere women went, the invisible signs were up saying "Men Only". The feminist movement was the body which enabled women to turn this private pain into a systematic critique of religion. The result was an examination of traditional arguments for female subordination, and a rejection of teaching that denied women full personhood (Christ & Plaskow 1979:3).

But are women to be excluded from study and questioning of the sacred texts? In Deuteronomy 31.11 mention is made that *all Israel* should be taught the Law. Verse 12 takes it to a more explicit level by specifically mentioning people, men, women and little ones, as well as the sojourner. All must learn the Law so that they might keep it. Moses also recognized that men as well as women must hear and learn in order to practice and propagate the faith (Klein 1993:70).

Their various experiences of sexism within the Church has not led all feminist theologians to despair, although they never let go of their critical perspective towards the Church and the tradition. In 1960 the following statement made by Valerie Saiving was curious and even shocking to some: *I am a student of theology; I am also a woman* (Saiving 1979:25). The experience she had as a woman growing up in the Catholic Church brought Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to the point where she started questioning maleness as the essence of Christian faith and theology. Despite being surrounded with patriarchal language, images and guidance, she started questioning the female roles that institutions wanted her to internalise and accept. Her own vision of Christianity led her to reject the cultural role imposed on her as woman. Despite everything patriarchal, a liberating vision still reached her (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979:137) and from this she drew her motivation to remain

within the Christian faith and work for liberation from within the parameters of Catholicism.

The criticism exists between feminist thinkers who remain within Biblical tradition that they are so linked with the past that their visions can never be completely transforming. But then a thinker like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza comes to mind who claims allegiance to tradition, and yet rejects all sexist elements in the Bible. On the one hand her loyalty to Biblical religion makes her a reformist, while other schools of thought see her work as creating a new tradition (Christ & Plaskow 1979:15).

The reasons for taking the Church with the utmost seriousness while criticising it lies within three points:

1. It is the community that through the centuries have related believers to Christ and the events that prepared the way for Him, as well as the events that represents His impact on the world (Bennet 1989:147).
2. The Church has a prior claim that comes before the innumerable valid criticisms, which is the fact that it exists to meet such a variety of human needs (Bennett 1989:148). The Church literally is the voice of all, especially those who have no voice (Bennett 1989:149).
3. The Church has a prior claim because it is present in almost all countries and among people of all conditions of life (Bennett 1989:149).

Hans Küng sees the Church as *semper reformanda* (always in need of reform). This is hopefully the way the Protestant Church is seen also by its members. The Church should not be viewed with an exclusive emphasis on "prior claims" or established structures or even an ancient creed or religious language, but should be seen as always in need of reform. Questions should not be seen as criticisms to be countered or answered, but as attempts to recognize the failures and limitations of the present in order to be open to the mystery of God's indwelling presence with people. Questions should be seen as helping to "open doors" that have been closed because of oppressions that have their roots in distorted ideas, or a distorted theology about God, humankind or the earth (Bennett 1989:150-151).

Feminist critique is not without its own faults, and the core ideal of liberation does not make it free of being criticized in turn. Peter Byrne criticises what he calls the "curious indirection" of feminist critique, and shows this indirection to be twofold:

1. Feminist critique is fastened to the motives of those who have upheld the doctrine of God as it has been taught in traditional Christianity. According to feminism, this doctrine of an omnipotent God would valorise male desire for power and domination and serve hierarchical and socio-political interests.
2. Feminist critique makes political considerations the dominant ones in determining the rights and wrongs of philosophical and theological postulation (Byrne 1995:145-146).

The first critique is indirect because it is unclear how the motives of those who hold a belief could show that it was false. If the motives were indeed self-serving, all it would tell us is that *they particularly* did not hold the belief out of a respect for truth etc. The truth and value of Scripture cannot be connected to the motives of people who upheld them as such, even though they might be male. For a motive-based account to derail a belief's standing as truth, it would have to have the force of showing that the alleged unworthy and delusive motives were *necessary* conditions for coming to the belief, so that, for instance, no one could ever believe in the authority of Scripture or the omnipotence of God unless they were moved by the desire to valorise male power and dominance (Byrne 1995:146).

The critique is secondly indirect because it is fuelled by a desire to create a theology that will serve a favoured political-cum-moral vision. The feminist vision is egalitarian, revolutionary, anti-capitalist and committed to all traditional ways in which society has always in the past allotted the different roles to the sexes. A dominant line of critique against traditional Christianity, has been its justification of old systems of dominance. The ages of thought and meditation and the long lines of history that went into the dogma as it stands, is rejected as irrelevant given the dominance of political considerations over correct thought in this area (Byrne 1995:147).

Feminists often give the impression that there is nothing more to do in the area of reflection about the Divine other than to determine the appropriate political and social desiderata that should govern our thinking, and then choosing a model for the Divine that best matches these. In its extreme, this line of thought leads Mary Daly to argue that all lines of thought that do not actively encourage human struggle against oppression, is to be rejected (Byrne 1995:147).

Feminist critique is an obvious version of liberation theology in which orthodoxy becomes orthopraxis. The right praxis is then (from feminist viewpoint), anything that works against oppression (as defined by feminist activists), and a working for (what



they decide to define as) justice. There are apparently no questions of truth outside of this framework (Byrne 1995:147).

The question that remains with feminist theology as well, is this: Is feminist theology really liberating? Have feminist theologians who remain within the Biblical traditions completely freed themselves from sexist theology? On the other hand, have the feminists who reject Biblical theology managed to fully transcend the dualisms of patriarchal theology, or are they simply focusing on the underside of the dualities that have never received positive attention? (Christ & Plaskow 1979:9)

Feminist philosophy gave us the gift of challenging the dominance of narrow modern ideas of rational argument and theory as the only proper and correct way to be rational, reasonable and understandable. Feminism recovered forms of knowledge that included songs, murmurings and cries of despair, telling of stories (especially in womanist theologies) as well as experimentation with new forms of theology itself. This has broken the standstill in fundamental theology. Where before faith and reason were two different and opposing forces, they are now in dialogue (Tracy 1996:91).

For centuries the connection between women and knowledge has been seen as dangerous. On the other hand, men (or at least a particular group of men) were easily identifiable with writing, reasoning and forming policies. Feminist theorists and theologians have been resisting this tendency to link genders with certain talents and characteristics. Feminists see the dominant way of writing, reading, showing, acting, talking, explaining etc as “**malestream**”, and as having been made to fit men especially. The men who seem to benefit most by the way things are simply being, are white, European and educated. In this line of thinking, huge focus falls on autonomy and objectivity. The flip-side of this coin is that alternative ways of knowing and communicating things are excluded. It really is a case of: My (white European educated middle-class) way or no way.

The sad result is that the dominant way of portraying life (this includes talking, acting, showing etc) becomes associated with a certain gender (male). Things like emotions and the body (non-dominant things) are being gendered as female. Men are then naturally associated with knowledge, and women with the feminine position of the body and emotions (Chopp 1996:117).

The theologians in service to **malestream epistemology** (writing and communication in line with white European male ideals) belonged to a class in power in the West. They benefited by arguing for a universal epistemology, which decreed that knowledge obeys the same rules everywhere. The second great claim was that the epistemological knower (the {male} student or academic or the {male} person doing the communication) was abstract and autonomous from the material being studied. To people in the Church, this meant that the preacher, priest, pastor or deacon could give an objective interpretation of what the Bible Scriptures meant. He was assumed to be free of all personal subjectivity and it was accepted that he never read his own ideas into the text.

The legacy of feminism is a critique of the ideology of this malestream epistemology. Feminist ideology critique has two interrelated parts:

- a) A critique of the universalism of malestream epistemology, and
- b) A critique of the abstract, autonomous knower (Chopp 1996:118).

As a result, feminism started to create alternative **epistemologies** (the theory of knowledge). These alternatives have developed into two responses, namely:

- a) Standpoint theory, and
- b) Social constructionism.

**Feminist standpoint theory** states that your position dictates your knowledge. Women have always been depicted as the opposite of men (the Other party who is completely different). Not only have women had to learn the ways of women, but also the ways of men (especially in religion). This led to a double consciousness in women that supposedly gave them a broader sense of knowledge. Knowing as a male and a female constitutes more knowledge than simply knowing as a female. In this view, knowing as a woman is more valuable and important. The female way of knowing offers epistemic privilege. Within this theory, there are variations, from the position of Mary Daly who argues that women know ontologically different than men, to the more romantic position of feminist theologians who argue that women know more about loving, living and God. There are grave problems in this line of theory. Standpoint theory assumes that all women are the same in essence (**essentialism**). In short, it is simply the female version of malestream epistemology which holds that all people are white, male and educated according to Western standards. In feminist standpoint theory, the ideal is white middle-class European women. This theory also gives more value to all forms of knowledge that is seen as feminine (Chopp 1996:120).

Critical feminism has rejected the notion that all women (also all people) are the same. It has also rejected the assumption that someone is a victim simply because her gender is female, and that someone is an oppressor simply because he is a man. Liberation had to come even to feminist fronts. The liberation struggle, together with feminism, brought women the chance to recognise themselves. Women of class and race privileges had to take account of their ability to victimise others or simply having been unconscious recipients of benefits based on the exploitation of other less fortunate people. Victims were also called to identify their ability to victimise others (In South Africa this is given special significance when one thinks of the years during the struggle against Apartheid when people of the same community were victimised because they were perceived to be in service to the "oppressors". The "oppressed" themselves killed and mutilated such perceived "informants"). Ways to break violence and oppression are only through distancing oneself critically from one's own context and through commitment to practising solidarity (Ruether 1998:78). This is especially asked of the Church of today.

**Social Constructionism:** Feminist theology gave women the gift of affirming the equality of their creation. It has also called the Church to renewal, liberation and acknowledgement of oppression against women. For the Church to be redeemed, means more than just adding female images and symbols to the **cosmology** (picture of the universe and the way it is fitted together). Feminist theology has identified traditional theology and the Church as institutions which are **patriarchal** (the male principle has absolute control). Patriarchy has been identified as being built on the blocks of **dualism**, which divides the cosmos into opposing terms (e.g. good/bad, happy/unhappy, holy/sinful etc). In order to overcome patriarchy, a whole dismantling of the vision of the cosmos as a dualism is needed (Ruether 1998:66).

**The feminist field is known by its insistence on broadening the academic perspective to engagement outside the academy in order to test theories.** This study touches on that by also using material gleaned from various other fields where relevant. Feminist theorists defy philosophical myths that teach that politically or socially motivated philosophy is "bad", and they insist on including politics and analysing attendant values of all theories. Feminists have intellectual as well as emancipatory goals (Stratton 1995:85). Ernest L Boyer (Stratton 1995:14) makes out a very good case for doing research at the boundaries where fields converge. He argues for making connections across the disciplines and placing the specialities in

larger context. **Data must be put forth in a way simple enough to educate non-specialists.** Graduate study should be broadened to encompass research, integration, application and teaching. He believes that this will ensure an intellectually vibrant new generation that is responsive to society's changing needs (Stratton 1995:14). In this respect my own goals are aligned with the vision put forth by Boyer, while keeping in mind that different educative methods should be used for different audiences. **In the South African context where many people are illiterate, for instance, a lofty academic book is useless, while learned class believers may find themselves simply too bogged down with other engagements to commit to another academic level diploma. To people such as these, a short educative course on feminist theology would be the answer and the ideal, despite their different academic backgrounds. A theoretical study of the topic should be further broadened by material in other forms, and in less formal style. While writing this study, such a secondary course open to all on a regular basis remains an ideal, albeit not included in the current work.** I did conduct a course to "lay believers with various academic backgrounds" in August of 2005. We assembled on Sunday afternoons in the library of a local high school. The course consisted of four contact sessions lasting three hours each, during the course of the month. Findings and conclusions drawn from these sessions will be discussed in chapters 5-7.

#### Why feminism?

The major reason for any feminist movement is to end oppression, discrimination, and violence directed to women, and to acquire full equality and human dignity for every woman (Clifford 2001:13).

Women make up 70% of the world's poor and slightly more than 50% of the population, but despite this, they do 66% of the world's work, paid and unpaid. Women earn between 5% and 10% of the world's wages and only own 1% of the world's property. Women in poor countries of the Third World put most of their earnings directly into the survival needs of their families. It is also most likely that a woman is the head of a household plagued by homelessness and malnutrition (Clifford 2001:14).

The "why" of feminism becomes clear when one considers the global problem of violent behaviors directed against women and girls. Assault by domestic partners, rape, murder, infanticide, cruel neglect, and the international trafficking in women and

girls, along with harassment in the work place, make violence against women the most pervasive human rights problem in the world. Whether a woman lives in a wealthy First World nation, the poorest of the Third World countries, or a country suffering war, the threat of violence is a reality with which women must contend (Clifford 2001:15).

What makes one a feminist? Why feminism as an option? Rosemary Radford Ruether states that the underlying motivation for her career was a dislike of injustice and a dislike to see religion used to justify injustice and oppression (Hinton 2002:29).

One must also at the start distinguish between feminist theology as an academic discipline and feminism as a social vision and advocacy movement (Procario-Foley 2002:135). With feminist theology there is always something added. Anne Clifford writes that the reason for any feminist movement is the ending of oppression, discrimination and violence directed to women, and to acquire full equality and human dignity for every woman (Procario-Foley 2002:136). The reason why feminism has these aims, is because the suffering of women resulting from patriarchy and androcentrism can never be justified as sanctioned by a God who is revealed as love (Procario-Foley 2002:136). Feminism can be associated with both a "set of ideas" and a "practical plan of action", as suggested by Joann Wolski Conn (Hammond in Procario-Foley 2002:145).

What is the central spiritual and religious feminist quest? The quest for women's self-affirmation, survival, power and self-determination (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:126).

Women's potential for strategic organising lie within trade unions and community groups. The Church is specifically noted as a place where women are to be found. In South Africa, women meet in Church groups whenever they are struggling to survive. These are surely potential sites for these inarticulate voices to be heard. The Church, after all, is better situated than any other institution, religious or secular, to work with poor and oppressed people (Haddad 1996:205).

For the Church to be a transformative agent in the development process, Church structures themselves need to be transformed. There has to be change. For change to happen, there must be a new vision. Hagar faced near-destruction in the wilderness. In that context, God helped her to make a way out of no way in her

struggle for survival. God also helped her with a new vision to see survival resources where she saw none before. African women everyday, experience a lived theology of survival — will the Church hear their stories? (Haddad 1996:208). **The great task of feminist theology is to make these voices heard and to force the Church to listen to the people that make up its greatest count.**

The question arises as to what a definition of feminism would be. A single definition of feminism is unavailable due to the variety in this field, but the definition given by Joann Wolski Conn is helpful:

She defines feminism as both a coordinated set of ideas and a practical plan of action, rooted in women's critical awareness of how a culture controlled in meaning and action by men, for their own advantage, oppresses women and dehumanizes men. This broad definition depicts feminism as a set of ideas or ideology. As a practical plan of action it makes those persons who share the feminist ideology, agents for change. Her definition also draws attention to the problems that women associate with sexism — the overt and sometimes more subtle claims of male control over females on the basis that males by nature are superior to females (Clifford 2001:17).

The feminist philosopher, Elisabeth List, has described feminist thought as the place of woman who thinks of herself and the world. In a theological sense this means that feminist studies are the intellectual space where women are thinking about God, the world, and themselves. Schüssler Fiorenza thinks of feminism in terms of a bumper sticker that goes: "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people". Women are fully responsible citizens in feminist eyes, and are, together with other nonpersons and marginalized people, theological agents and subjects. With her definition of feminism as the claim to full citizenship for all, Fiorenza indicates her own framework as radical, democratic, political and religious (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:7). A more detailed description of the contours of feminism will be handled in later chapters.

Feminism brings to bear its vision of woman by raising questions about blatant and subtle gender stereotypes that inhibit women's healthy self-determination. Feminism is by nature critical of the values and attitudes about women that cultures tend to unreflectively promote (Clifford 2001:17-18).

Within feminism itself, various mainstream groups can be identified (Liberal, Radical and Postmodern), keeping the variances in each grouping in mind. These groups are briefly mentioned and defined here, with a more detailed discussion following in later chapters.

**Liberal feminists** typically have the following distinctive philosophies:

1. They are satisfied with the current social systems, even while observing obstruction to women's progress within those systems.
2. Oppression is seen as that which slows women's entry/success in the public world.
3. The assumption is that men and women are essentially the same.
4. Though men and women are essentially the same, there are impediments to their equality in society and other spheres of life.
5. The goal is gender justice.
6. Rules must be fair so that no one is discriminated against through the system.
7. There is a search for civil rights and equal opportunity.
8. Men and women are to be freed from oppressive gender roles (Stratton 1995:68).

Liberal Christian feminists operate within a Christian framework, but approach feminism and theology from a very liberal perspective. Such scholars believe that the Bible writers were simply men of their times and were limited in their perspectives. Liberal Christian feminists employ a "hermeneutics of suspicion", which means that they systematically assume that the Bible's male authors and interpreters deliberately "covered up" the role of women in early Christianity. When such a hermeneutic is used it becomes easy to sift out from the Bible anything that offends one's feminist tastes (Schaeffer 2000:17).

**Radical feminists** hold the following tenets:

1. Women's biology is enslaving through the workings of the gender system that has males dominate and females submit.
2. Women's biology should be a source of power.
3. Oppression is (among others) witch burning, foot binding, suttee (widow throwing herself on her husband's funeral pile), purdah (women kept apart from other people by a veil/screen), clitoridectomy (cutting of the clitoris), pornography, sexual harassment, battering of women, prostitution, rape, and dry sex (Tshabalala & Brokensha 2004:50-54).

4. The basic root cause for women's oppression is seen as male control over the female body.
5. Solutions are sought in reproductive freedom, celebration of female sexuality, activism, creation of "womanspaces" etc (Stratton 1995:68).

### **Postmodern feminists**

The postmodern movement grows in part out of the work of French post-structuralist thinkers Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. French feminists Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig also feature prominently in this field. Postmodernism challenges the idea of difference/sameness between women and men. It also doubts many of the standard assumptions of modernism: the existence of self, unchanging truth, universal reason, apolitical knowledge, and neutrality of science and realism (Stratton 1995:69).

The question about the nature of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism comes into play at this point. Feminism does not have an easy relationship with postmodernism. Although postmodernism offers good deconstructive critique, it does not seem to propose many constructive possibilities. In short, it seems to be good at breaking down but not at building up. It sees the world as a text and emphasises the "endless play of difference". As a result of this some realities, like racial oppression and the experiences of victims of abuse or sexual assault, are treated too lightly. Mary Hawkesworth (Stratton 1995:69) shows that the violence that defines the reality of women's lives, are not fictions or figurations. It's real, and definitely not make-believe. To compensate for its shortcomings, some feminists propose alternatives within postmodernism while others advocate positionality (Stratton 1995:69). It must be stated that postmodernism and deconstruction are not the same thing. A deconstructive reading is an open and not a closed reading — the reader is given more freedom and becomes a co-writer of the text, while the author is disavowed (Hambidge 1992:69). Postmodernism does not give a controlling position to any single system, and within postmodernism one will not find any dominant discourses. Both reader and writer form part of the changeability and the life of the text, and influence each other to form new discourses (Müller 1992:397-399).

Feminists both affirm and are wary of postmodernism. Both recognise:

1. Particular groups have served as the norm and ideal for all of humanity.



2. Concepts and ideas developed on the basis of this false universalisation are faulty and persuasive.
3. One should be critical and suspicious of claims about truth and reality.

Despite these common views, feminists remain sceptical of postmodernism. They note that postmodernism can easily play into the hands of existing power structures.

Jane Flax observed that if:

*There is no objective for the distinguishing between true and false beliefs, then it seems that power alone will determine the outcome of competing truth claims. This is a frightening prospect to those who lack (or are oppressed by) the power of others (Flax in Stratton 1995:83).*

Ultimately, what made postmodernism less attractive as basis for feminist theory, is the reluctance of postmodernists to engage openly in political discussions (Stratton 1995:83).

Feminism does not come easily to all people. Even Christian women are still struggling to come to terms and acceptance of feminism and its ideals. Christian women from conservative traditions have great difficulty to overcome barriers to feminist consciousness. One of the biggest stumbling blocks in their way is the Christian identification of sin with pride and anger, and the identification of virtue with humility and self-sacrifice. These women have always been taught to put others first. In praxis, this serves to re-enforce female subjugation. Women in traditional Christian institutions are made to think that rebellion and self-affirmation are sin. They think that to be like Christ is to have no self of their own. They are suffering servants (Ruether 1998:77).

This line of thinking is dualistic in nature, and holds that there is simply a good/bad choice relation, defined according to malestream ideology. If malestream epistemology depicts servitude as good, then self-affirmation (especially among females and oppressed people) is necessarily "bad". In religion this load is doubly heavy since this duality is enforced from the pulpits, and people are not taught alternative ways of reading and knowing. What this results in, is that despite our modern age, some believers still seem to think along the lines of the ultimate authority of the clergy: "If the leader/pastor/deacon/priest explains it this way, then surely I in differing from that am in sin".

Feminist consciousness cannot remain a personal journey, but must also become a journey in solidarity with others of the own group, as well as others across group and

race. The idea that the individual impacts the community is central to feminism. The recognition of own liberation is necessary for the liberation of a community, and comes easier to women of oppressed races and groups. Middle-class white females as well as males generally find it more difficult to see beyond the personal arena (Ruether 1998:78).

In our era, the urgency with which patriarchy should be opposed is pushed to the fore by the AIDS pandemic. In sub-Saharan Africa, women and their children are contracting AIDS at a higher rate than are men, so much so that HIV is called the "women's disease" in some tribal languages. Many women with HIV/AIDS are either prostitutes trying to feed themselves and their children or spouses of men who have visited prostitutes. Once diagnosed with the disease, many of these women and their children are abandoned by their families (Clifford 2001:15). Women living in an overtly patriarchal society are more at risk of contracting the disease, and feminist liberative ideas about the female body should be brought to these people with great speed. If a woman starts seeing her own body as something that is not to be used and abused by the men of the group/clan/community/tribe, the first steps towards her self-preservation are taken. What before seemed like a political quest as far as the goals of feminism were concerned, has become a matter of life and death to some groups. In South Africa, this issue is brought to light in the ongoing study for the Private Population Council in which 3000 men participate, and the 19-country study for the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), which found that the lower a woman's status, the higher her risk of HIV-infection (Tshabalala & Brokensha 2004:53).

*There are one million reported rapes of women and children every year in South Africa. The real figure is probably much higher. In a study by the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, one in four men interviewed claimed to have had sex without the girl's consent. At least half of the 30000 people involved in the study — male and female — believed forcing sex on someone you know was not rape, but just "rough sex" (Tshabalala & Brokensha 2004:54).*

However great a problem represented by AIDS and violence, feminism needs to keep a broad scope in order to address all areas of injustice, and not fall into the trap of just focusing on one area of great need. Feminist theology links with various sciences in the quest for liberation, among them ecological sciences to build a holistic theology for the earth. It also links with social sciences to bring about its main focus — the liberation of the oppressed and marginalised. Feminism challenges the

Church to become socially sensitive and literally "put its money where its mouth is". In the process of becoming socially sensitive, the Church has a role of value guardian. It must show involvement at the level of values and as an advocate for the poor. Values like social justice, survival, and a fair sharing of resources are easily being forgotten during negotiations. Churches can constantly highlight their crucial significance. The Church has to become sensitive to the fact that it is a people's movement that can challenge power, act as movement leader and as an advocate for change. The Church's role in advocating for the poor is essential since it is they who are most often forgotten during environmental and various other policy negotiations (Hoyt 1996:174). There is not just a link between sociology and the Church. Feminist theology fits neatly into this operation as critical tool, since it is contextual by its very nature. It seeks to give analytical clout to the experiences of women and the injustices suffered at the hands of sexism. It is recognised that there is no "generic/general woman" whose "experiences" can become "subject-matter" of "generic/general feminist theology". Women's experiences are diverse and to speak of a uniform feminist theology can seem strange (Hinga 1996:27).

#### **1.8. SHORT DISCUSSION ON THE PLACE AND AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN FEMINIST STUDY**

Any study of feminist theology has no choice but to storm the issue of the authority of the text (in this case, the Bible). The authority of a given text is, like many other factors, vastly different between age groups, language groups, genders, economic classes etc. My study will problematise the dilemma of a feminist theology that undermines textual/Biblical authority for a Protestant audience. Will the audience be at all susceptible to ideological shifts? Is the Bible just one more text among others, or should the rules be adjusted according to the Biblical content altogether? In Protestantism, with its rule of *Sola Scriptura*, how do believers perceive the authority of the text, and how does this differ from a Catholic view on Scriptural authority? Do different views on said authority greatly influence the outcomes of feminist theology and the handling of the text? These questions are explored in greater detail in following chapters.

Phyllis Bird responds to the contributing authors in *Other Ways of Reading* and remarks that she senses an ambivalent attitude to the Bible that calls for more explicit articulation of assumptions concerning authority of the Bible and its relationship to other sources of norms for life today, including the norms of women's

experience, indigenous African religion, and the constitution of a multiethnic and multireligious state. At the same time, she wants to applaud the ethical concern apparent in all the papers that make up the book, and views it as an important contribution of African scholars to the present state of Biblical scholarship, in which the connection with the reading habits and expectations of "ordinary readers" as believers, has been almost entirely lost or suppressed (Bird 2001:206).

At the start of a study on feminist theology, the authority of Scripture becomes central. From here on out, all arguments to all sides are based on assumptions with regards to the authority the Biblical texts have, and the things they speak of. Kwok Pui-lan, a Chinese Christian, speaks of the Asian experience of Christian missionary expansion into China where the "Word of God" was brought to the "heathens" who lived in a deficient culture characterized by "idolatry and superstition" (Albrecht 2002:17).

Kwok's argument is if other people can only define truth according to the Western perspective, then Christianization means Westernization (Albrecht 2002:17). But is the Biblical message a Western message? Is the Bible a Western text? Is it not an ancient religious text, born from the Jewish and Near-Eastern tradition, and adopted into the lives of the peoples who came after?

Surely the Celts and Anglo-Saxons were not "Western" or Christians, and yet, today, the effect of the Biblical text and its interpretation is felt in these cultures in a marked way?

Asian Christians must ask themselves who owns the truth, who interprets the truth, and what constitutes the truth. The same can be said of any critical thinking Christian anywhere. In my Afrikaans, modern lifestyle within a Third World Country on the poorest continent on earth, I am just as far removed from the Biblical text as this Asian Christian woman finds herself to be. The only marked difference between us, is that my family have been Christians for many generations, and that the tenets and traditions of Christian faith have become familiar with age and history. I do not speak Hebrew nor live in a Biblical context. The Bible is equally removed and yet equally accessible to all, I would say. Kwok Pui-lan comes to the conclusion (with specific reference to the Christian Scriptures) that the truth cannot be pre-packaged, but is rather found in the actual interaction between text and context in the concrete historical situation. She writes that the whole Biblical text represents one form of

human construction to talk about God (Albrecht 2002:17). This too, will be problematized in further chapters, especially in chapter 6.

The link feminism has with the political, economic, social, and other arenas of life is not unique. Feminism draws its mandate from Biblical times. The chasm between religion and the rest of life experienced in the modern "structurally differentiated" society did not exist in Biblical history and literature. Religion in the Bible is inseparable from politics and economics. To recognize that currently religion is separated from the economic dimension means that it is far less possible for modern interpreters to reduce the scope and implications of Biblical stories, prophesies and struggles (Gottwald 1993:xiv).

Liberation perspectives call modern readers to align theory and practice. If we really mean that women are coequal with men, our praxis and language must correspond with the intention of our theory (Gottwald 1993:xxi). Feminist theology seeks to hold the Church accountable for making theory praxis in everyday life, and to influence society towards transformation. In this activity, the Bible plays the central role.

The importance of the Bible does not need to be acknowledged to be felt. Feminists have indicated that the Biblical tradition will either be transformed into a liberating future, or that the oppressed will continue to be subject to the tyranny of Biblical patriarchy, whether they recognize its power or not (West 1991:100).

Theologies with a feminist and womanist "edge" have consistently insisted on the need to link practice and theory again. Church words had to be seen in Church action again. The result is the retrieval of "spirituality" without loss on the front of ethical-political commitment and action. These theologies have given us an option that is both political and mystical in nature (Tracy 1996:91).

Feminist theology accedes that tradition is as important as the Biblical text, and that it has played a huge role in the attitude of the Church towards the subjugated. Even in the current era, tradition remains influential. Tradition should also be criticized and transformed. What is tradition? Tradition is not simply just the Church's past. It is also not just the living or continuous past of the Church. Tradition makes up a body of teaching, practice and lore, and an attitude towards that selfsame body. Tradition is both the piety by which we honor the past and the piety that we honor. Tradition is a communion with the saints and their witness to God that makes them our



**MADONNA AND CHILD - BOUNDLESS LOVE**  
JANET MCKENZIE

contemporaries in the life and experience of our faith. As William Faulkner wrote, and to agree with Katherine Sonderegger in her appreciation of the insight, the past is not dead, and it is not even past. The same is true of tradition. Tradition has a quality of the present that lives in our midst, and this not because of our recollection or use of it, but because it participates in the eternal history of God made present in the Spirit to us now. In this sense, tradition can be seen as a cloud of witnesses that speak to us now. Tradition, when seen like this, is part of the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas of the Church. It draws its power from the Divine reality on which it depends and about which it speaks (Sonderegger 2001:388).

Feminist theology strives to be a bridge between feminist theology and traditional theology. It sees itself as part of the feminist movement, but also reflection upon this same movement. Though feminist theology moved away from the traditional understanding of theology for itself, it still needs to establish itself in its own departments (Jakobs 1996:37).

The main break with traditional understanding of theology, is the way in which feminist theology handles texts and how they are perceived. Exum assumes that Biblical literature was produced by and for an androcentric (male as central) community. She understands women in the Biblical literature as male constructs. Since these women were created "by and for" men, they would reflect male interests. Women in the Bible do not have the best of women in society at heart. As long as readers remain within the androcentric ideology of the text, (that is to say they do not question the text or handle it in a suspicious way) they can do no more than re-inscribe the androcentric viewpoint — they simply agree with the text on every point. A feminist critique must of necessity read against the grain (Exum 1996:89). It might be added that a good feminist critique will also criticise and scrutinise feminist assumptions.

Having studied the works of (mostly) Western feminist theologians, a few questions and problems spring to mind that this study wants to highlight and criticise. One of the main characteristics in feminist theology up till now has been the affirmation that women are all different, and that, for that matter, all oppressed people are different with various needs and sliding scales of priorities as far as liberation is concerned. Dominant and prominent feminist theologies have not been successfully tested against the "market" they were designed to speak to. It is all very well to speak about liberation, equality and being aware and sensitised, but how does this look for Africa,

and particularly, South Africa? The most prominent feminist theology today is Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's Hermeneutics of Suspicion. In this study, I will try to measure critically its adaptability for a South African audience, and how practical it really is.

Until now, with the exception of a few rising feminist voices in Africa and South Africa in particular, feminist theology has been practised by Western, academic, middle class feminist theologians. Feminist theology until now has presupposed the same oppression and wants and desires of women around the globe, whilst strongly stating that women are different! The affirmation of the need to criticise and problematise even the own science, should also be applied to feminist criticism and theology, and this study aims to do just that.

This study will focus on South Africa, keeping various limitations in mind:

1. South Africa has 17 different (11 official) languages, and even more cultural and ethnic groups all calling this country their home.
2. It is impossible to conduct a study that encompasses all these various groups' experiences, since logistical factors make it impossible — one cannot travel to each group or understand them all.
3. Few women in South Africa are literate and have access to Bibles.
4. A study focusing on the teachability and critical usefulness of a hermeneutics of suspicion for the South African context, can only at one time be limited to a specific economic, academic and language group. It will not help putting women who have had tertiary education, together in a discussion group with women who do not even have a Bible, and who are not able to speak English or Afrikaans very well.
5. Keeping this in mind, from the outset this study can only give the results as tested against select portions of the community.
6. Feminism has as ideal the liberation from oppression. In South Africa, oppression takes various forms, and can be cultural, economic, academic, sexual etc.
7. Feminist theology stresses the need to cross all boundaries between women. Is this at all possible? And, in crossing boundaries, are women busy living out feminist theology, or are they simply doing social work and handing out alms in various forms?
8. South Africa is not mainly a Catholic country as far as faith is concerned. The hermeneutics of Fiorenza is written from a Catholic standpoint, with a vastly



different view on Scriptural authority and Canon boundaries from the viewpoint held in classical Protestantism. This study will try to gauge how acceptable her theology is to a non-Catholic audience.

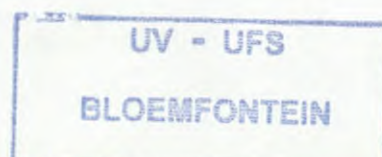
9. Lastly, feminist theology is a very academic, elite field. Is this at all accessible to the lay person in every day life, and can it even be applied to the various contexts of practical living in South Africa?

### 1.9. FEMINISM AND THE CHURCH

Within the Church itself, feminist theology is still faced with dangers. Even while being recognised, it can be patronised and assimilated to death. Rosado Nunes writes about "good feminism", which is just a gentle critic of the Church. "Good feminism" can be easily assimilated into traditional theology and liberation theology. How does this happen? Theology can simply keep women as a "topic" by incorporating the "women question" into the syllabus. The result is that women in society or the Church become simple subject matter. This "question" or "subject of women" is only incorporated into the Church when it does not rock the theological boat too much (traditional or liberational). Men are willing to accept a certain openness and dialogue as long as the basic ways of looking at the world remain those they designed themselves.

More frequently, books of theology deal with systematic theology and other subjects that have nothing to do with women, by ignoring the "subject" and producing a totally gender-neutral/race-neutral discourse. Theology "about women" is delegated to women, as if it were of interest only to this specific group, while men continue to produce a supposedly "universal" theology that involves the "rest of us concerned" (Rosado Nunes 1996:9).

Until now this has, to a great degree, been the praxis of one of the most influential Churches in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church. Women have been allowed to become ministers and preach from the pulpit, but the whole "feminist problem" has until now failed to bring about real changes in the way theology has shaped member's thoughts. With the exception of a few feminist theologians conducting their theology from academic benches, feminist theology has not reached the ears or minds of "the people". I refer my reader to the attached audio CD which contains a radio interview in Afrikaans conducted on Radio Oranje in June of 2005 for further listening. The interview contains a session of questions and answers about the topic



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with interviewer Phillip Kotze with myself as interviewee, after which people were given the opportunity to call in and air their views on local radio. The nature of these comments, especially the ones made by male callers, give ample illustration of this point.

#### 1.10. FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY

To simply incorporate feminist ideals under "headings" is putting the very nature of feminist theology at danger. The enclosure of women under specific headings comes in opposition to the feminist theologians' endeavour to deconstruct and reconstruct theological discourse in its totality. Fiorenza summarises this when she says that we do not want to be incorporated in androcentric theological/intellectual work. Feminists see the need to redefine and transform all intellectual institutions and academic disciplines if they are to allow women to participate as subjects and not as objects of university research and theological science (Rosado Nunes 1996:10).

A **discourse** (a way of speaking/writing learnedly) that truly includes women presupposes criticism of the patriarchal structures of society (and the Church). This women-inclusive discourse deconstructs the power of men in all social spheres (including the religious and symbolic). In this way it goes beyond the plain "addition" of women to existing discourses, but rather proposes the reformulation of the whole discourse. *We are not adding new topics for discussion to the pile, we want to change the pile altogether.* Since there is no way of speaking of "women" without also speaking of "men", the two define each other as socially constructed categories (Rosado Nunes 1996:12). The women's rights movement in the Churches has not stopped calling for equal rights for women. The full participation of women in theology has far-reaching consequences for the self-understanding of theology as a science and for its content. Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes recognised that the heart of the issue is the status of women in theology and Church. What is needed is an alternative understanding of theology and Church (Meyer-Wilmes in Jakobs 1996:36). Feminist theology *does not define itself in terms of so-called women's themes or researchers who happen to be feminine. Rather, it seeks a new understanding of theology* (Jakobs 1996:36).

Female silencing is accomplished differently in our age. Contributions of critical feminist Biblical studies are rarely recognized and even less acknowledged by the white-malestream academy and religious institutions, despite the fact that feminist

scholarship has much to contribute to the epistemological transformation of academic scholarship in religion. To place "women" or "feminist" in the title of an article or book ensures that the work will be relegated to the "women's section" of reviewers and libraries as if it were only of interest to women. Once these works are hidden in this way, feminist works cannot be seen as having theoretical significance for the scholarly field of religious studies or for a wider audience (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:3).

Feminist theology has to remain on the forefront of theological discussion in order to hold the Church accountable for its action or lack thereof. It time and again points out that reformation in Christianity takes place in and through the Cross, yet also despite the Cross. The Cross is not our goal. Christians must cure themselves of a masochistic spirituality that glories in suffering. Natural suffering or tragedy, and unnatural suffering or unjust violence, are neither the goal nor the way of Christianity, but they are the context in which we must endure and keep the faith in healing love, despite the presence of its contradictions (Ruether 1998:79).

Traditionally, theology has had the privilege of being regarded as an objective science, something that is devoid of personal agendas and ideology. Characteristically it has not been thought of as a science that gave preference to one gender and race, while others were discounted. Feminist theologians deny the "universal" pretension of existing theology and points to its particular character — it is made from a male viewpoint and is in nature exclusive, shutting out people who are not male, European and learned. Feminism has shown that classical theology is based on the experience of men, rather than all humans. Feminist theology proposes a reworking of theology that would also include the experiences of women, non-whites, and non-Westerners. This is the only way to break patterns of patriarchy in the Church and study of the Bible. This is also the only way to truly transform religion so as to represent all believers. If religion can be thus reformed, it would also prove an influential transformational power in society itself.

Having said this, the obvious solution of simply integrating women into the Church where the masculine prevails as norm, would not suffice. Simply placing women in positions as deacons, pastors, writers etc, cannot satisfy the need of the world to become encompassed in the experience of the Church. What is called for, is a radical restructuring of patriarchal structures that up to now have depended on

women/other-hating (**misogynist**) legitimation and an **androcentric** (male as central to life) view of reality (Rosado Nunes 1996:10-11).

Feminism touches various fields of interest at the same time, linking them all to the Bible and societal awareness and responsibility. Women are involved in a re-reading and re-evaluation of the role of the Bible as source for Christian theology. They differ from modern mainstream Western thought that sees the Bible as irredeemable. While sexist and patriarchal exegesis and hermeneutics are rejected as sinful, women have continued to read the Bible critically and to reflect upon it as a theological source (Hinga 1996:31). God-talk is a term used for individual religious experience and the idea of personal and communal revelation (Schwartz 1996:53). Women are taught that all fields of life are to be touched by critical reflection. This includes sociology and society. Feminist research has posed some important questions to sociology. What is called for, is an alternative paradigm of research. This must involve deliberate partisanship rather than pseudo-objectivity, and the obligation of academic studies to engage in liberating praxis. Partisanship is also identified in traditional theology, and the lack of acknowledgement of said partisanship criticized. Feminist theology at the same time makes its own deliberate stance clearly identifiable.

With the aim of feminist theology being the liberation of women and marginalized people, the question of liberation should be problematized. What should various oppressed peoples be liberated from? Are only or are all women in South Africa oppressed, and, if so, are they all oppressed in the same way? Is patriarchy even relevant as question-problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if most children of divorcees today are not even raised by a father, and never taught by a man (at least in the first seven years of schooling)?

By simply scrutinizing statistics supplied by Statistics South Africa for 1999, one can see that divorces greatly influence the questions and problems raised by Feminism:

<u>Duration of marriage</u>	<u>Reported divorces (Whites)</u>	<u>% of minor children involved</u>	
0-4 years	4399 divorces reported	0 children	35,91%
		1 minor child	25,16%
		2 minor children	7,27%
5-9 years	3926 divorces reported	0 children	19,96%
		1 minor child	31,15%
		2 minor children	29,26%

These figures give only half of the picture. Figures are vastly different among Black, Colored and Mixed population groups due to people never actually marrying and thus not officially divorcing, or people never reporting their divorces and number of minor children involved.

I perceive the whole focus of feminist criticism to be a shifting goal as times and cultures change. Although this study does not give primary attention to the question of the nature of liberation for the South African context, it is taken into consideration and mentioned where relevant. The aim is to keep in mind that liberation for South Africans may mean something different from the liberation described by foremost feminist writers, and that said liberation ideals may differ according to gender, age, culture, economic group etc.

### 1.11. SHORT INTRODUCTION ON READING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Feminism has opened our eyes to the importance of knowing that we do not read objectively. We have to become enlightened readers in order to see how we have been manipulated and brainwashed to believe certain truths about ourselves and the people and traditions that have shaped us.

Feminist critique also emphasises the importance of reading in various ways, and stating the way we read beforehand. The idea of a pure and objective way of attaining knowledge has been discarded. In the current Postmodern era, emphasis is laid on multiple readings, and the historic circumstances that gave rise to texts. It is still found that standard historical treatments seek **univocal readings** (no variants and only one option). As a result they concentrate on individual authors and redactors as the source of the meaning in the text. Treatments like this operate on the assumption that texts mean what the author or redactor meant it to mean.

This method of reading is problematic to feminist theology. In the feminist view, many factors influence the writer/author or redactor, and ultimately impacts the meaning of the text (in this case, the Bible). Meanings also change over time. A better understanding would be to state that meaning in the text can have both a horizontal and vertical quality. Horizontal meaning is meaning that exists across the culture at any given time, while vertical meaning exists across generations.

Not only does feminist theology want to educate us to new ways of reading the Bible, but also to understand intertextuality. **Intertextuality** places a specific text between other texts and forms of communication and lets these texts dialogue with each other

and the reader, with the goal to come to new insight about the meaning of the text. Under "texts" is not only meant documents themselves, but also the "texts" of history, culture, values etc. Traditionally, Protestant Christians would only seek out Christian commentaries on certain texts, but feminism encourages the reader to look at society, films, songs, texts in other cultures and traditions, to gain more and broader of an insight into the text. Attention is also given to historical circumstances in which the text arose. The resonances between these intertexts are key to understanding the attitudes of the writers of the Bible (Lyke 1997:192). This is also a key influence of deconstruction, and one of the greatest links deconstruction has with feminist theology.

Feminist theology emphasizes the various options of reading a text in the Bible. The science of reading and interpreting texts is called **hermeneutics**, and describes the way a text is being read and studied.

Habermas' critical hermeneutics (a way in which a text is read) could throw some light when applied to Bible texts. Previously, hermeneutics could not explain lies, censorship, the manipulation and oppression of thought and the force of people's minds exercised by ideological structures in the formation of false consciousness. Habermas went beyond Gadamer's fusion of horizons to analyse pseudo-communication in order to retrieve the meanings that are concealed in the language of texts (Field-Bibb 1996:87). Until then, hermeneutics was practiced along positivistic lines. A break was made with this whole way of thinking. This was a radical break from traditional thought that held that the Bible itself is fully objective. It now became clear that the Bible was written by people with ideas, ideologies, and agendas. To write, was to exercise some power. Language actions were also power plays.

Traditionally, the standpoint was that texts do not have **ideologies** (specific teachings and beliefs with a specific goal and focus). To a degree this is true. A text itself does not have an ideology, but readers and writers do. But speaking of the ideology of a text is a way of stating that texts arise in social circumstances and reflect the social locations and world-views (ideologies) of the writers. When androcentric ideology is the focus of critique, that means that I as reader have decided that to be the main factor motivating the text. To read against the grain of the text, is to read against what I as reader perceive the grain to be. *To make things simple, the grain of a text and the ideology of a text can be the same thing* (Exum 1996:90).

A traditional objection to reading "*against the grain*" is that it seems idiosyncratic when compared to readings that are "*with*" the grain. The perception exists that readings that are "*with*" the grain are more accurate. They are better interpretations of the meaning of the text. If one does make this observation, which in fact means that interpretation can be neutral or objective, it would also mean that meaning resides in the text itself. Not everyone agrees with this viewpoint. Exum, for one, believes that meaning exists in the interaction between reader and text (Exum 1996:90).

What is the relationship between feminism and deconstruction? Deconstruction draws attention to the slipperiness of language and the instabilities of texts, with their infinite options of meaning. A text typically assumes or takes for granted some set of propositions, privileging one term above another, for example: good/evil; purity/pollution; rational/emotional; objective/subjective; culture/nature; and male/female. Deconstruction reveals the text's inability to sustain these oppositions by exposing gaps in the text's logic. Deconstruction does not reverse the oppositions but rather challenges the conceptual system that makes opposition possible in the first place (Exum 1996:91).

Deconstruction focuses more on how texts work than on the reading process itself. It has been called the *technique for making trouble* more than once. Some critics are troubled by deconstruction because it challenges and exposes their "normal" and "familiar" handling of literature. Familiar concepts within the Western reading tradition are questioned. These concepts include *structure, sign, meaning, order, text, essence, autonomy and literature*. The result is that the theorist is no longer so sure of the up to now assumed meaning. Deconstruction is not a school of thought, and includes theorists with varying viewpoints. What they do share, is scepticism towards the socialisation of ideas and a critique of assumptions (Hambidge 1992:67).

Deconstruction builds relationships between texts. This process denies the autonomous existence of any single text. Deconstructionists handle texts with a "*freeplay of language*". The reader does not read in order to get insights from the text or to make an analysis thereof. Reading becomes a double activity that gives insight into the text itself and the limits to human understanding. Because it does not give absolute meaning, it leads to a never-ending supplementation of texts. Since

meaning cannot be identified, the text cannot be isolated. The reader compares the text to various other texts (Hambidge 1992:68).

Deconstruction emphasizes that each way of reading/handling a text, implies a set of theoretical assumptions. Even a "natural" reading process is based on assumptions. Often, these assumptions are simply more difficult to find and analyse. From the above it is clear that deconstruction leads to an open rather than closed, finalised reading. The reader is given more freedom and is given the position of co-writer of the text. The presence of the writer is denied (Hambidge 1992:68-69).

Exum is one academic who wants to use deconstruction to show how difficult it is for a patriarchal text like the Bible to maintain patriarchal authority. She wants to prove that a focus on a female version of the story can submerge the privileged male version. By reading against the grain and deconstructing the text, one side of the hierarchy is not merely replaced with another. She does not wish to offer a reading where females are privileged above males, but rather seeks to subvert the shaky premises upon which the text's androcentric main thesis rests. In doing this, she also wants to offer an alternative reading that gives female characters power by making them the subjects of their own discourse (Exum 1996:91-92). Examples of her work will be incorporated into this study.

#### **1.12. SHORT INTRODUCTION ON FEMINIST THEOLOGY'S COMMITTED STANDPOINT**

One of the main characteristics of feminist theology is its exercise of reading against the grain, or against the dominant ideology of the text. Another of its characteristics is its committed standpoint. Feminist theology takes a stand and this preference is stated always — the liberation of the subjugated, oppressed and marginalized. What makes it so revolutionary, is that science has been in the habit of proclaiming its subjective nature to be objective. Feminist theology exposes this to be a myth. How did this come about? Who is the foremost proponent of this critique?

One of the foremost feminist Biblical scholars of our time is Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. She developed the **Hermeneutics of Suspicion**. The idea was that texts should be read in the same way that a murder site would be studied. The reader is asked to comb the text for clues and see whether a crime has been committed to an oppressed party.



Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza took up Habermas' hermeneutical perspective in her feminist reconstruction of Christian origins. She wanted to show that the Church as we experience it today and through our ages, was not the way the original Church of Jesus functioned. She also pointed out that the view and position held of women in the modern Church, differs from that of the original Jesus movement. Her reconstruction of the Jesus movement centred on the *basileia* (the Kingdom) rather than other symbols. She sees the locus of God's action away from cult towards all-inclusive community which would have attracted social **marginals** ("insignificant" people on the fringe of society) and thus particularly women. Jesus is remembered as Sophia (Wisdom) who is put to death because of His challenge to **imperialism** ( a supreme, dominant way of ruling). The pre-Gospel traditions are interpreted as addressing patriarchal structures (exclusion of the power/status accorded to fathers, rejection of patriarchal structures of domination to name but two). Schüssler Fiorenza traces the patriarchalising trajectory of the communities after Jesus' death. While the majority of the communities succumbed to the patriarchalising influences, the Gospels of Mark and John point to an alternative vision of community that emphasized love and service as the core of Jesus' ministry and the mark of discipleship. Although patriarchy was victorious, it is not rooted in the praxis of Jesus (Field-Bibb 1996:88).

Thus is born the idea of a Church and a theology that can be wholly transformed by use of a hermeneutics of suspicion and making readers of the Bible aware and sensitive to social issues that ask for impact from the Christian community.

In this study main focus will be given to Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion, and the way it opens the text to us.

The new element in this hermeneutics is the insight that theology is always partisan, whether or not it intends to be. No objective theology is possible. It is therefore necessary to formulate this partisan nature and to provide a basis for it (Jakobs 1996:37). Feminist theology has been very open about its bias and eager to point out that there is no fault with not being "objective".

The question that arises, is to the nature of feminist theology's standpoint. Is there a specific standpoint? The problem in such an approach lies in the point of reference: to what praxis does feminist theology relate? Is there a binding view of what women's liberation means? *Feminist theology always relates to specific individuals, to real*

*political, historical and social situations. This connection must always remain visible; otherwise theology degenerates into ideology (Jakobs 1996:37). There is not one specific standpoint. Each branch of feminism articulates its own meanings and focus points. The liberation of the individual and the admittance of bias remain focal in all standpoints.*

But can we all be right? If feminism brings us a world where subjectivity is the rule in science, could it be said that the up-till-now male point of view (androcentric) was just one variation of truth? Could we call the whole discussion relative? Relativism and objectivity are based on unlocatable knowledge claims; nobody can be called into account. Feminist theorists oppose such a basis. They develop situated and embodied knowledge and are against various forms of unlocatable, irresponsible, knowledge claims. There must always be someone, or some view point, to be held accountable. Not everything is right, and all thoughts do not share equal ground. According to Susan Bordo: *One is always somewhere, and limited* (Bordo in Scholz 1998:152).

Sandra Harding differentiated between

1. Value-free objectivity
2. Judgmental relativism and
3. Strong objectivity.

**Value-free objectivity** refers to arguments that presuppose one universally and eternally valid standard of judgment (Pogocentrism). All claims are measured against the central, objective, value-free truth.

**Judgmental relativism** assumes that any judgment is equally valid. Everybody is right to an extent, and all claims have equal validity.

**Strong objectivity** holds that all judgments are socially situated and require critical evaluation to determine which social situations generate the most objective knowledge claims. According to this evaluation, weight of claims can shift according to situations. Knowledge claims are not simply relative, but the question to be asked is: who benefits by this, where is the claimer socially situated, and are there parties who will suffer because of this? The conscious choice of one's standpoint leads to the development of "strong objectivity" (Scholz 1998:152). The conclusion to this is that feminist theology does not claim to be objective, and is not simply subjective, but rather committed to certain issues, which makes it *strongly objective*.

**Acknowledging the many social locations does not mean that all knowledge claims are equally valid. Feminism does not listen equally to all voices in society. Haraway states that the standpoints of the subjugated (people who have been ruled over by others in various ways) are the preferred, because in principle they are at least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge (Scholz 1998:153). At the centre here is the acknowledging of the fact that knowledge should be scrutinised, criticised, and interrogated before it is given authority, and people who do this more often than others, are the ones who are not benefiting from present status quo's.**

There has been a general feeling in Church circles that feminist theology tends to be arrogant, not so focused on the sinfulness of humankind, and even antagonistic towards God and Church. This may be true of some fringe feminist theologians and their writings, but does not represent mainstream feminist theological thought. The spirit behind feminist theology could be called one of humility. Lesbian theologians have been on the forefront in developing theologies of humility. Carter Heyward has called this "not knowing for sure". Humility has been grossly distorted by hetero-patriarchal theologising into an introverted, self-obsessive attempt to be non-self-obsessed. This approach assumes a disconnection between oneself and others and God. It presumes that I cannot be for you or others if I am not for myself first. Yet, theologians practising theology from the underside (the side of the oppressed) have found that being for God necessarily involves being for ourselves and one another (Micah 6.8: *He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* {NKJV}). This then implies that humility is fundamentally rational because it involves experiencing ourselves as related and bonded in solidarity (Stuart 1997:192-193). Feminism is very focused on the individual in relationship to others, society, the Church, God etc. There are two sides to theological humility. The one side is the recognition that "we never know for sure" — we may be wrong. This creates a space for openness and mutual encounter. The other side of humility is confidence and a delight in theology that rings true with the community of resistance. It is only in the context of a theology of humility that ethics is possible (Stuart 1997:193). Within this framework, feminism works to bring about change in the Church, in theology, and in society itself.

### 1.13. FEMINIST THEOLOGY'S LINKS WITH OTHER SCIENCES

The question arises whether feminism is exclusive, and, broader than that, whether any science or field of interest today is or can be exclusive to outside influences. The current situation is one where it is increasingly permissible to digress from disciplines classically brought into relevance on (Hebrew) Bible criticism —among this list we find subjects like Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Egyptology, Ancient Philology, etc. Today the field is widened to also include other branches of knowledge that may be potentially valuable for rereading the Biblical texts. Disciplines like Psychology, Art History and Art Criticism, Sociology, Anthropology, Literary Criticism and so forth are currently used by many Bible readers. Current feeling is that whatever can be included under the theme of cultural studies and/or postmodernism, can be of help (Brenner 1998:13-14).

Feminist theologies oppose the narrow limiting of **epistemology** (the theory of knowledge). Feminist epistemology seeks to broaden knowledge through relational knowing, embodied knowing, intuitive knowing, imaginative knowing. No longer is the only valid, and "scientific" way to know things the malestream version we have been taught in society. To know God is not only to argue or analyse the referent of God through or at the limit of human existence. We know God through communal practices, through physical experiences, through the soaring imaginings of the mind. Sites of knowledge may be art, liturgy or relationships as well as texts, discursive arguments and theological debates (Chopp 1996:122). Feminist theory has aggressively fought to widen the boundaries of what is knowable, and in which way knowledge is presented as acceptable.

In the Protestant tradition, one of the most important tenets of the faith and a basic guideline for any hermeneutical process, is the *Sola Scriptura* principle, which holds that only Scripture itself can readily be used to explain Scripture. History and archeology can be useful in painting the background to the world of the Bible, but in the praxis of the exegete, these things are not as authoritative as the Scriptural principle inherent in the text. The Protestant feminist theologian is faced with a unique dilemma: has feminist theology as a discipline started to give too much authority to extra-Biblical sources and texts? Is the Bible fully incomprehensible without the help of an intertextual praxis that involves mostly texts from outside the Bible? The question has not been completely resolved, but it may be said that there

are numerous Protestant feminist theologians working in the discipline who uses the principle of intertextuality to varying degrees.

Since the interaction between feminist theology and some non-theological sciences is so influential, attention must be given to some of these more prominent mergers. I will discuss the science of ecotheology, ecojustice, ecofeminism and quantum theology in this chapter to illustrate the success of feminist theology's willingness to interact with various other disciplines to the liberation of humankind and the betterment of living conditions on the planet. The following sections also illustrate just how such mergers take place and are actioned.

### 1.13.1. Ecotheology

One of the fastest growing fields of collaboration between theology, feminism and "outside" influence, is in the field of **ecology** (study of the relationships between humans and environments) in theology.

Teachers and students of religion need to

1. Explore the implications of ecology for theology, and
2. Study the ecology of theological education itself, which has several aspects:
  - a) Critique

Critical evaluation of the culturally dominant paradigm we have inherited is the starting block for any exercise in criticism. Christian theology has inherited an understanding of natural reality from the Bible and tradition. This understanding views God over Creation rather than in and with the natural world. Humans are also seen as not being part of the biotic community. This has far reaches into our psyche and the way we live. This view of Creation and the **hierarchies** within it (steps of authority ranging from the highest authority to the lowest authority) spills over into the domination of women. In its turn, domination of women has provided a key link (socially and symbolically) to the domination of the earth. It is easy to see the tendency of patriarchal society to link women with earth, matter, nature etc. Males, on the other hand, are identified with sky, intellect and transcendent spirit (Hessel 1996:6). The mentality is one of: as the heavens rule the earth, male rules over female.

b) Reconstruction

We need to participate in the reconstruction of theology, science and economics. This means relearning our history, including an exploration of suppressed elements. It also means recycling positive insights from classical traditions pertaining to the renewal of just and loving, biophilic relations. Reconstructors will also give attention to the “**subversive**” (power to overthrow ruling practices) ecological principles of holism and interdependence, which challenge patriarchal hierarchy, mechanistic science and winner-take-all capitalism (Hessel 1996:6).

c) Praxis

Both the critique and reconstruction of eco-theology need to occur in a praxis-based context. Ecologically attuned theology is not just a way of absorbing a series of new and interesting ideas; it has to find roots in praxis. Feminism has repeatedly stressed the need to become practical in what we believe.

d) Collaborate

If we are to have a theological education in line with the ecological paradigm, we must challenge the continued splitting of theology into fields (science versus religion) and the separation of social from ecological justice. This new paradigm brings together theology, Bible, ethics and history and interfaces with training for liturgical, public and educational leadership, pastoral care and Church administration (Hessel 1996:7). This is in line with the feminist call to broaden science and break down traditional exclusiveness.

Once again, the focus has to fall not only on the different possible experiences for various religious schools, but also for people from different continents. How relevant can a feminist ecotheology be for a continent like Africa? It might be that feminist theology as encountered in the textbooks, is only viable for Western, First-World, countries, and then also only within an elite academic and economical class, and that, for Africa, and specifically South Africa, a whole new system needs to be developed.

It is further plausible to think that the main focus point within eco-feminist theological thought might be different when set against different African backdrops: It might be vastly different between South African, Zimbabwean and Angolan experience, where new questions come into play. Is it ethical to not “raid” the earth of her diamonds and minerals when they are the only way of procuring sustenance for your family? And what is the role so-called “benefactor” Western Countries play in Africa to further

Do not rescue Ruth, I would say. Beware of the woman of worth. Be suspicious of "the real African woman". Do not rush to rescue Esther from the lake, for you might come out with Mordecai instead. Listen to Ruth. Observe her carefully. Note her limitations. Mark her naked fears, her selfish drive for survival, her devious schemes, and her spectacular failures. Stop the cult that wishes to see positive and successful role models everywhere. African women's theological hermeneutics will be the better for it. Why must role models be successful anyway? Many African Ruths are not "successful". Patriarchy, culture, and globalization will not let them succeed.

Tinyiko S Maluleke 2001:244-245

"rape" of the environment? How do Africans themselves react to the earth? And then, how do different groups within society experience the earth? Groups like the Bushmen as opposed to informal settlers in South Africa spring to mind. Grave environmental issues like garbage disposal and the use of trees for firewood come into play in Africa, where they might not even be on the table for other feminists in more developed countries. In South Africa, water is scarce, while there are places where water is freely running from taps into the streets and thus being wasted. Western countries debate the ethics of genetic manipulation, while a continent is starving for lack of mealies that can stand the harsh African climate. Our European/Western sisters may be developing a great theology around human life to encompass the cloning issue, while South Africa has struggles like the problem of plastic bags littering the fields or the mining industry in this country. Can feminist theologians really talk across the lines of continents at all? Answers are still far away, but at least the subject has been broached at so many conferences.

### 1.13.2. Ecojustice

Another example of how interrelated sciences can become, is the merging of ecology, justice and theology. The hyphenated word eco-justice refers to constructive human responses that concentrate on the link between ecological health and social justice. It refers to the intersection of economic and ecological well-being with the struggle for civil rights and social justice. Eco-justice occurs wherever human beings receive enough sustenance and build enough community to live harmoniously with God, to achieve equity among humans, and to appreciate the rest of creation for its own sake and not simply as useful to humanity. Some users of the term ecojustice — often without the hyphen — have narrowed it to mean justice to non-human beings and eco-systems (Hessel 1996:12). The emphasis falls on sensitivity to the earth, the fellow human being, and the relationship with God, and the right balance between all these spheres.

### 1.13.3. Ecofeminism

How does ecology and feminism merge within theology? Ecofeminist thought lays out the themes of **interdependence** (depend on each other) between humans, God and nature, **immanence** (indwelling) of God in nature, the **sacrality** (holiness) of nature, and the **ethics** (the science of morals in human conduct) of care for the creation in widely diverse ways. Common to all ecofeminist theologians is the



argument that the connections between the oppression of women and the rest of nature must be recognised and analysed if either is to be understood adequately. Some ecofeminist theology and theory (not all) broadens the connection between the destruction of the biotic community (earth) and the oppression of women. They come to include all structures of domination that make up destructive relations, not only between men and women, but between ruling and subjugated groups, between races and classes, and so forth (MacNichol 1996, 72).

This view is developed in the works of Rosemary Ruether. Her work *Gaia and God* claims that the re-examination of the traditions of Covenant and Sacrament are key to healing the earth. Her reading of Hebrew and Christian covenant tradition sketches Kingdom building as inclusive of justice and right relation between peoples, but also between people and the earth. To be Christian is now not only to love God and the neighbour, but also to love the earth. The earth cannot be separated from history, and is only "fallen" as far as it is misdeveloped by humankind. It too, suffers alongside humanity. Ruether attempts to illuminate and expand submerged aspects of the sacramental tradition that have the power to overthrow this tradition. She wants to resurrect the once lively tradition of the Cosmic Christ as both Creator and Redeemer. She sees Christianity's syncretistic ability to synthesise diverse elements as a strength to be built on to provide the creativity needed to address today's eco-spiritual crisis (MacNichol 1996:72).

The following theologians provide three more examples of how to go about an ecofeminist use and application of Scripture.

1.

Primavesi combines a Spirit Theology with a fresh look at Genesis and suggests that the Spirit in Genesis has been overlooked. Her return to the Spirit is insightful and theologically rooted, and is a radical challenge to the **hegemonic** (only focused on the supreme leader) tradition (Eaton 1996:84). Where before all focus was on God the Father as Creator, focus is now shifted to the Spirit.

2.

Carol Robb finds much of use in the Biblical Judeo-Christian Covenant tradition. Membership in the covenantal community is now extended to all species and is not exclusive to humans any more. The natural world becomes included in the history of salvation. Justice exists when right relationships exist within the covenant. The extended covenant is built on a theology that maintains that we are "the new humanity participating with God/ess as co-creators of the universe". This new

covenant is the theoretical base for "environmental" ethics (Eaton 1996:85). The strengths of the covenant symbol are manifold. It moves from a strictly theoretical and theological discourse to developing a base for public policy, in order to eventually contest systemic injustice and generate ethics. A limitation is that it has not thus far precluded **misogyny** (the hatred of women).

3.

Anne Clifford suggests a creation-covenant partnership of humans with non-humans. This will emphasise the solidarity of both in relation to God. The Divine Sophia (God as Wisdom) is a key element in this exercise. Clifford stresses that new root metaphors are necessary to make the Divine Order intelligible. We have to find metaphors other than Father, Ruler, King etc. Metaphors like Wisdom, Truth etc come to mind. To really listen to Sophia *immanent within nature as God's creation, means we will discover ourselves within rather than apart from our complex global ecosystem* (Eaton 1996:85). Primavesi agrees with this when she suggests that Wisdom writings are a science of **doxology** (praise to God) and an appeal to the human mind to penetrate the order of the cosmos, and to know and love it. Wisdom invites contemplation of the earth (Eaton 1996:85).

The above theologians suggest that an appropriate response to the ecological crisis is to stretch, reinterpret and/or correct existing metaphors so that they actively function as **mediators** (go-betweens) in religion, science and politics. As creatures of the earth we have direct experience of life. Our most basic connection with the earth goes far deeper than any cultural mediation. We can rightly say that we experience the earth before we experience culture. What is the role of our religious traditions when we consider the earth as a fundamental context of life? Are religions necessary arbitrators between humanity and the earth? These questions still need a lot of discussion.

To attest to the growing status of this field, a recent publication of the World Council of Churches listed several articles on ecofeminist theology. Chung Hyun Kyung examined how an ecofeminist spirituality would blend with earth-based images from Asia and Africa, and focused specifically on the cosmos as God's womb. Aruna Gnanadason wrote from an Indian perspective and noted that work for justice must now include the earth (Eaton 1996:87).

How does this ecofeminism in theology find roots in praxis? On the international level, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under the leadership of

Noel Brown, has launched a major effort to involve the world's religions in caring for the environment. Since 1986 UNEP has encouraged communities to observe the "*Environmental Sabbath*" on the first weekend in June, and to include its themes in services at other times of the year (Tucker 1996:150). Efforts to incorporate a reverence for nature in rituals and liturgies have culminated in the *Earth Mass* (Missa Gaia) of Paul Winter. Since 1980 the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City has celebrated the Earth Mass each October on the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. Paul Winter's music draws on the sounds of birds, animals and whales, and the celebration includes a procession and blessing of animals in the Cathedral (Tucker 1996:151). Paul Gorman issued the "*Joint Statement of Scientists and Religious Leaders*", urging a co-operative and inter-religious effort in response to the environmental crisis. The Union of Concerned Scientists in their 1992 "*Warning to Humanity*" similarly called for the leadership of the world's religious communities to speak out on behalf of the environment (Tucker 1996:151).

When focusing on ecological theological reflection, feminist thought must be brought into the equation. This makes it necessary to integrate a class perspective with patriarchy, and to work on a creation theology that relates itself to the whole process of human labour. While Asian theologies have been more cosmological and focused on the inter-connectedness of all forms of life and spirituality, the feminist theological experience focuses on the concrete circumstances in which the natural balance is disturbed, access to water/soil/ means of survival undermined, etc.

Thus, ecological theological reflection needs to also include (among others):

- i) The critique of money and greed
- ii) The consumerist food security
- iii) Water as a common property resource
- iv) The Earth as God-given and therefore not private property
- v) The critique of administrative hierarchies
- vi) The integrity of the good creation as opposed to biotechnology
- vii) Sex determination and female feticide
- viii) The symbols of the seed and the tree of life as opposed to the activities of multi-national seed companies, and
- ix) Deforestation (Dietrich 1996:106).

#### 1.13.4. Quantum Theology

A newer development, has been links with Quantum Physics which led to Quantum Theology. Quantum Theology considers the natural world and the way the universe is structured, while Feminist theology considered relationality. In this aspect, the two sciences support each other in showing that relationality is the "stuff of the universe" that needs to be a central component to any act of culture, and then specifically religious acts. The value of the feminine includes the organic world, and has a history of not being valued in the cultural world. This feminine value is finding a friend in the sciences (Quantum Science is an exploration of the nature of the universe and flowed from Albert Einstein's relativity theory) (Rafferty 2001:106), and the result is a theology that points out that there are indeed connections to be found between disciplines that have traditionally been at odds with one another (Rafferty 2001:105).

Everything is affected by everything else, and this ends in the realization that the human observer is never neutral. Another resultant thought in some cases is that there is no objective reality, and that subjective reality depends on the result achieved after interaction between the observer and the observed. Even then, this result is achieved within a greater whole. The human ability for consciousness and reflection is a powerful factor in the outcome of the internal relational life of the universe, and this universe is open to all possibilities, dependent on the respect given to its processes (Rafferty 2001:107).

#### 1.14. FEMINIST EMPHASIS ON DIFFERENCE

This chapter needs to give brief attention to the issue of differences between women, since this is such a huge pitfall to feminist theology itself, and because the academy seems to be indifferent to the emphasis on this diversity.

Susan Holland-Muter wrote:

*We need to let go of the idea of women as a group sharing a common oppression, and examine how different groups of women experience their subordination and oppression differently. In doing so, we need to take into account race, class, sexuality, physical abilities, age and various other factors that could differentiate us as women. We need to let go of the need for sameness and the fear of confronting our differences (Holland-Muter 1995:58).*

Critical theologies with a feminist perspective affirm black, brown, red, yellow and white women in all their diversities (differences), histories and cultures, even as they problematise those diversities, histories and cultures. The interconnecting cognitive (mental), moral, religious, social and practical relations among and between these women at all points and in all sites of struggle are also problematised. This interrogation, engagement and problematisation (rational thought in theology) is articulated as the notion of *difference*, which has increasingly displaced the notion of *sisterhood* as a key theoretical tool in critical feminist theologies (Shawn Copeland 1996:142). Where the emphasis was on all women being sisters in the earlier days of feminism, the focus is shifting more and more to the way we might all be women, but the different ways in which we are women.

Within feminist theory white feminists try to be sensitive to the fact that even through the best intentions, they can take possession (**appropriation**) of different others. This happens when they do not acknowledge that women of colour were the ones to raise issues of difference, and when they demand that women of colour serve as tokens of otherness on panels that was formed without their leadership. We exploit difference when we commodify blackness or sell African spirituality or treat others as "exotic spices we would like to taste" (Stratton 1995:200). Despite the dangers of appropriation, coloured women continue to stress the importance of focus on differences. Audre Lorde says: *Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilisation of women's joint power* (Lorde in Stratton 1995:201). Difference matters. It shapes our experiences and our understanding of these experiences (Stratton 1995:201). Within this milieu must be found the commonality along with the differences, to enable us to speak to each other. Rosie Braidotti wrote that in any feminist philosophical enterprise we must first of all set ourselves the task of finding the female *cogito*. Thus she said that, *We authorise for ourselves the statement: I—woman—think—as—woman—therefore—I—am* (Althaus-Reid 1996:139).

There is no single definition of feminism *per se*, but rather a variety of feminisms. Feminisms agree in the commitment to work to free (women) oppressed people from oppression. Difference comes in with the definition of what exactly this oppression is, what causes it, and solutions of liberation (Stratton 1995:68).

Despite all the ideals of feminism to be inclusive and speak for all oppressed people, the various types of feminism have a history of being exclusive. Feminist agendas

have often been limited to the visions of white, heterosexual, middle-class feminists. Poor women and women of other races, as well as lesbian women, have felt and have been marginalized (treated as insignificant). These women call various feminist movements to account for the way they ignore differences among women (Stratton 1995:70).

One case of reaction to this problem is the actions of Alice Walker, who coined the term "womanist" after being dissatisfied with the un-prefixed term "feminist". She saw this term as more appropriate to the experiences of African-American women. Walker defines **womanist** in one place as:

*From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish", i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of colour. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish", i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown". Responsible. In charge. Serious. (Walker in Stratton 1995:70).*

Walker also gives other definitions, and notes that womanist is to feminist what purple is to lavender. Her emphasis on the depth and breadth of womanist concern, courage, and responsibility fits well with **Barbara Smith's definition of feminism**:

*Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement (Smith in Stratton 1995:70).*

Stratton herself uses the term feminism and womanism as courageous, responsible and actively working to promote the freedom and living of *all* women.

I end this chapter with a section where some of the key concepts used in this study are explained in greater detail. This is included to especially aid the lay reader in understanding some of the terms used throughout this work.

### 1.15. CERTAIN CONCEPTS EXPLAINED

What follows are some definitions and broader explanations on key terms used throughout this study. They follow in alphabetical order.

### **Androcentrism**

Patriarchy is a root cause not only of sexism, but also of racism, ethnic prejudice, colonialism, economic classism, and naturism (the destructive exploitation of nature for human needs). Gender discrimination is not only to be found in patriarchal male domination, but also in behaviors that make the experiences of males central to every area in life. The name for this pattern is androcentrism, which means that what is associated with being male is the norm, and what is associated with being female, is the exception. The male norm is the human norm. There is no recognition that male experience is but one option (Clifford 2001:19, 265) for human experience. The term androcentrism literally means "man- or male-centered", and results in making what is associated with being male central in every facet of life.

### **Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs)**

In Spanish the term used is *comunidades eclesiales de base*. Small groups of Christians, especially poor families at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid, who gather regularly to pray, to read the Bible, to celebrate their faith, and to plan actions to be taken by the community that will benefit the poor (Clifford 2001:266).

### **Deprivation**

This term is objective but masks the existence of power relations. *Deprivation is the observed absence of prerogatives and privileges*. It focuses on that which is denied, and not on the ones doing the denying (Lerner 1986:235). See also *Subordination of women*, and *Oppression of women*. Subordination, Oppression and Deprivation all describe women at some period of history. Every word is also appropriate for some aspect of women's status at a specific time and place (Lerner 1986:235).

### **Disciples**

Those who follow Jesus and carry out his mission. Some Christian feminists envision the Church as a "discipleship of equals" (Clifford 2001:267).

### **Dualism**

From the Latin *duo* meaning "two". It is a construction of the world in terms of binary oppositions: male/female; white/black; rational/emotional (Clifford 2001:267).

### **Ekklēsia**

Originally a Greek term denoting the democratic assembly or congress of full citizens. In the Christian New Testament, *ekklesia* is the name for Church. With

*ekklēsia*, Fiorenza signifies the radical equality that characterizes the "already and not yet" of religious community and democratic society (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:ix).

### **Emancipation**

This word comes from the Roman civil law. *e + manus + capere* = to come out from under the hand of (to free from paternalistic dominance). This term seems to be more precise than the term "liberation" (Lerner 1986:237).

### **Feminism**

Here one must distinguish between *woman's rights feminism* and *women's emancipation feminism*. The strive for women's emancipation predates the women's rights movement, and is more than just a movement, since it can be a level of consciousness, an attitude, a course etc. It is possible for women not to be emancipated even though they have won many rights in society (Lerner 1986:237).

Cultural feminism refers to the form of feminism that seeks to humanize society by emphasizing the special contribution that women can make to create a better world because women tend to be more nurturing, less competitive, and more collaborative than men (Clifford 2001:267).

In the broadest sense, feminism is a theory about women. It is used commonly to describe the discontent of women about the many manifestations of sexism directed to them and the struggle by women for social, political, and economic equality. As used by Anne Clifford, the term means a coordinated set of ideas and a practical plan of action rooted in women's critical awareness of how a culture controlled in meaning and action by men, for their own advantage, oppresses women and dehumanizes men (Clifford 2001:268).

### **Feminist**

A person of either gender that advocates equal rights, status and opportunity for women in a male-dominated world; a person who favours the abolishment of gender-based roles in society, home and Church (Schaeffer 2000:30).

### **Feminist consciousness**

This takes place in four stages:

1. Women become aware of a wrong
2. A sense of sisterhood develops



3. Women autonomously define their goals and strategies for changing their condition, and
4. An alternative vision for the future is developed

The recognition of a wrong becomes political when women realize that they share this with other women.

Feminist consciousness can only develop when historical conditions are right and when women have both the social space and social experience in which to ground their new understanding (Lerner 1986:242).

### **Gender**

Socially acquired roles designated as appropriate to either males or females by a society at a given time in its history. The association of traits such as aggressiveness and competitiveness with males and nurturing and passivity with females is due to cultural gender stereotyping and is not biologically determined (Clifford 2001:268). Gender is a set of cultural roles, and show the cultural definition of appropriate behaviour (Lerner 1986:238). Gender has a social dimension. It is what societies recognize as masculine and feminine, and can vary from group to group. Gender can be seen as a continuum of human attitudes and behaviours, socially constructed, socially perpetuated, and socially alterable (Meyers 1987:46). In light of the above, gender is used for all behaviour other than the sex act to take into account the sociality of the term (Meyers 1987:46). Gerda Lerner defines the terms *Sex* as the biological given for men and women. She goes on to differentiate it from *Gender*, which is the cultural definition of appropriate behaviour for the sexes – a set of cultural roles, and a cultural product (Lerner 1986:10). Anthropologists also distinguish between *sex*, which is a biological characteristic, and *gender*, which is the cultural elaboration thereof (Green 1992:64). Gender is a patriarchal plot that upholds the heterosexual norm. In Butler's interpretation, gender ceases to be a concept and becomes an activity: it is the activity that constructs categories such as "sex", "women", "men", etc for the explicitly political purpose of reproducing the heterosexual "institution". Gender is the process by which women are marked off as the second sex, men are conflated with the universal and both sexes are subjugated to a normative view of sexuality (Van Dijk-Hemmes & Brenner 1994:63).

### **Hermeneutic**

A method of interpreting Scripture. Hermeneutics prescribes rules and guidelines by which the Bible should be interpreted (Schaeffer 2000:30). The word hermeneutic comes from the Greek "Hermes", the messenger of the ancient Greek Gods. It refers

to interpretation, especially the principles and methods of interpreting literature such as the Bible. Feminist hermeneutics is the theory and art of interpretation in the interest of women's full humanity (Clifford 2001:268). Today the term hermeneutics refers to theories of interpretation of anything that might be the material for study. Feminist Biblical hermeneutics refer specifically to Biblical texts and ancient writings not accepted into the Bible. Contemporary hermeneutical theory presumes that new understandings of the text and the reader, emerge through the reader's encounter with the text. Hermeneutical method describes the hypotheses and logical arguments used to come to a conclusion about a text. People engaged in hermeneutics also use imagination to discover the possible meanings and applications of texts in people's lives (Clifford 2001:57).

Feminist hermeneutics further narrows the specialization in the field by

1. Making women the subject of interpretation, and by
2. Making women the constructors of religious meaning.

The first is important because the extensive institutionalized silencing of women in Biblical religions needs to be addressed, and secondly because it is vital that women, and not male attitudes about women, be made central.

The second point brings the interest of women, especially the desire for liberation from all manifestations of patriarchy that dehumanize women and men, to bear on the interpretation of Biblical and extraBiblical ancient texts (Clifford 2001:57).

### **Inclusive Language**

Language that eliminates or greatly reduces male-centered terms in an attempt to be more "inclusive" of both genders (Schaeffer 2000:30).

### **Kyriarchy**

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has coined the word *kyriarchy* which is a stronger word than patriarchy. Derived from the Greek words for lord and master (*kyrios*), and to rule or dominate (*archein*), it is a socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men (Rakoczy 2004:11).

### **Liberal Feminism**

The form of feminism that holds that female subordination is rooted in legal constraints that exclude or block women's full and equal participation in the so-called

public world. Liberal feminism tends to emphasize women's rights and individual freedoms (Clifford 2001:269).

### **Liberation Theology**

Theological response to social oppression guided by the message of Jesus, who proclaimed liberty to captives. It is also reflection on liberating praxis, concrete actions undertaken to transform society. Liberation theology arose first in Latin America and now has a plurality of forms: Black (US), womanist (US), *mujerista* (US), *minjung* (Korea), and liberation theologies in most Third World countries (South Africa) and of indigenous peoples (Native American and Australian Aboriginal) (Clifford 2001:269).

### **Misogyny**

Male hatred of females, often involving male violence directed at women (Clifford 2001:269).

**Oppression of women** refers to the **forceful subjugation of women**. This definition does not adequately describe paternalistic dominance. Paternalistic dominance has oppressive aspects, but involves mutual obligations and is not generally perceived as being oppressive. To compare the oppression of women to the quality of oppression of other groups, like the colonized, slaves, Blacks, the poor etc, is irrelevant and leads one along a false path. The fact is that one half of humankind has always dominated the other half, and this fact makes it different from all other forms of dominance. The word "oppression" also implies victimization. To conceptualize oppressed women as primarily victims, is also misleading and a-historical. Women are structured into society in such a way that they are both subjects and agents. The word oppression focuses on a wrong. It is subjective and makes it clear that the oppressed group knows they have been wronged. Seen in this light, the term is not complex enough, since women have collaborated in their own subordination through their acceptance of the sex-gender system. Women have internalized the values that are used to subordinate them and they voluntarily pass it on to their children. Some women have been oppressed even while in their turn oppressing someone lower than them. The term "oppression" is simply too simplistic to show all the nuances of all these complexities (Lerner 1986:234).

### **Paradigm**

A paradigm is a symbolic framework that underlies the shared assumptions and understandings of reality of a particular society. A paradigm functions through its symbols in ways that define and limit a society's beliefs and attitudes. It establishes boundaries in a society that define the important realms of shared life, including gender roles and expectations (Clifford 2001:71, 270).

### **Paternalism, Paternalistic Dominance**

The description of a dominant group (seen as superior) towards a subordinate group (seen as inferior), where the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and rights on both sides. The dominated exchange submission for protection and unpaid labour for maintenance. The concept comes from family relations as they developed under patriarchy. The father had absolute power over all in the household, but in exchange he had to supply economic support and protection (Lerner 1986:239).

### **Patriarchy**

In academic feminist literature, male advantage exercised as power over women and disadvantaged males is called patriarchy. The word "patriarchy" literally means "the rule of the father" It should not be confused with paternity and paternalism, despite their common linguistic roots. *Paternity* refers to a man parenting his minor children, and does not assume that the father will dominate them or relate to them in ways that will not respect their adult autonomy. *Paternalism* usually means treating or governing people in a fatherly manner, especially by providing for their needs. Paternalism often includes the denial or diminishment of adult responsibilities and rights. If a man exerts power over his children or other people in ways in which he assumes his superiority and their inferiority, that is paternalism (Clifford 2001:18).

Patriarchy is the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family, and the further extension of male dominance over women in society in general. Men hold power in all the important spheres while women do not have access to such power. This term does not imply that women are completely powerless and deprived of rights, influence and resources (Lerner 1986:239). Patriarchy refers to systems of legal, economic, and political relations that legitimate and enforce relations of dominance in a society. It functions as an ideology that affect every aspect of societal life. Patriarchal societies are known by the inferior status given to women and children. But men are not the only ones who can exhibit patriarchy. Women can also dominate their children and others

vulnerable to domination. Professional women who hire less educated women to do household work, can act patriarchal when they dominate these women and fail to respect them and honour their human dignity (Clifford 2001:18, 270). Patriarchy literally means "the rule of the father". It is a system of legal, economic, and political relations that legitimate and enforce relations of dominance in a society, particularly over persons from a racial or ethnic minority and/or from a lower economic class (Clifford 2001:270).

### **Radical Feminism**

The form of feminism that argues that patriarchy is the root cause not only of women's oppression but also of all forms of hierarchical dualism that result in women's secondary status in society (Clifford 2001:271).

### **Reconstructionist Christian Feminist Theology**

Theology done by Christian feminists who draw attention to patriarchal influences on Christianity that result in oppression and injustice. In this theology, the Bible and the Christian tradition are studied with interest in uncovering their manifestations of patriarchy and androcentrism (Hermeneutics of Suspicion) and also as sources that support the struggle for liberation of women and other oppressed groups (Hermeneutics of Remembrance) (Clifford 2001:271).

### **Reformist Christian Feminist Theology**

Theology that reflects a commitment to the Bible and Christian tradition, opposition to gender bias, and a desire for greater participation in existing Church structures (Clifford 2001:271) for women.

### **Revolutionary Feminist Theology**

Influenced by radical feminism, this is a type of theology that rejects the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and their male Deity as sources of patriarchal oppression, and centers its reflection on Goddess traditions and the celebration of women's unique talents and abilities (Clifford 2001:271).

### **Sex**

This term shows biological distinctiveness. Men are the only other sex, apart from women. This term shows the biological given. It does not show sexual preferences (Lerner 1986:238). According to M Gould and R Kern-Daniels the use of the word "sex" should be limited to that which refers to the biological dichotomy between

female and male, chromosomally determined, mostly unalterable. Sex roles are then behaviours such as sexual intercourse and child-bearing, which are determined by biology (Meyers 1987:46).

### **Sex-gender system**

Gayle Rubin introduced this term. It refers to the institutionalized system which allots resources, property and privileges to persons according to culturally defined gender roles. Sex determines that women can have children, but the sex-gender system assures that they should be child-bearers (Lerner 1986:238).

### **Sexism**

This is the ideology of male supremacy and superiority as well as the beliefs that sustain it. Sexism and patriarchy reinforce one another. It is possible for sexism to exist even in societies where institutionalized patriarchy has been abolished (Lerner 1986:240). Sexism is the erroneous belief, conviction, or attitude that one sex, female or male, is superior to the other by the very nature of reality. Although it is possible for either males or females to be treated as inferior, historically, women have been more negatively affected by sexism than men (Clifford 2001:272).

### **Socialist Feminism**

The form of feminism that uses Marxist and feminist analysis in tandem to argue that economic class and gender definitions work together in Capitalist societies to oppress women (Clifford 2001:272).

### **Subordination of women**

Subordination does not connote evil intent on the part of the dominant, and allows for cooperation on the side of the dominated. Voluntary acceptance of subordination in turn for protection and privilege is also allowed by the term. Along this line the term "paternalistic dominance" is apt (Lerner 1986:234). See also *Oppression of women*.

### **Tradition**

From the Latin *traditio* and the Greek *paradosis*, meaning "to hand on". The basic Christian meaning is the handing on of beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and revered sources, such as the Bible, by a Church in ways that are responsive to the concerns of the time (Clifford 2001:273).

**Trinity**

A central doctrine of Christianity that affirms that there are three Divine "Persons" existing in one God. This mystery is rooted in the Biblical belief in God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, and in the teachings of Jesus about God as "Father" and the promise of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to send the Holy Spirit after His earthly life has ended (Clifford 2001:273).

**Woman's Culture**

This term implies an assertion of equality and an awareness of sisterhood between women. It often takes the form of redefinition of the goals of mass movements. One such an example is the fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, woman's culture in the United States led to a self-conscious definition of the moral superiority of women as a rationale for their enfranchisement. This is not a view current movements hold. In its anthropological sense the term signifies the familial and friendship networks of women. One must however make the strong point that women's culture is not a subculture. Half of humanity's culture can hardly be defined as such. In reality it turns out that women live a duality as members of the general culture, and as members of women's culture (Lerner 1986:242).

**Woman's emancipation**

This term means freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex, and promises self-determination and autonomy for women. This freedom encompasses freedom from biological and societal restrictions. To have self-determination means that one is free to decide one's own destiny, social role, and decide about one's own body. Autonomy means that one can earn one's own status without being born into it or marrying into it, and entails financial independence and freedom to choose one's own lifestyle and sexual preference. All of the above imply a radical transformation of existing institutions, values and theories (Lerner 1986:236-237).

**Woman's liberation**

This term conjures up all manner of liberation groups, and implies that the victimized group has a consciousness of wrongdoings against them whilst striving to correct the wrongs (Lerner 1986:237).



**THE EYES OF THE HEART II**  
JANET MCKENZIE



**Woman's Rights Movement**

This signifies a movement that is concerned with winning equality with men for women in all aspects of society, thereby giving them access to all rights and opportunities enjoyed by men in the the institutions of that society (Lerner 1986:236).

**Yahweh**

A name for God (YHWH), which, according to the Old Testament book of Exodus, was revealed to Moses. In Jewish tradition, it is considered a name too holy to be pronounced aloud and is replaced by *Adonai* (Lord) (Clifford 2001:273).

## CHAPTER 2

# THE STATE OF SOCIETY THAT MAKES A FEMINIST THEOLOGY NECESSARY

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

Chapter one gave a broad view of the field of feminist theology. Chapter two now wishes to answer the question: why is such a theology necessary at all? What makes society so bad that it needs the criticism and liberative work offered by a feminist theology? The chapter then proceeds to illustrate the state of society and offers a rationale for why such a theology is necessary.

Where does one begin to do a theology of liberation? The answer is: at home. Start at the beginning. As one sets out from the front door to travel a new unknown path, it is necessary to look back and acknowledge from whence one came. In feminism, it is crucial to never forget the past road traveled. Since the forgetfulness of women about their past history is a great problem identified by feminist criticism, one needs to always remember the past — why are women in a position of subjugation today?

Why refer to some topics more than once? It is impossible to study any aspect of female life in society without focusing often, in increasing detail, on certain issues. The reason for this is the fact that these central issues (patriarchy's influence on society, the history of women's subjection, the religious inherited oppression of subjugated groups etc) tend to come to the fore at every turn of the argument, and their importance is such that they influence every single aspect of an argument put forth. When one writes about women, it is impossible not to go into the history of women in society in ever increasing detail, for every aspect of women's lives in the present, seems to be influenced by the inherited past, which goes back to ancient times in some cases, and classical times in others. The place modern woman finds herself in society today can also not be studied without taking into consideration the time since the Middle Ages and the Aufklärung following it. In a mainly Protestant country, it becomes clear on closer inspection that the thought patterns of the great reformers had a profound impact on the way the societal fabric of the modern era is

made up, and woman's place in it once again is influenced by events that happened during the 1600s and even our inherited colonial past.

I ask the reader to bear with patience the fact that one needs to return to the past in order to gain insight into the present. This is part of the hermeneutic dance, where one moves forwards, backwards, forwards and backwards in ever-widening circles. This hermeneutic dance is explained in greater detail in chapter 4.

I am sensitive to the fact that my own position as white woman limits my viewpoints and understanding of African culture. Growing up in a multi-cultural society does, however, give one at least a limited bit of insight into other cultures sharing the country, and one at least has a first-hand experience of the dynamics and challenges that a multi-cultural society offers its inhabitants. I do not propose to be able to understand all the issues in the life of the Pedi woman, or the Tswana, Sotho, Zulu, Ndebele, German, English etc woman sharing my societal experience, but the least claim to be made is the fact that one does not have a complete lack of knowledge and understanding. Keeping the limitations of one's own identity in mind, one can at least try to speak on behalf of women who otherwise are completely unheard, about those things that influence the welfare of all of us, until such time that their voices can also be raised up.

In this chapter I focus on a few pressing issues for women, which certainly seem to greatly affect us in South African society.

- The history of women in society (going back even to ancient times), and the history of men in society.
- The fact that women do not know about their past.
- The ever-present influence of the image of God, and the influence it yields over the place of women in the Church of today.
- The fact that women use the life and work of Jesus to inspire them to an ideal of freedom.
- What manner of power do women have? Are they completely powerless in society? How have women utilized their power?
- The impact of African culture in South Africa.
- The problem of the ancient text of the Bible which needs to speak to the modern woman of today.
- The great problem of violence against women in South Africa.

- The pressing economic struggles women face in South Africa.
- How to become a suspicious, aware, enlightened reader.

My choice of issues to be singled out as pressing questions for women (specifically of South Africa) necessitates explanation. It is impossible to focus on all issues affecting the lives of women in the country today. The problem of HIV/AIDS, the great issue of women getting infected with AIDS in greater numbers than men, the problem of children left without parents, the problem of child abuse and child rape in the country, the struggle for equal standing within the African culture, the problem of inter-racial relationships among women within the country etc — all these issues are valid and pressing, but time and space does not permit a study of each one in detail. The few questions I have chosen to focus on in this chapter, stem from the fact that, as a woman attending Church all my life, going to school and studying and thus being in a position of being influenced by government policies on education of women, I have never been exposed to any of the above questions being addressed by any institution or any person, and certainly have never experienced any institution or body to make my community and who I represent aware in any way of these problems. One can really say that my Church does not address these issues, for I as woman am not aware of the Church doing anything significant enough so as to change praxis or perceptions about these issues in society.

In as far as one's own experience serves as measure for truth of reality, I may state that I am a member of one of the largest Church denominations in the country, the Dutch Reformed Church. In my experience, my religious body has a tendency for working on a small scale. This is echoed in the experiences of others when I talk to them about the situations in their congregations and the projects they have in their Churches. There might be a social worker or a committee in the Church who often pleads for help from the members of the religious body, but nobody is ever shown the size of the problem, nobody is ever addressed about the issues that lead to the problem, and certainly no effort is ever made to shake Christians from their oblivion. We know we have scary problems in our country, but our empathy fatigue is so great that we simply prefer to turn away and look at something else. We seem to cruise through life, hoping to miss great pain, and only becoming aware of the needs of society once society reaches out and shakes us by means of hijackings, rapes, robberies, polemical articles etc.

The Church is the body where Christians volunteer their time once a week. This opportunity towards enlightenment and the opening of the eyes should not be missed. With this hope, I write...

In order to rightly evaluate one's position in the present, one has to take note of the past and what it was that led women to the place they occupy currently in society. In this regard one has to take a brief look at the way patriarchy developed from ancient times, and how this thread runs through to the current era. Women also have to look at their current positions in religion and society in general and evaluate it honestly: are we completely powerless or do we have selected areas of influence? The scope includes an overview of the current situation of theology on the African continent. Chapter four eventually positions Fiorenza's specific hermeneutics within the broader spectrum of reading strategies discussed in preceding chapters.

## 2.2. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PATRIARCHY

How, when and why did female subordination start? The traditionalist answer to this question is that male dominance is universal and natural. In religious terms this argument goes along the lines of woman being subordinate to man because this is how God created her (primordial position or creationist position). Traditionalists accept the existence of **sexual asymmetry**, whereby **different tasks are assigned to men and women**. The argument is that woman was designed with a different biological function than man, and resultingly should be exercising different social tasks. God created sex differences which determine sexual division of labour. As a result no one is responsible or to blame for sexual inequality or male dominance (Lerner 1986:16). Can this easy answer be acceptable to women? Should we dig even deeper to find the roots of our oppression? The topic of patriarchy has been mentioned before (ch 1) but, in the methodology of feminist criticism (the hermeneutic dance) one needs to return to this in increasingly deeper spirals in order to find the wellspring of oppression, name it, and renounce it. One can also only be satisfied in the acknowledgment of patriarchy once one knows where and how deep its roots lie in our culture.

Feminist anthropologists have challenged the generalizations which hold male dominance to be universal. Such conclusions were exposed as being patriarchal assumptions by the people investigating the various cultures. Male dominance is not

universal. There are societies where sexual asymmetry carries no connotation of dominance or subordination. The various tasks undertaken by the various groups are essential to survival and both sexes enjoy equal status in this regard. Such societies are **complementary, with different but equal roles and status** for men and women (Lerner 1986:18).

(Unwittingly) traditionalists have accepted cultural changes which have allowed men to free themselves from biological necessity (hard labour is now done by machines as opposed to hand power, and this is positive progress), yet will hold that women are forever to be held to the unchanging activity of female nurturance (Lerner 1986:20). But patriarchy has a history — it developed — and because of this fact it is not a created order.

Men and women built civilization jointly. If women were not victims, why did they participate in the construction of a system that subordinated them? One step towards the answer is to abandon the search for an empowering past (matriarchy). Compensatory myths from the past will not emancipate women in the present and future. Patriarchal thought modes are so internalized that a natural reaction when thinking of an alternative to androcentrism naturally leads us to matriarchy. Patriarchy is not eternal, ahistoric, invisible or unchanging (Lerner 1986:36-37). The position of women in society is also subject to change over time in form as well as meaning. To illustrate this argument, we cannot for instance fully evaluate the social role of the "concubine" looking from this modern era we live in (Lerner 1986:38). Patriarchy might not have existed forever, but it has roots going back far into history. Before the development of an ideology of patriarchy, and before the institution of the state, patriarchal relations between the sexes existed (Lerner 1986:75).

Along the lines of an argument put forth by Danish anthropologist Peter Aaby, the exploitation of human labour and the sexual exploitation of women became linked in the urban revolution (Lerner 1986:52). The process by which Neolithic villages became agricultural communities, then urban centers, and eventually states, is called the urban revolution (Lerner 1986:54).

The foundation of the state lies even further, in religion. Cosmogonies served to provide the religious underpinning for the archaic state. In the process of urbanization, female deities became subordinate to male gods, with accompanying myths to legitimize male ascendancy (Lerner 1986:54). In this regard, Robert

McAdams stated that the core of the urban revolution lay in the changes created in social organization. This early class-formation led to the shift in societal structure from kin-based to a class-based society (Lerner 1986:55). The urban revolution in Mesopotamia saw three stages: a) the emergence of temple-towns, b) the growth of city-states, and c) the development of national states (Lerner 1986:56).

From 2280-1800BC various rulers in Mesopotamia developed dynastic and diplomatic marriages as a means of consolidating their military gains or preventing warfare. Dynastic marriages were a higher form of exchanging women, and marked off the daughters of upper class ruling families for a special and ambiguous role. In one sense they were pawns of their families' diplomatic plans and imperialistic ambitions, while in another sense, these princesses were also frequently influential (Lerner 1986:67). The Codex Ur-Nammu and the Codex Lipit-Ishtar show that women took initiative in public affairs and that they were trained as scribes during this period. The city of Mari yielded documents from the era 1790-1745BC describing elite women's great scope in economic and political activities. Women owned and rented property, could contract in their own name, could sue in court and be witnesses. They participated in business and legal transactions like adoptions, property sales, and loan handling. Women are also described as presenting gifts to the king, and in this capacity served as scribes, musicians, singers, and political agents. They were also priestesses, diviners and prophetesses. Prophets were usually advisers to the king, and in this capacity it stands to reason that women also influenced kings (Lerner 1986:68-69).

Despite Mesopotamian women's participation in politics, economics and religion, their dependence and obligation towards male kin or husbands cannot be denied. Queen Shibtu is a typical wife-as-deputy in this time, and holds the highest position to which women could aspire. Such women's power derived completely from the male on whom they depended. Their influence and role in history are real, as well as their power on men and women of lower rank, but they remain subordinate to men in sexual matters (Lerner 1986:74). It flows as a natural matter that women came to perceive themselves (realistically) as dependents of men. Women understood their safety to be in their men's protection (Lerner 1986:75).

In the modern state, the existence of slavery is outlawed, but it has had grave consequences for women in history. There is a link between female subjugation and slavery. The oppression of women not only antedates slavery, but also makes it

possible. Female oppression created the necessary mental construct that enabled men to make the enslaved into slaves — other than human (Lerner 1986:76-77). The majority of those who were first enslaved, were women (Lerner 1986:78). In the words of Gerda Lerner:

*By subordinating women of the own group and later enslaving captive women, men learned the symbolic power of sexual control over women and elaborated the symbolic language in which to express dominance and create a class of psychologically enslaved persons (Lerner 1986:80).*

By using slave women as servants and sex objects, a standard was created whereby class dominance over women in all historic periods was achieved. From the start, enslavement meant different things for men and women (Lerner 1986:88). Once a group has been enslaved, their stigma of belonging to an enslaveable group becomes tangible in their lives. This stigma becomes a reinforcing factor that excuses and justifies the practice of enslavement in the minds of the masters as well as the enslaved. This stigma becomes internalized by the enslaved (this process takes many generations and demands intellectual isolation), and they begin to see enslavement as "natural" and "acceptable" (Lerner 1986:100). This view would offer one possible explanation for why women let themselves be subjugated to men, and why they might even have acted against their own interest throughout history.

Ancient texts prove that patriarchal dominance moved from private practice to public law. Control of female sexuality moved from the husband and father to the state. Laws were eventually created to control female sexuality (Lerner 1986:121). While sexual regulation of women of the propertied class became more strict, the virginity of respectable daughters became a financial asset for the family. As a result, commercial prostitution became a social necessity to meet the sexual needs of men (Lerner 1986:134). Distinction between women was created on the basis of sexual activity, which eventually resulted in the legal classification of women along the lines of sexual activity (Lerner 1986:135). The state became involved in the classification of women as respectable and non-respectable (Lerner 1986:136).

The double standard for the lives of men and women come from ancient times. Men took their place in class hierarchy based on their own occupations or the status of their fathers. Class distinctions for women were based on their relationship to the men who protected them, and their sexual activities. The basic distinction boiled down to respectable women who were protected by their men, and disreputable women who were without protection and working in the street, selling their services.



This distinction divided women from each other, and impeded cross-class alliances among them. As a result the forming of feminist consciousness was greatly impeded (Lerner 1986:139).

*The Code of Hammurabi marks the beginning of the institutionalization of the patriarchal family as an aspect of state power. It reflects a class society in which women's status depended on the male family head's social status and property. The wife of an impoverished burgher could by a change of his status, without her volition or action, be turned from a respectable woman into a debt slave or a prostitute. On the other hand, a married woman's sexual behaviour, such as adultery, or an unmarried woman's loss of chastity, could declass her in a way in which no man could be declassified by his sexual activity. Women's class status is always differently defined than that of men of their class from that period on to the present (Lerner 1986:140).*

The preceding paragraph shows that women were always measured against a different set of rules, and that this set of rules also isolated them from each other. The blame for this falls squarely on the system of patriarchy, which gives rise to the question: is there a single, simple definition of patriarchy usable for all contexts? According to Carol Meyers, it is not possible to define patriarchy in a way that depicts all its usages. Its meaning varies, depending on the discipline that uses the term. This term is freely used in the study of Biblical material (Meyers 1987:26). The current use of the term Patriarchy in feminist theology and Biblical studies, is as a structural or ideological designation. Modern feminist discourse has appropriated the term patriarchy in its struggle to deal with feminist feelings of oppression and exclusion. What is clear, however, is that it is necessary to understand patriarchy in order to oppose it (Meyers 1987:27). The institutionalization of power relationships form the backbone of patriarchy, and has been successfully described by Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics*. In this book she highlighted the division that exists between male and female, and she established that it involves female subordination (Meyers 1987:27).

On the other hand it should be said that one should, however, be wary of any system of explanation that deals in universals. Marxists and radical feminists tend to characterize patriarchy without any of the variations that might exist in various cultures. Patriarchy is related to ideas of male dominance, but what does male dominance mean? It may always be present, though not always the same. Male

dominance does not have a universal content or shape, and cannot be equated with female passivity or lack of autonomy. The existence of some dominant males, does not mean that all males dominate all females. One might also have a situation where overt cultural patterns give prestige to males over females, while social reality is vastly different. Anthropologists have only recently become aware of the undercurrent in the gender-ordered life of many groups. Where female control mechanisms exist within cultures that do not honor female contributions, they have coined the term subsystems. Anyone within such a community is aware of female autonomy, while outsiders would not be able to see it readily (Meyers 1987:30). When talking about male dominance, possible subsystems and a variety of overt forms of male dominance must be taken into consideration. It must still be stated that no matter how much autonomy women have, there are always more facets of community life controlled by men (Meyers 1987:31).

Social science itself tends to be patriarchal. Studies until now have made assumptions of value, and the assumptions made, have been androcentric in assuming that male prerogatives and responsibilities are innately better than female ones. When looking at labour division along gender lines, for instance, the assumption is made that male tasks are more valuable than female tasks. The problem this leaves us with, is that even the results from studies in these sciences, are not without problems of their own, and cannot be plainly assumed to reflect reality. Are the assumptions gained in these sciences, for instance, based on a balanced investigation of both male and female views of the value of the various tasks? Is it not possible that an ideology of male domination/supremacy is held by men, and not necessarily by women? (Meyers 1987:33). From the foregoing it should be clear that numerous problems in the social sciences presenting us with our history, might result in the fact that the history we have perceived to be true, may have looked differently, especially where women are concerned.

### **2.2.1. The Bible as Patriarchal Text**

The same applies to the text of the Hebrew Bible. For a long time it has been hailed as a realistic reflection of life in Biblical times. This is no longer the case, and researchers are increasingly becoming aware of the need to reach the historic layers of our heritage that are not mentioned, or at least, hidden. The Hebrew Bible is a public, urban document. It contains statements that appear to value men above women or give them unequal legal privileges. But from a contemporary perspective,

these texts do not give complete evidence of Biblical patriarchy. The texts are silent about women's feelings about differential treatment. The existence of gender asymmetry cannot automatically be defined as oppressive. When one objects to the practice to label as discriminatory those texts that favour men, one does not intend to be apologetic, but rather to be sensitive to the antiquity of the texts themselves and the otherness of their birth surroundings, while pointing out the lack of evidence that women in those times felt oppressed, degraded etc. Gender differences that are currently hierarchical, may not have been perceived as such at the time. The Biblical text is a cultural record that emerges from, but does not necessarily reflect, social reality (Meyers 1987:34).

Another mistake to make is to assume that if women are devalued in one aspect of consideration, they are devalued in other areas of life. A study by Whyte proved that this is not necessarily true or obvious. Various indicators of women's status do not interrelate automatically. Low status in one area does not imply low status in another. In Israel, this means that while access to religious roles might have been denied to women, it did not necessarily mean an overall low status for women. Unfavourable divorce settlements for women simply mean that women fared less well in cases of divorce. These two examples were a reality in Israel, and their conditions should not be removed from the total cultural context that gave rise to them and are too easily defined as signs of Biblical "patriarchy" and the general inferior status of women (Meyers 1987:35).

### **2.2.2. Gender Relations of the Ancient Near East Reviewed**

Feminists should beware the bemoaning of situations of patriarchy in ancient societies that deflect their energies from the transformation of current situations of real gender imbalance. Questions should be asked around the nature of urban life that alters the model of balance that exists for some peasant societies. Israelite society is not idealized, but critics are then freed from their misplaced occupation with Biblical androcentrism and allowed freedom to search for the dynamics that led to the dichotomizing of gender attributes by early postbiblical times (Meyers 1987:45). Another mistake is to single out certain aspects of life and making them the focus of criticism that is unbalanced. An example of this is not to make the mistake of singling out childbearing as a category of women's lives today and transpose it onto groups who lived in different conditions. To do this, would be making the mistake of being

"present-minded" in the analysis of the reproductive role for women in premodern societies (Meyers 1987:167).

As far as ancient Israel is concerned, the household unit who worked its own land had a high interaction of activities for both sexes. The domestic realm was not exclusively female, but was a male and female responsibility. An integration of responsibilities did not preclude labour division along gender lines either. Gender-linked tasks were a part of everyday life. It is also not only the activities which were interrelated, but also the accompanying values, attitudes and policies of the domestic unit (Meyers 1987:168).

Relationships between the sexes in premonarchic Israel should be seen against the backdrop of Israel as a folk or peasant society. All essential tasks were done within the household, and all members, except infants and the infirm aged were involved in subsistence tasks. Such groups are homogenous and free of hierarchical differentiation such as is found in more complex societies. Early Israel might be termed an egalitarian society, with an atmosphere of nonhierarchical gender relationships. Androcentric Biblical texts should not be allowed to obscure this fact of gender equality. Victorian family views should also not be allowed to interfere with an assessment of gender relationships in an egalitarian farm household (Meyers 1987:169).

Despite all the evidence to female value in early Israel, the existence of male dominance in certain areas cannot be denied (Meyers 1987:181) but it should be further investigated and nuanced. Is it possible for the marriage relationship and practices of ancient Israel to throw light on the problem of male dominance over women? The word for husband is *ba'al*, and means "master" or "possessor". This has led many to believe that women as chattel were items to be owned by their husbands. A prominent example cited is the passage in Exodus 20.17 where the wife is listed alongside other possessions of the husband (Meyers 1987:182).

The term *ba'al* does not express absolute sovereignty of one person over another. The word that rather signifies conqueror over conquered, or master over slave, is rather "lord" / *'adon*. *Ba'al* as the term used for the husband is not an absolute, and involves an intimate relationship, a limit to power, and also an ultimate ruling will. This term is not limited to the relationship between husband and wife, but is also used to illustrate the male's authority over the animals (Exodus 21.28,29,36), over

property (Exodus 21.34; Ecclesiastes 5.12) and the general household (Exodus 22.7; Judges 19.22,23). *Ba'al* is not an abstract term, and does not give the male absolute status. The male as the *ba'al* is not an absolute despot but rather a will exerted in relationship to others (Meyers 1987:183).

Women appear in leadership positions in the Bible, despite all influences leading to male dominance in local and national spheres. Should these women be seen as exceptions or as representatives of a larger group? Meyers states that these women were representative of a large group of publicly active females whose identity was lost in the course of the male-controlled canonical process. Female prophets and wisdom figures would not have made their limited way into the canon if they were not part of an intrinsic acknowledgement of female worth and (may we hope it?) authority (Meyers 1987:196). Strong female images did survive in the Bible, such as the strong woman of the Song of Songs, and the female Wisdom figure, who testify to the ongoing reality of what this material represents (Meyers 1987:196).

With male dominance characterized as a myth (as per the work of Rogers), male dominance did not exist in the formative stages of Israelite life (Meyers 1987:187). It is only later that males started to dominate, and Gerda Lerner has identified this in previous paragraphs as the time of the urbanization of Israel. Female displacement from the parity they held with males must have occurred in the monarchic and late preexilic period (Meyers 1987:196) according to Carol Meyers. Another possibility exists: that the superimposition of Greco-Roman thought and cultural forms on the Biblical world and the subsequent rise of Judaism and Christianity from the embers of Israelite life, are to blame for the fall of Eve's status (Meyers 1987:196).

Greco-Roman culture brought a dualistic way of thinking to the Semitic world: pairs such as body and soul, evil and good, female and male became aligned. Eve was the victim of this alignment, and the female principle was linked to the bodily, the evil, and eventually negative aspects of life. In tradition, Eve became associated with sin, death and suffering, and this image was superimposed on the figure found in the Genesis narrative to such a degree that the woman in the text was hardly seen (Meyers 1987:196).

### 2.2.3. Influence of Patriarchy on the Church

How did women relate to the Church in ancient times, what was their position in the early Church, and how do they fare in the Church of today? Within the short span of this overview, it is impossible to do justice to this intricate history. In this section I will just briefly touch upon a few main points that mark some of the few influences women had, and the way the Church thought about women in general. The coming of Protestantism had a major impact on women and their position in the Church. Since my own affiliation is Protestant, the main focus will be on the way Protestantism handled women, and how their position in the Church is affected by (oftentimes unspoken) ideas about women in general.

In early Church history we find traces of women and their influence. Among the Roman nobility, female ascetic leaders included Marcella (350), Melania the Elder (364), and Paula and her daughter Eustochium (385). These women founded female ascetic communities as well as one or two male ascetic communities throughout the Holy Land and Europe. They passed down their monastic foundations to their female descendants. It is interesting to note that even though these women were independent by means of their wealth, they nevertheless accepted the dictum that women could not be public leaders. Through celibacy their traditional roles as reproducers and household managers were dissolved, but their subordination to men was transferred to Church leaders. In an overall view, though the Roman Church is generally seen as one that gave women the opportunity to study and learn outside of the domestic sphere, this view is one-sided. These women did not have their womanhood affirmed by the Church. Their ability to learn and study was not really seen as something a woman could do as well as a man. These women were simply changed into men. In the monastic idiom of that time, they have discarded their weak femaleness and have become male and virile (Ruether 1998:34-35).

We have little writing of these female monastic leaders of the High Patristic Age. Although their male counterparts (as Jerome) are well known, little is known about these women. From Jerome it is known that they were scholars who studied Hebrew in order to read the Hebrew Scriptures (Ruether 1998:35).

Women's lack of teaching authority in the Church continued throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation. A slight rise in women's writing and publication occurred in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, to become greater in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women

wrote in various genres, including plays, letters, treatises, and guides to spiritual life. Accounts of their mystical experiences eventually became the female genre of theological writing. These female mystical writings circulated among both sexes and carried stature as guides in the pursuit of a holy life (Ruther 1998:36).

The Roman Church did not just touch women in their religious life, but had the power to also influence the sexual life within the community. The Reformation, however, did not have much impact on the regulation of sexual matters. Its major impact was indirect. Freedom of conscience was in no way freedom *from* conscience. The keeper of the conscience was the head of the household, usually the father, and the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Knox and Zwingli) placed responsibility for a proper upbringing in the lap of the household (Davies 1997:23).

The early Protestant attitude toward women was one of men seeking to regulate and control women's lives rather than to elevate their importance. In the words of one scholar, Luther was of the idea that the narrow shoulders and wide hips of women were signs from God that He intended them to limit their activity to the home. Also, the idea was that women were created to conceive and bear children, which gives insight into the idea why cloistered virginity as practiced in the Roman Church was seen as an offence against God. Wives should be constantly pregnant for this was the purpose of their existence (Mellor & Shilling 1997:63).

One good aspect that the Reformation brought to relationships, was the idea that marriage was a voluntary contract between man and woman. This inevitably stimulated introspection and reflection that characterize the person's individual and cognitive dimensions (Mellor & Shilling 1997:63).

The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was ambiguous for women. Various opportunities were opening for men, but at the same time they were also closing for women. A male could combine marriage and ministry, but the female could still not speak in Church. While cloistered female communities gave women space to learn, lead and have a religious life, they were swept away during the Reformation to the protest of nuns. A man's work in the world was seen as his calling, women's only calling was to be wife and mother. Schools were opened for boys but girls were largely forgotten, and the institutions that were responsible for educating females were destroyed. Mary and female saints were no longer seen as important, with the result that the Protestant movement had a much more severe masculine symbol

system and religious leadership (Ruether 1998:43). While it may seem as if the Roman Church had a much more user-friendly approach to women, with all the women saints, Mary and the opportunity to learn within the Church, it must be pointed out that within the system of cloistered living, women basically gave up their femaleness and became men before God. Though Protestantism may have swept away the cloistered community, it should be kept in mind that this cloistered life did not tolerate or condone femaleness in any case.

Protestantism was not the welcoming home that a female believer would have hoped for. According to Protestantism the male over female government was established in paradise. Eve was declared to be similar to Adam in her interior nature as image of God, while as woman, she would have been lesser. *As the sun is more excellent than the moon, the woman is not equal to the man in glory and prestige* (Luther in Ruether 1998:45). Calvin's anthropology is similar to Luther's, though he thinks of women's secondary status and subjugation in more juridical terms. Eve shares equally in the image of God and has the same chance of salvation. When looking at redemption and immortal life, there is no gender discrimination. In the distinct aspect of God that has to do with dominion over lesser things, rule is given to the male and woman is included under the things which are to be ruled (Ruether 1998:46). We are all equal before God as far as matters of salvation and immanence are concerned, but the man is still the supreme ruler on earth.

These views did not go by unquestioned. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, alternatives to the above mentioned views sprung up among humanists and left-wing Christians. German humanist Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim wrote a treatise in 1509 on the nobility of the female sex. He turned the arguments from Genesis upside-down by accepting that women and men were created equal in the image of God, but went on to say that woman is superior to man when it comes to things pertaining specifically to her womanhood (Ruether 1998:47-48). Von Nettesheim stated that Eve's name signifies life while Adam's means dirt/earth, showing that the male is closer to inert matter than the female. Eve's name also echoes the female aspect of God as wisdom. Unlike Eve, Adam was created outside paradise, with Eve being created from superior material. Her creation after Adam points her out as the crowning glory and culmination of the work of God (Ruether 1998:48). Von Nettesheim also touched the problem of sin and the role Eve played in this. Eve was not guilty of sin since she did not get a direct command from God not to eat of the tree. Another author, Agrippa, detailed Old- and New Testament religious heroes and noted all the



I learned that fighting all the time, even for a just cause, leaves you exhausted and dead, and one must choose one's fights. Most importantly, I learned that one's dreams only become visions when set within a community; the community helps to envision those dreams and to implement them.

Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro 2002:68

females among them. He pointed out that female followers stayed close and loyal to Jesus while males fled and betrayed Him during the last hours. Women were given the right to preach at Pentecost, and Christian women taught in Church. From a Christological perspective it can be said that Christ came to overcome male hierarchy over female, and to restore women's equality with men. Agrippa saw male domination as tyranny and not as Divine will (Ruether 1998:48).

Women did not stop learning altogether. Wealthy women in 17<sup>th</sup> century England grasped chances for tutors and learning opportunities. They cultivated study and learning in their homes and built family libraries. These women were not given the opportunity to a university education, but this did not stop them from arguing for expanded education in women's colleges. Mary Astell was a prominent figure in the circle of learned Anglican women. She called marriage oppressive, and suggested that women who wished to study remain single. She proposed the development of women's colleges, and developed a theology of women's spiritual and intellectual equality to men in order to sustain her argument for women's education (Ruether 1998:50-51). Despite Astell's intellectual liberation, she did not argue for women's political rights, and accepted gender hierarchy as a given. She maintained that women are spiritual equals to men, and that this spiritual equality demanded education. By denying women the opportunity to study, men were denying women the right to cultivate their souls (Ruether 1998:51).

17<sup>th</sup> century England also saw growing counts of women preachers and writers among radical Christian groups. The American Civil War era was marked by an outpouring of apocalyptic preachers — many of them female. At least 38 women prophets are known by name and have been preaching between 1640 and 1660. Most were Baptists (Ruether 1998:51). This type of prophecy faded by the end of the Civil War, but the Quakers inherited its spirit. The Quakers spread rapidly in the 1660s. Margaret Fell, wife of the leader, wrote 25 tracts, letters and journals, including her well-known work defending women's right to ministry, written in 1666: *Women's Preaching Justified according to the Scriptures*. From a purely female viewpoint, the Quaker movement was more egalitarian than any other religious movement of the time. The Quaker movement empowered its women to go on preaching journeys and to participate in the pastoral work of the community. Women held parallel leadership to men, and administered their own funds for pastoral activities (Ruether 1998:52-53). Quaker theology held that men and women were equally restored in Christ, and that women were equally created in the image of God.

Domination of man over woman as found in society was seen as an expression of unjust tyranny, and reflects the fallen condition of humanity. For the redeemed this domination has been overcome (Ruether 1998:53).

Radical Christianity merged with political liberalism and transformed the theological focus into one that called for transformation of women's legal position in society. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a new strain of radical Christian tradition developed. This consisted of renewed mystical movements that saw Wisdom as female expression of the Divine. The most prominent of these were the Shakers, who, under leadership of Ann Lee, moved to America in 1774 where they founded communal societies (Ruether 1998:56).

From 1960-1980 most of American Protestantism accepted women's ordination. Lutheran Churches in Europe accepted this in the late 1950s and 1960s. In South Africa the Reformed Church accepted this ordination in the 1980s. The Dutch Reformed Church followed suit later in the same decade. There are still various Churches that to this day do not condone female ordination. Despite this, more and more theologically educated women are starting to contextualize theology in their own cultures and societies. They formed a.o. Womanist, Mujerista and Asian-American feminist theology and ethics. Third World Liberation Theology also supplied a voice for many women in Third World countries. One step forward was that women demanded their own women's association within the organization of Third World Theology in 1982 (Ruether 1998:61).

The view held of women in Christian religion has never been able to satisfy the suffering woman or people touched by her plight. Overall, the Church must take the theological perspective of women more seriously. Theology from the perspective of women in struggle has very important and crucial insights to convey. This is unfortunately often undermined and thus denies the Church an avenue of rich contribution. When looking at modern liturgical structures, it is noticeable that the language for liturgy and naming God has been restricted to exclude the experiences of women (Gnanadason 1996:77).

Sadly, the Church is guilty of treating the problem only on surface level, by adding women to committees and ministries within the Church. The key to greater participation of women in the being of the Church, is not just a few more token female representatives in committees, or for more women to enter ordained ministry, or for

the Church to support certain objectives. The key is more inclusiveness and genuine partnership between women and men as well as faithfulness to the new community promised in Christ. The cry is for the Church to be truly in solidarity with women (Gnanadason 1996:78). One way for the Church to be in solidarity with women, is to be sensitive to the fact that theology does not include female experience, and to rectify this situation. Anne Clifford writes that what is included under the gender-blind term "Christian theology" is in fact male theology, done with an almost exclusive focus on questions of interest to European or Euro-American, well-educated, middle-class males (Gentry-Akin in Procaro-Foley 2002:139).

The Church also needs to urgently look at its own interpretive history concerning the role of women in society, but especially in the faith. The question needs to be asked as to where the idea sprung up that women were problematic to the faith, and that their leadership and being had to be problematized. Since the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Christian tradition shows traces of a dualism that regarded the body as problematic and saw the mind/will as an antidote to the carnalities of the flesh. The body was Bad and the mind was Good.

Christians were also confronted with two other *ecclesiae* (theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Church):

1. The *ecclesia* (theology) of the official authoritative Church, which gave instructions and demanded devotion, and
2. The *ecclesia* of the Christian community, who helped enforce Church rules, but also arbitrated moderation and pastoral charity for those who fell in their struggle.

There was a tension between these two *ecclesiae*, but unlike the dualism between the body and the mind, these two were complementary (completing each other), and not antithetical (in opposition) to each other (Davies 1997:19). It is clear that since earliest times the Church had to deal with dualities, but that not all were handled in an opposing way. Some could live side by side. These dualities exist to this day, and impact theology in various Churches in unique ways. One example of the Church's handling of dualities lies in its attitude towards the poor. When focusing on the poor and looking at the ways these dualities exist when faced with the "problem of the poor", the Church in relation to the poor possesses a fourfold function:

1. Kerygmatic            Proclaiming the good news of grace  
                                  (the unmerited favour of God)
2. Diakonic             Healing wounds between rich and poor

3. Koinoniac            Visible and genuine acceptance of the indigent (needy/poor); a caring community
4. Exorcistic            Expelling demonic structures which perpetuate (maintain) poverty.

The above functions were visible in the ministry of Jesus as well as the life of the primitive Church. To ignore them now would amount to apostasy (Hoyt 1996:174). Both the Good and the Bad are dealt with in a holistic way that speaks to all the aspects of the "problem". When these dualities are put into focus on the poor, they seem to be working in a complementary way.

Can the same be said when these dualities are focused on women? Why has the Church not shown the same integrity in handling the (false) duality of male and female? It is unfortunate to have to show that the Church has laid a great deal of religious guilt at the door of women — its main members. From medieval times to the present, women have been taught the double message of the cross which has not only taught them to accept their position of subjugation, but also the violence their husbands bring against them. Women are pictured as doubly guilty of the primal guilt of humanity. Women were created to be subjugated to men in God's original plan for creation, but their disobedience caused a double punishment by doubled servitude forcibly coerced upon them. Women were taught to consider their dire social circumstances as a) their natural condition as well as b) their just punishment for sin. Women were taught to bow under this punishment, even if they had done nothing to deserve it. In their acceptance and bearing of their punishment, they were mirroring the suffering of Christ. They were taught the hopeful ideal that their cruel husbands may eventually be won over by their sweet acceptance of cruelty. The result of this theology was that the cross of Christ became a tool for justifying violence against women and advising them to endure without complaint (Ruether 1998:100).

According to Plumwood the human/nature dualism is one of a set of interrelated dualisms. He states that nature is often associated with the feminine. The domination of nature is fuelled by the same ideology as the domination of women by men (Elliot 1995:5).

Human/nature dualism and masculine/feminine dualism share the same parallel logis, and may lead to other dualisms, such as reason/emotion, and spirit/body. Each dualism involves a positive and a negative side. The one excludes the other. This means that in the human/nature dualism, there can be no "nature" in the full human. The exclusion of the natural from the idea of the properly human is not the

only dualism involved. When it comes to defining what is human, not just the natural gets excluded. When the dualistic conception of the full human is constructed, all the feminine defined parts are rejected (these parts are also seen as less fully human). The result is that the conception of what a full human being is, is mostly a masculine idea(l). To be fully human is to be at the opposite end of what is natural(non-human) and feminine. When the character traits of the full human are decided, characteristics like rationality, freedom, and transcendence of nature stands in front. These were traditionally all seen to be masculine traits. The result is that humanity is positioned as opposed to nature and the feminine (Plumwood 1995:156-157).

The question that study of Biblical texts wants to answer, is to the relationship between the Biblical word on the role of women, and the traditional stance of the Church and synagogue on women's roles (Meyers 1987:6). The continuing unacceptable gender roles find an emotional justification in religious texts, which in their turn shape the psyche of Western humanity (Meyers 1987:7). The time has come to seriously consider the impact of negative views on women in the religious life of the Church. No longer can women be viewed as the black sheep while expected to fulfill the tasks of the donkeys.

Where do women go to find a champion? Many in the Catholic Church turn to Mary. But the power of the Virgin lies in her ability (from Catholic standpoint) to intercede with God on people's behalf. Her power also derives from her motherhood and the miracle of her immaculate conception. Mary has no power for herself, and the sources that enable her to intercede on behalf of others, are the very sources that separate her from other women (Lerner 1986:143). In my view, Protestant women have nowhere to turn. Jesus and the message of the cross as conveyed to women only serve to further justify their minor status and inspire them to a life of suffering. Other women turn away from Christianity towards the goddess cults. The ancient goddesses had power in their own right. Their power was the same as that of men, derived from military exploits and the ability to impose their will on others and influence them. Ishtar was female and had the same sexuality as mortal normal women. The interesting paradox is the rise in power of the goddess, which at the same time was also marked by growing societal constraints upon women of her day (Lerner 1986:143-144). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has, however, shown this exercise to be unpractical and rather advises women to reform their Churches and traditions from within the parameters of the Christian faith.

#### 2.2.4. Patriarchy's Influence on Women's Labour

How does one bring the foregoing to bear on the lives of women? One example follows in the critique of the way society acknowledges the economic efforts of women. In what follows, an example can be seen of a hermeneutics of suspicion at work, focused on a non-religious aspect of life, with the committed stance of advocating better conditions for women within the economy.

The "progress" report, when looking at economic indicators of national governments, fails to see the economy through women's eyes. There is a need for a different analysis of economics that takes into account the real costs of people's time and effort. Costs that are monetized show up in government record, but domestic costs, not monetized, are ignored (Clifford 2001:14).

In ancient times men became the owners of the products of the commodification of women (bride price, sale price, and children). This may be the first instance of the accumulation of property. Enslavement of conquered women enabled the conquerors to acquire tangible wealth by selling or trading the product of the slave's labour (which included the slave's children) (Lerner 1986:213).

Claude Lévi-Strauss spoke of the reification of women which happens as a result of this. Women themselves are not reified or commodified, but rather their sexuality and reproductive ability. This distinction is important. Women never became "things" and were not seen as "things". But women always lived in a greater state of unfreedom than men. Since their sexuality was controlled by others, women were psychologically restrained in a very special way (Lerner 1986:213-214). Gerda Lerner also draws attention to the historical experience of women:

*For women, as for men of subordinate and oppressed groups, history consisted of their struggle for emancipation and freedom from necessity. But women struggled against different forms of oppression and dominance than did men, and their struggle, up to this time, has lagged behind that of men (Lerner 1986:214).*

Class dominance took different forms for men and women. Men were primarily exploited as workers, while women were not only exploited as such, but also as providers of sexual services and as reproducers. Sexual exploitation is the very mark of class exploitation for women, with their class positions becoming actualized

through their sexual relationships, while class for men was defined on the basis of their relationship to the means of production (Lerner 1986:214-215).

Are things looking better for modern women? It seems that the patriarchal family has been amazingly resilient and varied in different eras and places. In modern Western states, property relations in a family might be more egalitarian (with the father not having absolute power) while the economic and sexual power relations remain the same (Lerner 1986:216). In some other cases sexual relations may be egalitarian while economic relations remain patriarchal, or the reverse. In all cases, changes within the family do not translate to changes within institutions and government (public realm) (Lerner 1986:217).

It seems that the family on the one hand mirrors the state and educates its children to follow it, while at the same time it serves to create and reinforce that order (Lerner 1986:217).

When improvements in the status of women are seen in a society, this often only means that there are observable improvements in the degree in which their situation afford them opportunities to exert some leverage within the system of patriarchy. Women with more economic power have somewhat more control over their lives. One should not mistake the existence of women's groups, associations and economic networks that try to counteract the dictates of patriarchy, as women's freedom. Reforms will not basically change patriarchy. In order to transform patriarchy, reforms need to be integrated within a vast cultural revolution (Lerner 1986:217).

Patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women, which take the form of gender indoctrination, educational deprivation, denial to knowledge of women's history, dividing of women along lines of sexuality, coercion, restraints, discrimination with regards to economic resources and political power, and by giving class privileges to conforming women (Lerner 1986:217).

Women have for thousands of years shaped their lives and acted under paternalistic dominance. This term describes the relationship of a dominant group (considered superior) to a subordinate group (considered inferior) in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and reciprocal rights. The dominated exchange their



submission for protection, and their unpaid labour for maintenance (Lerner 1986:217).

The economic level of life cannot be separated from this problem. The modern economy requires for its success a "crypto-servant" class of housewives. In this case middle-class and upper-middle-class housewives. The subordinate role of the woman becomes more arduous the higher the family income, since modern economy is based on an ever-expanding consumption of goods (Bennett 1989:138-139).

Betty Friedan, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist writer, has focused on the mistaken worldview that women can only find satisfaction in the traditional role of wife and mother since the 1960s with her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Her important insight was that middle-class, suburban, white, heterosexual housewives are left feeling "empty and miserable" when they are deprived of a meaningful goal (Sprong 2002:40). 25 years later she wrote her book called *The Second Stage* in which she suggested that whilst women in the 60s were victims of the feminine mystique, then women in the 1980s were victims of the feminist mystique. She had discovered that there were minuses as well as pluses to career-marriage combinations and that the single career woman was often disillusioned with the rewards of success (Sprong 2002:40).

An interesting measuring tool was introduced by Sanday in the measuring of the value of women in a society. In agrarian settings where men and women share equally in subsistence tasks, females contribute a maximum of 40% of the productive labour. Women show smaller figures due to their reproductive role which keeps them from a 50/50 split. The status of women is at its highest when the 40/60 ratio is reached, according to Sanday. If female participation exceeds this ratio, there is often the negative effect of the prestige of women diminishing rather than increasing (Meyers 1987:169).

Feminist studies have proven the interdependence that is implicit in a division of productive tasks. The contemporary egalitarian ideal (where men and women each do half of the same tasks, like each doing half the cooking or spending the same hours rearing children) should not blind us to the efficiency and stability inherent in a situation where there are distinct labor patterns according to gender (Meyers 1987:172).

For societies living at the subsistence level, gender differentiation implies complementarity and interdependence. For either men or women to strive for personal independence, is to act contrary to the demands of such an agricultural society. Women's roles are central in such societies. Even in societies with patterns of female subservience, the internal dynamics reveal a functional equality and male awareness of dependence on female talents and labour (Meyers 1987:172).

Internal household gender balance can exist even in societies where public structures or bureaucracies favour male above female, and where men enjoy more prestige. When males and females are managers in critical areas of economic life, as in household production systems, women as well as men are accorded prestige and enjoy self-esteem. Gender hierarchy in work roles are then virtually non-existent (Meyers 1987:173).

Statistics show that African women consistently earn the lowest incomes, have the least wealth, and have worse jobs than men. African women are usually relegated to the secondary labour market which includes the informal sector, agriculture and domestic work or even unpaid labour. These women occupy a disadvantaged position in the economy. Discrimination in education has played a crucial role in sustaining this disadvantaged position. On average, the African woman has only three years' privilege of education (Haddad 1996:200).

The disadvantaged economic position of women is further aggravated by the unequal labour division in the household. Women are expected to take care of the household chores, cook, clean and care for the children, in addition to any paid work they do. Little time or energy is available to work overtime or take on more senior positions in the formal sector. The result of these constraints is a substantially reduced cash income (Haddad 1996:200), so that women as a group earn less money than men, despite the fact that they work longer (unrecorded) hours. This has a marked psychological effect on the way women perceive their own work effort. Their own work gets measured against male work and against male standards, and the underlying assumption of such an exercise is that male work is more significant than female work. What is needed for women to be able to claim their own work effort as equally worthy, is a mind shift in the way work is seen, and a committed revaluing of work that does not get economically rewarded.

### 2.3. WOMEN'S PROBLEMATIC LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR HISTORY

Why did it take so long for women to start acting against their own subjugation? Why are so few women even today aware of their lack of social status? One reason for women's seeming acceptance of their inferior position, is the lack of knowledge of our history. We do not know that, throughout the history of the Church, voices have spoken up against the inferiorization of women in the Church. Women's history has been hidden under great male accomplishments, and women were made to believe that they had no history. There was seemingly no foundation of achievement to build on. The ignorance of history has a great psychological influence of which the impact has not ever been considered fully.

For millennia women have been participants in the process of their own domination and subordination because they have psychologically internalized the idea of their own inferiority. A major way to keep women subordinate, is to keep them ignorant of their own history of struggle and achievement (Lerner 1986:218). What stories were told and who told them reflects the patriarchal structure and androcentric attitudes of the societies in which these stories became the communal memory. Resultingly, the experiences of men were usually given a position of privilege in the communal memory, while the experiences of women were downplayed or ignored (Clifford 2001:59).

The absence of a tradition that would reaffirm the independence and autonomy of women has been a great stumbling stone toward developing a female group consciousness. There has never been any woman or group of women who has lived without male protection, or who has done anything significant for themselves, as far as women knew. Women were told, and came to believe, that they had no history. It could be said that the great disadvantage women had, was men's control over the symbol system (Lerner 1986:219).

Male hegemony over the symbol system took two forms:

1. Educational deprivation of women, and
2. Male monopoly on definition (Lerner 1986:219).

From the above it is clear to see how, through the ages, men have limited the educational opportunities of women, and how each century offered a setback time after time with the changing in dominant male ruling parties and philosophies. All definitions of anything conceivable were also male dominated. Do we even have a

female understanding of our bodies, of health, of activity, of success etc, that is not inherited from a past male definition?

It would, however, be a mistake to think of women as victims primarily. To do so would obscure the fact that women are essential and central to creating society, and they have always been active agents within history. Although women have been "making" history, they have been kept from interpreting history (unrecorded past) and knowing history (interpreted and recorded past). Women have also been excluded from symbol creation, and the ventures of science creation, philosophical creation and the creation of law. The exclusion of women to these endeavours of life has led to a tension between women's actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting this experience. This tension is called the "dialectic of women's history" by Gerda Lerner, and according to her this dialectic has served to move women forward in the historical process (Lerner 1986:5).

A great part of consciousness-raising is the identification of the subjugated status of women in society. But, once again, this makes up but one side of the feminist coin. The other side is amply argued by Jones-Warsaw when she states that one cannot merely identify oneself as a victim, since this is dangerous for the process of growth. Koala Jones-Warsaw suggests that we re-evaluate feminist/female usage of the terms "victim" and "victimization". In the context of black women for instance, to view oneself as a victim is to absolutize the definition of the self and negating the possibility for regrowth. A view like this elevates one single negative aspect of an entire life while negating all other creative and positive aspects. Jones-Warsaw criticises such a view as an oppressive tool. Instead of women being recognized as mothers, fathers, lovers, artists, engineers, orators, comedians, athletes etc, women wear the "mark of "victim" seared into our consciousness" (Jones-Warsaw 1993:182-183).

Jones-Warsaw makes a plea for women to reject any view of victimization that represents an isolated definition of the self or state of being. She suggests that victimization be viewed as a process to which we as women are more susceptible, but also as a process of sin in which we as women actively participate (Jones-Warsaw 1993:183).

This insight is very valuable, and has been amplified time and again by other academics and activists — even from the perspective of liberation theology. The

victim is not just exclusively a victim, but helps in his/her own subjugation, and in turn can also victimize others. A great influence on the self-subjugation of victims, is the interpretation and presentation of the Biblical text within religion. The (female) sin of extreme self-negation (of women) has a clearly traceable religious root. Once women see their own complicity in the internalization of negative female stereotypes, the work of building positive images of and for women can begin.

Patriarchal religions have given us the inherited belief that female initiative and will are evil by simply juxtaposing Eve and Mary in the Biblical text. Eve caused our fall into sin by asserting her will against the command of God. Mary, on the other hand, rang in a new era with her response to let it be done according to the words of God (Luke 1.38). Patriarchal religion values the passive subordinate will, while classical definitions of sin holds that sin is the assertion of will, with grace defined as the subordination of the will. This unconscious view has grave consequences for Western women. Western culture encourages males to assert their will (then sin takes the form of excess of will). Culture on the other hand discourages women their assertion of will (for women their sin takes the form of self-negation or insufficient assertion of the will). Yet society and religion encourages women to remain in their sin, while the same is not true for men (Christ 1979:283-284).

Women's groups themselves are still just as prone to victimize others in the own group, and great self-consciousness is necessary in this respect. When black women share portions of their lives with white or feminist groups, some aspects of their story are taken out of proportion and lifted up in such a way that it serves the purpose of the white females (Jones-Warsaw 1993:185). This leads to a cycle of victimization, where the victimized starts victimizing others. The only way black women specifically can break free of this cycle, is to risk all for those things that can bring wholeness and integrity to their personhood. Each situation must be carefully judged for the possibility of setting them up as victims for others (Jones-Warsaw 1993:185). I would say that the opposite can also be true. Jones-Warsaw obviously writes from a perspective where black women form the minority representatives within a white movement, but the reverse is true in a country like South Africa. Here a situation can and often does unfold where black women within a group/movement can require white women to permanently be or accept responsibility for being guilty of transgressions of racism, colonialism and apartheid and various crimes of the past era, without ever moving past such a point. I have started to call this the enforced white-guilt syndrome, which hampers communication and development throughout

the country in all movements where different people strive to work together. I admit that I paint in broad strokes, but in order to progress to liberation for ALL women, women need to start actively striving towards transcending their South African history in order to build a new history. Harping on the past and forever staying mad about the past is as much a white as a black problem. My sentiments are echoed in the work of Starhawk, who offers the same perspective from a very surprising angle — Paganism and Wicca.

Are we to remain angry and focused on awareness all the time? An answer comes from the writer Starhawk, a professed witch. According to her, witches understand that energy (emotional, physical or psychic) flows in cycles. It rises and falls. Intensive energy levels must be released and then brought down and grounded before it becomes destructive. In no ritual could a peak of frenzy last all the time. At the same level—political/feminist groups that try to maintain a high level of anger all the time run out of steam. By releasing energy, momentum is not lost. It is rather true that real movement and change happens within the rhythmic pattern of life (Starhawk 1979:267).

When women come together to tell about their experiences of anger and joy, about the bad things that happened or were done to them as well as the good things that came across their paths, the event of storytelling takes place. This is a very effective release of energy. Within feminist theology, great emphasis is placed on this activity. Stories are very important, and especially women's stories should be shared so that experiences can broaden and understanding take place. This is especially necessary in the South African context. We have the great example of the institution and event that took place in the form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is a great feat to be able to look back at this event and see the healing and personal release, and subsequent freedom that followed storytelling in such a context. Feminist theology can stand on this example and illustrate that it is not just possible, but that in a country rife with conflict, it has been done successfully.

Due to the fact that women's stories have not been told, women's experiences were not given the opportunity to influence the language of myths and sacred stories. Luke even wrote of Mary that she kept all the things the angel told her in her heart, pondering them on her own (Luke 2.19). The words of Mary were never spoken, written and retold, and never had the chance to "dwell among us". Her experience and that of others like her, has not shaped the stories of the Bible (Christ 1979:230).

A great event in the South African context that illustrates the importance of sharing personal stories, and the ability this has to bring about healing, reconciliation and closure, was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. During this event, no person listening to these stories were left untouched. Parallels were drawn between the continued distress of those recalling human rights violations and the empathised suffering of the Commissioners and reporters. None escaped unharmed, either through the deterioration of family life, or through serious physical affliction. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's cancer was seen by many as a physical manifestation of terrors he had vicariously experienced. In the end the Commission wasn't about recording evidence and apportioning blame, it was to allow the victims and perpetrators to tell their story; to finally allow relatives and friends the chance to grieve, and for the country to reach closure (Boddy-Evans internet book review).

When women tell stories and create herstory, an important part of the activity should also be the telling of stories of female role models. Who can we look to for inspiration? Only when one starts to search for female role models, does one realize that female role models and heroines are not that easy to find precisely due to the fact that "his-story" does not remember women. The celebration of female role models and heroines then becomes a very important task.

Not only do women have a lack of female role models and even less paradigms about positive female relationships from Scripture, but women from different races do not have heroines in their own communities. Women of colour experience a double lack of female role models. Black women usually find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. They often view the privileges of race, sex and class without achieving it for themselves. They are often subjected to standards of beauty and goodness that are defined in terms of white, middle-class women. This leads to the desire to become more white and male in order to be acceptable. Such a strive leads to dismemberment and fragmentation (Jones-Warsaw 1993:183).

Even in the current era, the need to identify and proclaim female role models is of the utmost importance. Women may no longer be allowed to remain blissfully ignorant to their own detriment. We all have some inkling of an idea, for instance, of who the (male) captain of the national soccer or rugby team may be, or the (male) State

President etc, but do we even know who a few of the women in our communities are who are really worthy of being called role models? The 2006 woman of the year, for instance, was Esther Watson, and the 2007 woman of the year was Linda Olga Nghatsane. Judge Lucy Mailula said of the women winners that it was fantastic that the Woman of the Year Award showcased these unsung heroines as they are truly role models for the young women and girls in South Africa. The achievements of these women is inspiring and worthy of the nation to celebrate (Woman of the Year). What remains interesting to note for me, is that no news item showcases events like these to the same degree as, for instance, an announcement of the team members to play a national rugby or soccer match against another country. This just proves in the basest way how history and media is truly his-story. Women need to sit up, take notice, become critical instead of complacent, and start turning the tide.

#### 2.4. RETRIEVING POSITIVE FEMALE IMAGES OF GOD

Anne Bennett looks at the way society is structured and finds in all systems, be it economic, religious, political or familial, the same structure: that of a pyramid with a patriarch at the top. This pattern is practically identical to the way we envisage God and His relationship with creation (Bennett 1989:127). It is impossible to have a liberation theology as long as we have a pyramid concept of the divine order of creation. Anne Bennett calls this pyramid demonic, unnatural, and contrary to all experiences of interrelatedness and interdependence of creation. From the following pyramid of power, roots can be traced to sexism, racism, classism and exploitation of the earth (Bennett 1989:128).

God  
 (Ruler – Male)  
 Man  
 (ruler – male)  
 “Other” men  
 Women, children, slaves  
 (all called “other”)  
 All the other living creatures  
 Earth  
 (Bennett 1989:128).



The way God is presented to women needs to change if women are to find a champion in Him. The German theologian Dorothy Soelle wrote:

*... God (the "male" God...whose most important activity is rulership) corresponds to a deep-seated fantasy of mankind. Men, too, wish to be self-sufficient, autonomous, dependent on no one. They too would like to be omnipotent rulers... these dreams find their verbal expression in the religion fabricated by men in the interest of men. The highest satisfaction men can imagine is to be autonomous and independent (Soelle in Bennett 1989:117).*

Anne Clifford calls for the recovery of Biblical symbols and metaphors that affirm that female reality is not extrinsic to the living God. She asks that attention be given to images for God such as those found in Hosea 11, and Isaiah 49.25 and 66.13 where the picture of God as male is shattered. In these texts Yahweh is presented as mother who lifts her people from the depths of desolation and gives them hope. What is called for is not a re-sexualization of God in exclusively female symbols, but rather the inclusion of Biblical symbols of God in worship and theology, so that the horizon of the tradition can be expanded to also embrace female spirituality and religiosity (Clifford in Procaro-Foley 2002:152).

Feminine language referring to God has been absent in all areas of life in the Church. It is impossible to find such references in its doctrines, prayers, worship, spirituality and even leadership. Many female scholars are just now uncovering feminine language for God which is not new but which has been hidden in the Scriptures and Christian tradition. To speak of God in female metaphors means that the living reality of what it means to be "woman" is suitable speech in describing God (Fraser 2002:202).

Feminism also advocates worship that includes a positive image of women, and that incorporates the female realities of God. Churches open to this change are experiencing a new breeze of worship. Many lessons are taken from the books of Chronicles. Chronicles does not represent worship as rigid, as a matter of external forms without joy or spirit, or an occasion for hostility and separation. It does not colour worship as a human enterprise offered to God grudgingly. It rather paints worship as a matter of the heart as well as the hands. Once again the Church is called to demonstrate its beliefs in physical actions. Worship becomes an occasion for joy, thankfulness, generosity, healing, reconciliation and a time for God to empower and enthuse His people. During this time the human heart is reorientated



**SPOTLESS LAMB**  
JANET MCKENZIE

to remember what God has done in the past and to infuse the present with hope for a future of wellbeing and communion with God (Graham 1999:141).

## 2.5. USING THE PARADIGM OF JESUS TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION

In the Biblical text, Jesus is shown standing in judgment against social and religious systems that exclude, subordinate or marginalize people from Divine favour. Jesus brought good news to the poor. He spoke to the very people whom the clerical classes regarded as unworthy of teaching/training/redemption. Jesus confronted the male Church leaders in a practical prophetic way. They were criticized for excluding the unlearned and the unclean, as well as for their pretense to having found special privilege with God (Ruether 1998:87).

Using Jesus as a paradigm for dealing with the Church praxis of the day, takes us through several steps of revisionist thought about Christology. Jesus, His message and His deeds form the paradigm.

1. He made visible His message of good news to the poor. He openly confronted oppressive religious and societal systems. He assertively affirmed the despised as loved by God.
2. Jesus' work must not be isolated from the ongoing Christian community. He still stands in a position critical towards oppressive privilege. As followers of Christ, Christians must take up this cause and in this way fulfill the same Christlike duties towards one another.

In this way the Church becomes a community that practices redemption. They embody the path of liberation, and in such a way that people and social systems are transformed (Ruether 1998:93).

I once again make the statement from personal dogmatic background that even in the common goal for liberation with the ideal of a hierarchy-less religious (and/or social) life we need a measure of truth outside of human experience. I find this measure to be the Biblical text and the person of Jesus. Before leaving Christianity behind, Mary Daly writes that the Jesus of the Bible was remarkably free of prejudice against women and treated them as equals insofar as the limitations of His culture would allow. She expresses the certainty that Jesus would be working with women for liberation in the current day (Daly 1979:59-60).

The figure of Jesus gets adopted by women in their struggle for liberation in various ways. Some call Jesus a feminist. Black women call Him a womanist, or at least see Him as pro-womanist. Koala Jones-Warsaw, together with others, uses the term *womanist* instead of feminist, and defines it as wilful behaviour. A womanist is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire peoples, males and females. The task of a womanist hermeneutic is to discover the validity and significance of the Biblical text for black women who currently experience the three dimensions of sexism, classism and racism (Jones-Warsaw 1993:182).

Modern feminist theologies build an egalitarian anthropological paradigm of Christianity. The foundation of this egalitarian view is the statement that woman is created equally in the image of God and that no subordination of woman to man is part of "original nature". Feminism encompasses the critique and rejection of any theological justification of women's subordination. Basic assumptions underlie this critique:

1. Women's equal humanity,
2. Women's right of equal access to education and professions, and
3. Equal political participation (Ruether 1998:62).

Redemption was until now seen as individualistic and otherworldly (a characteristic understanding in Western culture), but a contemporary feminist understanding shifts the understanding of redemption to social and this-world-ly hope (Ruether 1998:63). Feminism claims this shift to be a recovery of the understanding of redemption as found in the Biblical tradition. The idea where redemption is seen as individualistic and otherworldly is the result of the effect of Platonism on Christianity. Redemption came to be seen as being reconciled with God and ascending to communion with a heavenly world where one will live after death (Ruether 1998:63). In the Biblical idiom, redemption is very practical, and involves freedom in the life here on earth. Women need redemption in their lives here on earth as much as anybody else. This redemption would not just be spiritual in nature, but also involves practical freedoms such as the redemption of worry about schooling for their children, redemption from the fear of violence, redemption of poverty, redemption of being ignored when decisions are made, etc.

## 2.6. WHAT POWER DOES WOMAN HAVE?

Women realized that the common gender oppression does not necessarily make all women equal. Difference exists between people of the same gender or skin colour. To assume commonality between women is to find a false liberalism. When we pretend we are all the same, some people become invisible in the process. People may, for instance, develop a false respect symbolized by the inability to face hard issues. Another danger is that of patronizing or appropriating one another's identity. In all of the above mentioned instances, a major influence is *power*. The relationship of domination and subordination underlies almost all choices people make (Kanyoro 2002:76).

One of the easiest ways to understand the structure of power in society (and even in the feminist movement) is to look at how we construct and express what we think. When one looks at language, the shocking realization is that the word "woman" refers normally only to middle- and upper-strata white women who decide what is normative. The rest of all women have to add adjectives to the word to keep from becoming invisible:

*Poor* women, *black* women, *Hispanic* women. Ada María Isasi-Díaz points out that even an expression like poor women means white, unemployed or underemployed women. Black women means poor black women — black women who are not poor are educated black women. Women of colour in reality only refers to black women, while the rest of racial and ethnical women are usually added on as an afterthought (Isasi-Díaz 1988:97-98). Isasi-Díaz further indicates that heterosexuality is normative in society, to the degree that the terms "feminist" or "women" include this meaning. The "others" have to be qualified: *Lesbian* women or *bisexual* women (Isasi-Díaz 1988:98).

The above offers proof of the fact that power always rests with those who define the norm. Language offers a very important tool for understanding the power dynamics in society as well as the feminist movement (Isasi-Díaz 1988:98). The solution to the problem lies in the hermeneutics of suspicion. All aspects of life, especially language and texts of various media types, need to be scrutinized for the hidden, unsaid assumptions and occurrences that would bring forth a different meaning altogether, or cast a new light on traditional ways of seeing and interpreting.

One aspect this redemption will take, is giving women authority and power in society in the areas where before they had no influence. It must be made clear that women did not have complete and obvious overt authority and power in society, but that they were also not completely powerless. To explain this statement, one should focus on the nature of power and authority.

Max Weber distinguished between power and authority in his work *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, which has since been adapted and used by feminist theorists. Rosaldo Nunes writes in her work *Women, Culture, and Society* that **authority is the culturally legitimated right to make decisions and command obedience**. In gender issues, it is seen as male dominance and female compliance. **Power is the ability to effect control despite or independent of official authority**. Power is the influence that women have in gender-related behaviour. Female power typically refers to informal and unofficial modes of behaviour that never receive male recognition but that allows them to exert direction in various circumstances. While authority is a hierarchical arrangement, power has no cultural sanctions although it plays a definitive role in social interaction (Meyers 1987:41).

Women can exercise power even while legally subordinate. Where authority structures are most easily noticeable, men appear to be more dominant and women will appear helpless. This is not necessarily the case, as the work of feminist anthropologist SC Rogers has proven. She calls the visible or symbolic superior status of men a "myth of male dominance". She understands **myth** to be **a significant part of the belief systems of its adherents, but one that expresses a truth not literally reflective of the day-to-day reality**. Male dominance can thus be a public attitude of theoretical control while it does not describe reality. Women's power might be culturally muted, but remains functionally active (Meyers 1987:42).

Rogers has identified certain characteristics of a community in which the myth of male control is superimposed on a condition of functional non-hierarchy:

1. Women are mainly associated with domestic matters.
2. The society is domestic-oriented, with life centering around the home, and home life having implications for life beyond the home.
3. Formal rights may disadvantage females, but they have an equally forceful and authoritative power in day-to-day informal interactions.
4. Males have greater access to juridical, political and formal aspects of community structure. This is a prior condition to item 3.
5. Men occupy themselves with culturally valued activities.

6. Males and females enjoy mutual interdependence in important ways (Meyers 1987:43).

For Rogers, the last point is very important because both men and women will tend to perpetuate the system of social balance: male authority offset by female power (Meyers 1987:43). Recent anthropological research (as done by a.o. Friedl in Greece and Rogers in France) has been valuable in proving that male dominance is a public attitude and not a functional reality, and female power is functionally active though culturally concealed (Meyers 1987:175).

To balance the above, one must note that despite a great amount of female power that may exist in a society, the lack of female authority cannot be condoned from a contemporary perspective (Meyers 1987:44). This is also true for the religious life of women. The situation can no longer be tolerated whereby women are needed to give support to Church action, but have little say or influence in the doctrine of the Church, or the way religious truths are presented.

Most of the social transformative agendas of the feminist movement show an alignment with Marxist and neo-Marxist theories — while these theories have in their turn influenced Critical Theory.

## **2.7. THE UNIQUENESS OF THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Once again, one is confronted by the unique structure of South African society. In South Africa, the situation exists whereby the dominant societal discourse is Western in nature, while the reality of life is that the most inhabitants consist of people from various African cultures. Life for the white woman in her Church is vastly different from life for the black woman in her Church, with all the metaphors and symbols that entails. The African Church also has great influence from indigenous African culture, whereas the "White Churches" show marked Western thought patterns and histories tracing back to Europe and the history of the Western Church.

The black woman's status in her own Church is mainly defined in terms of culture, which is the dominant influence on theology. Culture is an euphemism that is used to explain biases and justify actions that might otherwise be challenged. Culture as concept is also used to sustain diversity at the expense of unity. One must challenge these uses of the concept of culture, and enter into a dialogue as far as culture is concerned. Women can probably give credibility to such a debate since they have

pointed out the universality of female subordination. The current ecumenical focus on gospel and cultures may be one such forum where Christian women can speak their experiences (Kanyoro 2001:103).

Culture is learned behaviour and therefore not unchangeable or a set created order. Women hold fast to this credo in their struggle against culturally legitimated subjugation.

The key to development in Africa, is the improvement of the status of women. From this will flow the improvement of health status, a slowing of population growth, and economic and social progress. By investing in women, their own, their families' and their community's and country's living quality is lifted up. A key element in the lifting of women's status, is making them involved at decision-making levels. Yes, we know that available women with the necessary knowledge and skills for various decision-making processes are few and considerably less in count than men. That is why leadership promotion for women is also vital. In the African context, all these factors should be actioned and considered against the backdrop of a culture that hinders women from making the needed progress. Theology has a role in pointing out that culture hinders women to be the people that God wants them to be, and in this critique, Musimbi Kanyoro for one, finds the meaning of doing theology (Kanyoro 2002:92-93).

Christina Landman has been doing work among women of various cultures in South Africa and from her experience she has identified various conceptions of God that women have locally.

Images of God that emerge when women try to explain their losses and the violence against their bodies, take on three faces, in which God the Judge plays a prominent role:

1. God is the source of both the good and the bad which befall people. God punishes, but God also restores and consoles women, or so it is claimed.
2. The image of God punishing people to make them stronger is highly prevalent, as Landman found. The relationship of God to Israel is often mentioned, with God strengthening Israel by allowing her to be conquered. God makes a woman stronger through her battered body in a similar way.
3. God has a larger plan with suffering, and then especially with women's suffering. Christina Landman gives the example of Eunice who, when asked why she did not report the man she contracted the HI-virus from, responded



that being HIV-positive made her part of God's greater plan to save nature by allowing large numbers of people to die. This woman now regarded her life and specifically her death as meaningful because God was doing important things with her death, along the same vein as He has done with good people in the Old Testament (Landman 2002:86-87).

The conceptions above show the typical mentality of subjection that women in religion share, and the internalized religious systems of meaning which serve to subvert the theological problem or the critical question of social injustice.

In South Africa, women are still submitted to rules of culture which are not seen as important for men:

The head of the Gender Commission has spoken out against cultural practices which amplify women's subjugated position, for example:

- During the mourning period for a husband, a widow has to bear certain restrictions which are not relevant for the man under the same circumstances.
- Women are excluded from certain cultural practices.
- Women's virginity is prized — while men sleep around in what can only be called a rampant fashion.
- Young maidens are subjected to "virginity tests", etc.

### **2.7.1. The Guilt Women Bear**

In the South African context, Landman has identified that women of various cultures are victims of a powerful discourse of guilt. They are uniquely trained into this guilt-identity from the earliest ages, and it probably begins with a specific reference to Eve's transgressions bringing all evil into the world, and all girls being daughters of Eve. Christina Landman writes that when a woman is called a bitch or a "*hoer*" (whore), or when she is told that sex with a prostitute is better than sex with her, the guilt of the stressed relationship is placed on her. Guilt for women is a compelling religious discourse. Landman identified Eve as the proto-type for women's ever-present guilt in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (Landman 2002:92). The theological history of South Africa is diverse, but mainstream Protestant Churches are characterized by Calvinism. South African Calvinism with its ability to describe guilt precisely in terms of laws (laws which are extremely genderised) enables men to use their religion to form amazing fantasies of innocence. Local pietism also

disempowers women by encouraging fantasies of guilt. The result is that women relate everything which happens to them to their personal sins (Landman 2002:92).

### 2.7.2. The Violence Women Bear

One of the things that happen to them, and for which they find the blame in their personal sinfulness (and thus take the blame on themselves) is violence. Violence is an endemic reality in our society (Ackermann 2001:102). The following statistics are for the South African context, and uses the figures of 1997.

- |                        |   |                       |
|------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| 1. Murder              | 67 per day                                | 14% end in conviction |
| 2. Rape/wife battering | 1 every 80 seconds                        | 6% end in conviction  |
| 3. Rapes reported      | only 1 in every 35                        |                       |
| 4. Child abuse         | South Africa is the leader in child abuse |                       |

The victims of violence are mainly the physically less powerful members of society, women, elderly people and children. The feminist ethicist Christine Gudorf pointed out that violence is a narcotic (Ackermann 2001:103). Rape is one of the most underreported crimes in South Africa. In 1994, The South African police estimated that, for every rape reported, thirty-five rapes go unreported. Reported cases make up only 2,8% of all rapes, giving a figure of one million rapes a year. These figures remain estimates, but it is clear that rape is rampant and of crucial concern to women, men, the state, the health sector, and the Church (Ackermann 1996:149).

South Africa is a prime example of a country where views held of women (this also includes religious views) serve to perpetuate violence against women and oppression of women. One in three women questioned by CiET Africa, a non-governmental organisation, said that they had been raped in the past year (when interviewed in 1999). In a related survey conducted among 1500 schoolchildren in the Soweto township, a ¼ of all the boys interviewed said that "jackrolling" (recreational gang rape) was fun. More than ½ of the interviewees insisted that when a girl says no to sex she really means yes. Many of those interviewed also expressed little knowledge about the need to use condoms and practise safe sex. The boys' opinions differed markedly from that of the schoolgirls, many of who suggested that they were living in an intolerable sexual environment (BBC News, World Africa).

Female and male theologians pointed out that structures and attitudes that condone violence against women might be legitimised by the idea that God intends men to dominate and women to submit, and the idea that women are morally inferior to men

and cannot trust their own judgement (and therefore are in no position to criticise their men). Another problematic belief was identified in the idea that suffering is a desirable quality for a Christian, as a way to imitate Jesus who suffered silently and gave His life for others on the cross, and that women in particular have been chosen to be such "suffering servants". The idea that God commands Christians to forgive those and reconcile with those who sin against them, might also be interpreted in a way that demands from a woman that she repeatedly forgives and remains with a man who continues to abuse her, or who is unfaithful to her and exposes her to the risk of contracting HIV. Yet, South African women also testified about how they had found solace, strength and inspiration in their Christian traditions, for instance in the belief that *both* women and men are equally created in God's image, and hence deserve equal treatment, and in the idea of God (through His incarnation in Jesus Christ) as the compassionate co-sufferer and liberator who through His suffering on the cross can understand battered women, and who through His resurrection points at a new future, as well as in stories of how Jesus broke with His contemporary patriarchal culture and treated women as equals, and in the examples of Paul's early female co-workers (Ericson, Internet article).

In a country where violence against women is rife and women make up the main body of the Church, feminist theology has the potential of being the tool that gives women a sense of self-worth and the instrument of education that can lift them out of the patriarchal hold their various cultures have over them. The various definitions for feminism offer proof of feminism's potential for liberation. Karen Offen gave a historicized definition of feminism which she drew from the writings of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American women. In Offen's definition, women and men who acknowledge the validity of women's own experience and values are feminists, and they recognize the institutionalised unjust treatment of women as a group by men as a group in a given society. They furthermore challenge the ideas, institutions and power structures that uphold male privilege in such a society (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:66). This definition brings two strands of feminism together: individual feminism and relational feminism. Individual feminism places focus on individual rights and uses male adult citizenship as the standard for equality. Relational feminism defines women relationally (usually marriage) and base their claims for greater rights on:

1. Women's essential nature (childbearing and nurturing), and
2. Their distinctive contributions to society (begins at family level).

Offen identifies that essentialist arguments have historically been used for feminist ends (VanEnsveld Adams 1996:66). In Africa the essentialist argument for the value of women is still often used despite its lesser use in the rest of the feminist world.

Religion is not necessarily a place of safety or equality for women in South Africa, and feminist criticism addresses this issue. The Methodist Church has recently elected a black African woman as bishop, but despite this, women still make up quite a small percentage of the ordained clergy in practice. In interviews with female clergy and in literature, a picture emerges of women often having to struggle harder than their male counterparts for recognition, appointments and influence within their respective Churches, although some women spoke of support that they had experienced from people within their Church. On the whole, black African women were not only underrepresented among academic theologians, but also among the clergy (Ericson, Internet article).

Traditional gender roles and separate organisations for women and men, with women often being the backbone of the Church (as churchgoers, in social work, fundraising, cooking, baking, cleaning and decorating the Church) have a long history. Having their own organisations might partly be desired by women as their own "safe spaces" independently of those normally in charge, i.e. the men. A secular space where this is most clearly seen, is in the existence of the ANC Women's League and the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa. These serve as examples of powerful organisations where women feel themselves at home. The aims of these organisations still remain committed towards transforming South Africa into a non-racial, **non-sexist**, democratic, united and prosperous country (chapter 4 of the Progressive Women's Movement mission statement). Today traditional gender roles appear to be particularly strong in "Mission Christianity" where the missionaries served as role models. According to such roles the clergyman is a man, supported by a wife who works voluntarily in the congregation and as chairperson of the women's group. Ericson interviewed two black African (Xhosa) male doctoral students, born in the 1970s, and they stated that, due to such strong gender roles, they could never even picture a female ordained minister when they grew up, because what role would her husband play in the congregation? (Ericson, Internet article).

Examples like the above just show how far we still need to progress on the road towards liberation and a new view of women in society, and the role feminist theology

has to play in this regard. A new way of reading the Biblical text is critical in this regard.

Victims of sexual violence are abused for the gratification of those more powerful than themselves. Rape is therefore the unjust, evil abuse of coercive power and as such it is a theological problem (Ackermann 1996:150).

Violence is not just a problem that can remain in the hands of the state and the police. Violence is a theological problem, and since women, children and the elderly are mainly the victims of acts of violence, feminist theology cannot remain silent about it. Projection onto others serves to blanket the common human propensity to violence (Ackermann 1996:146). Violence calls into question the very nature of humanity and it raises doubts about God's presence in and care for the world. Violence has ethical, doctrinal and pastoral dimensions. Victims cry out for healing, while perpetrators of violence also need healing from the narcotic of violence (Ackermann 2001:103).

The silence in the Christian Church on the subject of violence against women in its preaching, teaching and pastoring raises questions about the nature of the Church, its self-understanding of its pastoral role, its theological insights and the priorities of its leaders, clergy and theologians. Official Christian praxis communicates at best an uncaring timidity about this shocking problem. It is not surprising that the majority of women of faith who have been raped prefer to seek help from secular bodies like the rape Crisis Centres or POWA (People Opposing Women Abuse) rather than their pastoral leaders (Ackermann 1996:151).

The problem is that violence in South Africa is often only identified by its physical effects (blood, destruction etc) while the invisible forms of violence like threats, insults or humiliation, are seldom concerns that receive attention. Violence like this needs to be identified by the victims and defined from their perspective. Violence against women and children is an example of invisible violence. Rape, incest and wife battering are manifestations of hidden violence whose victims often blanket these crimes in silence for fear of further retaliation, relationships of dependency, feelings of shame or societal prejudice, threats, or disbelief of the victim (Ackermann 2001:104).

The time has come for local (and local feminist) theology to start addressing violence in all its forms. Even the violent misrepresentation of God by preachers and pastors to their female audience should be seen as a violation of not just God's image, but a violation of the possible relationship women can have with Him. The Church needs to be claimed back as a place of refuge for women, and not just a place where more misplaced guilt can be added to their load. The Church should also take seriously its position as body that can influence society and start speaking against violence, while actively putting programmes in place that have as purpose sheltering people from violence.

### 2.7.3. African Culture and Theology

The African culture brings its own challenges to the understanding of God and the life He gives. This leads to the unique situation that women may be subjugated in all walks of life, but that African women are subjugated in ways different from other women in the country. Their culture(s) has a huge role to play in the understanding of the starting point of their subjugation. There are three aspects of the African world view that influence the research of an authentic spirituality for Southern Africa:

1. God (referred to as *Umvelinqangi*, *umdali wezulu nomhlaba*) is the source of all life and the creator of heaven and earth. When God is referred to as *Nkulunkulu*, it signifies Him as the greatest of the greatest. God is unknowable, above all things, and has no human profile. In African thought, however, there is no separation between the spiritual and the secular — they both form an inseparable single reality. In Zulu cosmology, for instance, the primary creative principle is referred to as *Nomkhubulwane*, who is sometimes understood to be the goddess of balance or the daughter of God. This creative force is not thought of in personal terms, but is rather a conception, a manifestation of the quality of God that has female powers of creativity (generosity, sensitivity, intelligence, concern for children). Mazisi Kunene stated that the highest symbol of this force is the rainbow (Ndungane 1996:77).
2. Life is understood as one unit with different phases, which leads to a unique bond with the deceased. After various ceremonies and feasts the deceased is integrated into a community of guarding spirits. The living dead (ancestors) are seen as a life form with heightened existence (*Abaphantsi*). The deceased are still the same people they were on earth. Paradise is in the underworld of the ancestors (*Kwabaphantsi*). This leads to a view of land as

not just a piece of real estate, but as an organism that sustains the bond between the unborn, the living and the dead. African thought is not plagued by the dualisms of the Western world. Religion does not sit in a separate compartment of life. All life (even the political) is one in the realm of God. The Good News for Africans is not so much about saving souls, but about the restoration of humanity to its fullness (Ndungane 1996:77-78).

3. Humanness is expressed as *Ubuntu*. This signifies a spirit of community and caring for one another. African thought emphasizes that an individual exists in community. John Pobee summed this up by polarizing Descartes' view: Descartes said "*I think, therefore I am*", while the African view is that "*I am related, therefore we are*". Africans believe that a person is a person through others. This understanding of humanity creates an enormous capacity for forgiveness (Ndungane 1996:78-79). It is easy to see how this sense of community could easily tie up with the feminist accentuation of faith communities.

African spirituality also shows the following characteristics:

1. A spirituality that is God-centred and rooted in the unshakeable truth that God is in control of all life.
2. A spirituality that is rooted in a deep sense of community, growing from the African sense of belonging.
3. A spirituality that has been purified by the experience of pain and suffering that is rooted in the Cross, which also exhibits forgiveness, compassion, tenderness, and a loving and caring disposition towards the other. Africans find identity grounded in *Ubuntu* (Ndungane 1996:79).

The above positive aspects of African culture unfortunately get overshadowed by more negative aspects. Simon Maimela writes that African cultures are still being used as instruments of oppression by those who are in power to legitimize their privileged position. A fellow female theological student remarked to him that her male colleagues agreed with her on all points, until the topic of culture was touched. For males in Africa, it is convenient to use aspects of African culture to perpetuate their privileged status. African males tend to use culture in the family context, as husbands, fathers, sons, brothers etc. to safeguard and perpetuate their dominant positions at the expense of females. In the larger society as well, dominant groups use cultural expressions of the powerless for the purpose of making victims of society

accept their position of domination as well as the entrenched positions of dominant groups (Maimela 1996:82-83).

#### **2.7.4. The Problems of Translation**

A further challenge is presented by the problem of translating the Bible into African languages. As stated above, the African world view does not show the dichotomies characterizing Western cultures, and the problem for translation lies, for one, in the fact that translators are often Westerners schooled in Western academic traditions. It is virtually impossible not to translate one's own paradigm into the text in some way. Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswane makes a great argument about insensitive translation and its effects in her article *Translating the Divine*. In her culture, Modimo stood for all people, as well as the natural order. Modimo was not for the chosen few, or a particular gender. Translators and theologians of colonial Christianity failed to grasp this concept in their translations of the Hebrew Biblical text, and consequently failed when they simply translated Yahweh as Modimo for the Setswana people. Gabriel Sitloane also illustrates in his book *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* that the Batswana image of Modimo does not correlate with the Biblical pattern of God, and proposes that the concept of Modimo, should rather be translated with pronouns of "it" rather than "He" (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001:84).

#### **2.7.5. Criticism of Local Theological Scholarship**

Itumeleng Mosala writes on Black theology, but his conclusions are relevant for liberation theologies and feminist theologies as well. He points out that the reason why the dominant groups in society are able to claim to be grounded in the best traditions of Christianity while at the same time alienating and impoverishing others, is because this accommodation happened in the formation of the Biblical texts themselves. One is uncritical when one overlooks this important internal Biblical contradiction, and one is in danger of transmitting these struggle-laden texts as part of the unproblematical Word of God. There is a trajectory of struggle that runs through the Biblical texts, and to recognize this is, according to him, to no longer be able to speak of the Word of God in absolute terms. Mosala suggests that one course of action to take, is to take sides in a struggle that is not confirmed by the whole Bible, but which is represented by groups in the society behind the text. The result would be different appropriations for the texts, depending on class, gender,



culture, race and ideological position and attitude (Mosala 1993:61). The lack of appropriate orientation points for the text to real life is echoed in the work of other local scholars, and they are in agreement that one of the reasons for this situation is the lack of commitment on the side of theologians themselves.

In his 1991 book about hermeneutics in a South African context, Gerald West indicates that, although English speaking Biblical scholars have not legitimated apartheid to the same extent as their Afrikaans speaking colleagues, and despite having been trained in the historical-critical approaches, they too have failed to complete the hermeneutic circle and address the question of what the text means for South Africa today (West 1991:33).

The dilemma facing historical-critical scholarship, is due to the lack of a real life context that would function as an orientation point of the research effort. In South Africa, the context cries out for significant interpretations, but historical-critical interpretations seem unable to answer the need, and only manage to keep actual power relations inaccessible to analysis and public consciousness (West 1991:33). The result in society, is that Biblical scholarship has managed to make itself irrelevant to the South African context, while at the same time distancing the reading of the Bible, and entrenching the conception that the Bible is the property of the academy (West 1991:33).

In the academy itself, the awareness of the plurality and ambiguity of all interpretation (more prevalent in the Afrikaans speaking institutions) has led to the proliferation of "interesting" detached readings, rather than "interested" and committed readings. In South Africa with its dominant "interesting" readings, a plurality of interpretive interests are recognized, and the plurality of interests is encouraged (West 1991:33). The few agents of engaged scholarship in South Africa are still very reserved in their conclusions. In this country, the pursuit of "neutral" or "interesting" readings means fiddling while South Africa burns (West 1991:34). Jonathan Draper describes the problem as:

*"Interesting readings" abound in the New Testament Society of South Africa... but outside the gates stand the angry [black] youth asking why they should read the Bible at all! (Draper in West 1991:34).*

A further problem is the fact that theology was until now practiced mainly by white middle class males, with the result that it is unfortunately linked with oppression and

dominance in an unhealthy absolutist fashion. David Lochhead indicates that no theology for the oppressor is needed, since it already exists in abundance. He points out that what is needed, is a theology for the oppressed who are also simultaneously the oppressor. This is much more difficult to deliver! We also need to understand ourselves better, in order to come to an adequate analysis of the ambiguity of our situation (Lochhead 1993:130). Although Lochhead writes from a privileged white male viewpoint, his words are very relevant for the South African context. Suddenly, in a lot of cases, the middle-class white male has become the oppressed himself, while he still remains an oppressor in certain situations. The same applies to the white female, who, while being oppressed as a female, is also an oppressor of her own (often black female) subordinate. Another example is also the previously oppressed black male/female, who, due to changing political policies, have now risen to a level where they themselves become the oppressors of (even white) subordinates.

For South African Black Theology, the need exists to re-read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, while being aware of the Bible's power as both a problem and a solution, both an oppressor and a liberator (West 1991:34). More will be said about the work of Gerald West in this regard in later chapters.

I would add to this that Black Theology in Africa needs to also become aware of its own oppression of weaker parties. The black male oppressing the black female is a problem whose acknowledgement has been avoided to a great extent. The new challenges brought about by the HIV/AIDS pandemic similarly has not been addressed or even touched upon. It seems that Black Theology has a great task ahead in addressing many issues that have arisen in the last three decades. No longer is it just exclusively a theology striving for liberation against (white) oppression, but it needs to become more introspective and sensitive towards its own shortcomings as well as being open to address new issues that come with time.

To make the text of the Bible relevant for the current real life situation in the South African context, attention must be given to the problems faced by the poor. South Africa is increasingly becoming a country with a rich rising black empowered community, the so-called "Black Diamonds". These people have in the past been victims of the Apartheid policy, but have now found great wealth and opportunity within the new South Africa. As previously disadvantaged groups rise to better economic circumstances, previously advantaged groups experience a lowering of

It takes time to establish trust with other women before beginning to do any advocacy. It would be easier just to do academic theology; that is reading, reflecting and writing. But for us in Africa, it does not matter how much we write of our theology in books, the big test before us is whether we can bring change in our societies. This is a tall order and we agonize about it.

Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro 2002:84

living standards in some cases. Our economy is also becoming one with a great gap between the very rich and the very poor, with a shift in the makeup of the middle class. Theology needs to address the new middle class, and needs to get a commitment from the rich in society, while still being sensitive to the voices of the poor. Accountability to and solidarity with the poor and oppressed is critical to liberation hermeneutics. West names doing theology the second act after commitment to the struggle of the poor and oppressed. Desmond Tutu also pointed out that the objectivity of the non-committed make them unable to comprehend matters that influence the poor and oppressed (West 1991:68).

#### 2.7.5.1. Locally, the Myth of Neutrality Persists

In a country that has radically changed in the past ten years, theology has been slow to adapt to new insights on all fronts and the challenge to the myth of impartial science. Despite the tremendous rise in feminist studies, for instance, no chair in Theology is held by a female at my current University. Because the "scientific" ethos of Biblical studies was shaped by the struggle of religious scholarship to free itself from dogmatic and ecclesiastical controls, it continues to insist on value-free inquiry and asserts a deep chasm between the past and the present. Biblical studies are resultingly not able to engage the question of meaning in a global situation of exploitation. The scientific paradigm strives to establish a single true meaning of the text in order to claim universality for its interpretations. It does so, however, not on theological but on methodological scientific grounds. Although it avows objectivity, disinterestedness, and value-neutrality in order to control what constitutes the legitimate scientifically established true meaning of the text, it is patently Eurocentric (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:41).

The aspiration of Biblical studies in particular and religious studies in general to "scientific" status in the academy and their claim to universal, unbiased modes of inquiry denies their hermeneutical-rhetorical character and masks their socio-historical location as well as their sociopolitical or ecclesiastical interests (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:42).

*Because they are rooted in the individualistic and relativistic discourses of modernity and share with fundamentalism a positivist and technological ethos, liberal Biblical and religious studies discourses are in no way equipped to address the crisis of justice and well-being brought about by the globalization of inequality. In spite of their*

*critical posture, academic Biblical studies are thus akin to fundamentalism insofar as they insist that scholars are able to produce a single scientific, true, reliable, and non-ideological reading of the Bible. Scholars can achieve scientific certainty as long as they silence their own interests and abstract from their own sociopolitical situation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:42).*

Insofar as modern Biblical scholarship insists that it is able to isolate the "facts" or the universal "truth" from the Bible's multivalent and often contradictory meanings, it denies its own particular Eurocentric perspectives and kyriarchal rhetorical aims, which are indebted to the European Enlightenment. By objectifying, antiquating, reifying, and privatizing Biblical scriptures, it is in danger of playing into the hands of fundamentalist Biblicism, which also claims that it can identify with certainty the univocal Word of God in the Bible as a provable fact (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:42).

#### 2.7.5.2. Detached Theology's Inability to Aid Transformation

Today this modern scientific paradigm seems to be in the process of being decentered and replaced by a (post)modern hermeneutical or cultural paradigm (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:42). This third cultural-hermeneutical paradigm underscores the rhetoricity of historical knowledge, symbolic power, and the multidimensional character of texts. It either ascribes personified status to the text in order to construe it as a dialogue partner, or it sees the text as a multicolored tapestry of meaning. This paradigm likens the reading of the Bible to the reading of the "great books" or classics, whose greatness does not consist in their accuracy as records of facts, but depends chiefly on their symbolic power to transfigure human experience and symbolic systems of meaning (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:43).

While the postmodern hermeneutical paradigm has successfully destabilized the certitude of the scientific objectivist paradigm in Biblical studies, it still asserts its own scientific value-neutral and etheological character. Hence it tends to result in a playful proliferation of textual meanings and to reject any attempt to move from kyriocentric text to the socio-historical situation of struggle that either has generated the text or determines its function today. The result is that this third hermeneutical-postmodern paradigm of Biblical studies also cannot address the increasing insecurities of globalized inequality nor accept the constraints that the ethical imperative of emancipatory movements places on the relativizing proliferation of meaning (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:43-44).

If scholars bring to their scientific discourses political interests — as feminist and other subaltern scholars are wont to do — they are seen as corrupting the purity of science. Their research is allegedly no longer ruled just by the demands of logic and their discourses supposedly no longer belong to the cognitive scientific domain alone, but promote cultural, political, or religious ends (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:69). Here universal scientific methods and particular culturally-specific values and visions are pitted against each other. Such a scientific rhetoric of disinterestedness, however, is not able to recognize Biblical and religious studies as public discourses that analyze and promote culturally specific values and thereby function as ideology (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:70).

#### 2.7.5.3. Schüssler Fiorenza's Alternative

Schüssler Fiorenza has dubbed the Rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm the pastoral-theological, liberationist-cultural, rhetorical-ethical, or the rhetorical-political paradigm. She settled on the label rhetorical-emancipatory in order to articulate its method and goal. It deploys rhetorical analysis and the rhetoric of inquiry in order to assess the emancipatory implications and impact of Biblical texts and contemporary interpretations of the Bible. The term emancipation is often used in derogatory fashion, but it recalls the process of liberation from slavery. It is therefore an appropriate word for an interpretive approach that has as its goal overcoming structures of domination and achieving well-being for everyone (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:44).

This fourth paradigm understands Biblical texts as rhetorical discourses that must be investigated as to their persuasive power and argumentative functions in particular historical and cultural situations (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:44). At the heart of rhetoric is both the ethical and the political. Such a critical rhetorical understanding of interpretation investigates and reconstructs the discursive arguments of a text, its socio-religious location, and its diverse interpretations in order to underscore the text's possible oppressive as well as liberative performative actions, values, and possibilities in ever changing historical-cultural situations. This approach understands the Bible and Biblical interpretation as a site of struggle over authority, values, and meaning (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:45).

This fourth paradigm shift in Biblical studies articulates a change in the aims and goals of critical exegesis and Biblical interpretation. The task of interpretation is not just to understand Biblical texts and traditions, but to analyze their power of persuasion in order to change and transform Western malestream epistemological frameworks, individualistic apolitical practices, and sociopolitical relations of cultural colonization. Thereby it seeks to engender a self-understanding of Biblical scholarship as a critical communicative postcolonial praxis. Biblical interpretation, like all scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:46).

A critical ethical-political reading does not subscribe to one single reading strategy and interpretive method but employs a variety of exegetical and interpretive methods for understanding the Bible as a public discourse (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:47-48).

## **2.8. CONCLUDING REMARK**

Women might not have always been subjugated, but through the ages their position has become one of extreme and undeniable subjugation, so much so that they could even have been sold as slaves if the males they were connected to suffered misfortune. The rules for women were also historically different, with women being judged for things that males were not (sexual conduct). Feminist theology has pointed out that the Bible itself is a text that was authored by males, and, though tradition hails it as representing a true reflection of the status of women, this can be contested. The Church unfortunately has a history of increasing patriarchal influence characterized by misogyny. This chapter has pointed out the state of the Church which through the ages has asked women to regard themselves as defective males, unworthy vessels, sexual temptresses etc, but never equipping them to lift their heads and live as image bearers of the image of God.

Not even the labour of women in the "secular" positions of everyday living has proved to be measured equally to that of males. A woman might work as hard as a man, but she does not get the monetary recognition a man expects, even in the modern age.

The current status of women's consciousness is one of forgetfulness. They do not know about their past, the women who have fought for their freedoms, and what steps they follow in.

Currently in Church circles, feminist theology has called for a retrieval of positive female images of God, and has utilized the Person of Jesus towards transformation.

The chapter has also looked into the nature of the power women *do* have in modern society.

Since this chapter focused on the state of society necessitating a feminist theology, it looked at the state of theology in South Africa as well. The insight was communicated that theology in South Africa has a unique character and that, in order for feminist theology to have an impact locally, questions surrounding the guilt women bear, the violence they bear, and the culture they live under should be addressed by theology. It was also stated that, although feminist theology seems to have grown in leaps and bounds in other countries, one unfortunately has to admit that locally it has not yet managed to be recognized as a field of study to be taken seriously by its "big/older brothers". The field of theology is still very much a male dominated world in South Africa, suffering a lot of the clichés of patriarchy. As alternative to the supposedly value-neutral theology practiced here, the hermeneutics of suspicion proposed by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is offered, and this will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

In South Africa, the ANC has taken a gendered approach to the problem of inequality and oppression. This approach does not look at men and women alone, but at the relationship between them, how societies are structured along gender lines, and the impact of these relations as a whole in society. It explores the subordination of women to men and how this relationship impacts on all aspects of life and society. A gendered perspective is concerned with ensuring a gender analysis with regard to policies, programmes, planning strategy and evaluation. In other words, it looks at fundamentally transforming unequal power relations and changing society (Pretorius, Internet article).

In this chapter I have identified a few issues that illustrate the glaring need of women in society. None of these discussed issues are being aggressively addressed by mainstream Churches. These issues are of particular importance to women in South Africa, and form a part of their subjugated status in society. The reverse is also true: should these issues start getting direct attention and aggressive assessment coupled with change and transformation in religion and society, a marked rise in the status of women would be observable.



The next chapter will be giving attention to the development and position of feminist criticism. As was stated before, some arguments given in this chapter will be mentioned again and expanded upon where they are applicable. This method follows the steps of the hermeneutic dance as explained often in feminist literature.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE DEVELOPMENT AND POSITION OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

### 3.1. INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF THE CHAPTER

Chapter two started with an overview by discussing the state of society that makes a feminist theology necessary, thus offering an apologetics for the existence of such a theology, and mentioned why a critical evaluation of a hermeneutics of suspicion is necessary and relevant for the South African context specifically. In this chapter the lens needs to be retracted again in order to offer a broader eye view of the whole field of feminist criticism. How did it develop, what eras were characterized in what ways, and what contemporary feminist criticism looks like. This chapter furthermore describes in more detail than previous chapters the nature of feminist theology, and delves in detail into its characteristic advocacy stance and critique of patriarchy. As was mentioned earlier, some of these arguments have been mentioned, but they are expanded upon as the argument progresses in a form of hermeneutical dance. This chapter eventually describes in more detail the relationship between feminism and the Bible, giving attention to the suspicion of the Biblical text, moving to criticism of language used for God, and looking at the view held of women in religion. Since this study aims to keep the local context relevant, attention is given to feminism on the African continent and identifies the aims of feminist theology for this continent. The reason why feminist criticism is described in greater detail is to eventually ground the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza against the history it is built on, and paint it against the backdrop of work that complements the field.

In this chapter I am showing various aspects highlighted by feminist theology and critique. It is impossible to go into a detailed study of all topics being critiqued by feminism, but I have chosen a few issues important to the South African context. One should keep in mind that feminism has a huge unwritten history — how does one record an oppressed person's awakening to the consciousness of being oppressed and his/her own role in this subjection?

Feminism takes a clear advocacy stance which is further explored, and then focus moves to the main item of critique — patriarchy. Patriarchy leads to various forms of sexism, which are briefly exposed. The academic problems and challenges facing feminist theology are rife and must be named, which brings one to the text itself.

Why do feminists consider the Bible important at all? After looking at the Bible, the impact on society and religion of the way God is depicted in the text becomes clearer, which leads to an appreciation of the way femaleness is understood and depicted through the ancient texts to the modern day. Feminist theology has as base female experience, and the meaning of experience when people are so different should be problematized. One ultimately begins and ends with the religious text and the way it is used and received in religion and the religious body of the Church itself. In this sense, one must consider the way worship is conducted from a feminist view point, while ultimately keeping the eye on the goal of liberation and the vision of the future, in the words of Rosemary Ruether.

How does feminist theology perceive itself? Feminist theology is more than just a “tinkering” with traditional theology. It is a powerful critique of patriarchy within the Church and the world, and it sends forth a wake-up call and challenge for revision and renewal at every level of Christian reflection and praxis (Beck 2003:384). The claim is made of an increasing number of female theologians, which means that theology is now “done” in a different way, and there is a strong argument that its natural environment is no longer the academy but the realm of every woman’s experience of the gospel message (Fraser 2002:196). It has been mentioned in chapter two that this is not necessarily the case in South Africa, and this idea is further expanded in the current chapter.

To sum up, this chapter looks at the development and position of feminist criticism and theology, its impact on Biblical science (hermeneutics), society, and the transformation of both.

### **3.2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST CRITICISM**

What are the roots of feminism? Feminism arose in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a part of the ideology of liberalism. The utopian socialists took over this concern with women as part of their rethinking of the family, community and state (Ruether 1975:162). During this period feminism was closely identified with socialism. Middle-class

feminists in America and England continually defended the role of the family and the female in order to curb this presumed relation of feminism with socialist critique (Ruether 1975:162). One such a society, the St Simonians, gathered up various socialist, positivist, anarchist and communist doctrines in a confused way and demanded the liberation of women from patriarchal power and the sequestered life in the home, together with free love and the right to divorce. The argument was that women should be integrated into all the elites of the new industrialized society. The St Simonians proclaimed the reclaiming of the flesh from sexual repression. For them, the liberation of women represented the restitution of the emotional, sensual and material principles from their oppression under Christianity. In this ideal, they showed similarities with many modern males who are sympathizers with women's liberation while in fact being primarily concerned with the liberation of the "feminine side" of men. Such thinking serves simply to reinforce the stereotypic differences between male and female roles and "natures" (Ruether 1975:164).

### **3.2.1. The Waves of Feminism**

Anne M Clifford identifies three waves of feminism beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

The three waves projected different social visions of women and show some distinct assumptions and focus points:

#### **3.2.1.1. First Wave**

The first wave (mid 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) envisioned women as capable of participating in the public *polis* by voting responsibly. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century most intellectual and theological work was done out of a prefeminist perspective. There was no conscious awareness that women's experience as women's experience, was relevant in any way to intellectual work. It was literally a man's world where women were simply part of the male story. Women remained invisible as women. The prefeminist consciousness did acknowledge that women's lives had some unique aspects, but the differences were seen as unimportant. Women only gradually came to believe that their experience was too limited and undervalued. Only after this awareness did women begin to agitate for change in the legal system, in politics, in fashion, social expectations and eventually the Church. Women at last became self-conscious about themselves as women (Brown Zikmund 1985:21-22).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century women compensated for their inequality and marginality by glorifying women's place. Women's being created second and limited to special spheres turned to this as their strength. Women were separate for a reason. God gave women a special calling (Brown Zikmund 1985:24). This glorified image of women led to women studying the lives of great women and examining their roles in the Bible. With the growing understanding of female difference, women learned to capitalize on these differences and in some cases created a reverse sexism which declared that the male world could only be saved if it was to become "feminine" (Brown Zikmund 1985:24-25).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century women rejected the soft feminism illustrated above and began to promote women's studies for egalitarian reasons. The argument was that women and men needed to go beyond the differences to their common humanity. Women and men ultimately shared the same condition and history. Women's experience was important, not because it was special, but because women were God's creatures alongside men. Human history was distorted if the experiences of women remained unnoticed and unappreciated (Brown Zikmund 1985:25).

Women's studies were initially remedial, trying to repair damage and correct distortions. What had been left out was redeemed and knowledge was expanded. Much feminist consciousness-raising is still being done through women's studies. Women still need to see the total picture and claim their equality in God's world. But the journey towards feminist critical consciousness does not stop with new information. It rather goes beyond helping women claim their history but criticizes the distortions perpetuated by the majority. Feminist critical consciousness strives to develop an authentic inclusive interpretive framework for all Biblical, historical and theological work (Brown Zikmund 1985:26).

Moving from women's studies to feminist studies, two things happened:

1. New material and methods cultivated in women's studies became the base for a critique of past assumptions and paradigms. Enthusiasms for new knowledge turned into a critique of old knowledge.
2. Feminist critical consciousness began to shape a new interpretative framework (Brown Zikmund 1985:26).

A second line is found represented by 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists like Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In this line egalitarian Christianity is joined up with political liberalism (Ruether 1998:57).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), an active abolitionist, indicated the ways in which the Bible contributed to the subordination of women. She gathered female colleagues to create a Biblical commentary, *The Woman's Bible*. Stanton along with Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) and Susan B Anthony (1820-1906) are the best-known champions for the legal and economic equality of women with men in the US of this first wave of feminism (Clifford 2001:11).

Feminism has greatly led to the continuously blossoming awareness of what the impact of male and female roles in society are. As men created new political and economic structures, they assigned to women the role of producing and raising male citizens who would lead society. Men were sovereign in the city square, while women were given the task of making a home for men and their children. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were active in the public world of business and politics. This widely accepted cluster of attitudes, known as the "cult of true womanhood", was something that the women of the first wave of feminism used to their advantage. They selectively conferred on the cult of true womanhood a significance that suited their cause, attributing special status to women because they cared for children and were the guardians of Christian moral values, while still rejecting that women were unsuited for politics (Clifford 2001:12).

#### 3.2.1.2. Second Wave

The second wave of feminism (activists were mainly Euro-American women in the 1960s and 1970s) sought civil rights and equality for women. On the political field the Equal Rights Amendment struggled for passage for 50 years in America and was finally brought down by state legislatures in 1982. The Women's Party's commitment to peace was silenced by fascism. In the 1950s the equality visions of feminist movements were largely forgotten. In 1960 racial justice's struggle reawakened. Feminism was reborn. In Western Europe women were also looking at their so-called status, while in Latin-America, Asia and Africa, struggles fired up against neo-colonialism, poverty and Western military intervention. The era also saw the birth of the ecological movement (Ruether 1998:60). This will be explored later in the chapter in greater detail.

In the 1960s a second and broader women's movement emerged in the United States and Western Europe. This new wave of feminism once again converged with

the struggle of African Americans in the US context. Women participants in the civil rights movement realized that not only were the Black men and women not equal to white men and women, but that the white women championing their cause were not equal to white men. A great disparity existed between the high ideals of the civil rights movement for blacks, and women's own lived realities (Clifford 2001:12). In Africa this was also visible in the campaign against white elitism in Anglo-American feminism.

This time saw the birth of socialist claims within the women's movement. Socialism began with the claim that women would be liberated from domestic servitude by joining the worker's struggle. Marxism soon interpreted this to mean that gender issues *per se* were unimportant and marginal. Feminist movements that focused on liberating women were typed as "bourgeois" and reactionary. The revolutionary socialist woman was to identify with the class struggle in a way that negated specifically female issues. Latin American theology has tended to follow the same bias (Ruether 1998:116).

The second wave of feminism was divided into four major types by Maria Riley: liberal feminism, cultural feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism. These different forms of feminism affect and intersect with theology done by Christian feminist theologians (Clifford 2001:21).

#### 3.2.1.2.1. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism's defining characteristic is its stress on social equality, especially achieving equal economic and political rights for women. A liberal feminist seeks:

- a) The removal of the barriers that deny women full legal, political, economic and civil rights as autonomous adults, and
- b) Equal access to all structures of society — political, economic, social and cultural.

Liberal feminism also emphasizes individual freedom for women, civil rights, and the rights of women to make decisions about matters related to their sexual and reproductive health. It seeks the full equality of women with men in all facets of societal life, especially in economic and political life (Clifford 2001:23).

### 3.2.1.2.2. Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminism is also sometimes called romantic feminism or reform feminism. It focuses on the contributions and values traditionally associated with women, like nurturing and compassion, and the difference they can make to the betterment of society. Cultural feminism is rooted in two premises that can be traced to the cult of true womanhood:

- c) The presumption of the moral superiority of women, associated with their maternal role, and
- d) The need for that moral superiority to make societal life more humane (Clifford 2001:22).

Cultural feminism emphasizes the moral superiority of women over men and the values traditionally associated with women such as compassion, nurturance and peacemaking. It seeks the betterment of society by stressing the contributions made by women (Clifford 2001:23).

### 3.2.1.2.3. Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is a 20<sup>th</sup> century development that envisions feminism to be concerned with more than social equality for women — it seeks to eradicate every form of male domination (Clifford 2001:23). What makes radical feminism radical is the belief that male domination is the root of all societal problems. Radical feminists hold that the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships (Clifford 2001:23). Radical feminists do not limit their criticism of patriarchy to societal structures and institutions, but have as their goal the liberation of women from all male control in every facet of life (Clifford 2001:23-24). Radical feminists have created separatist-oriented communities, sometimes self-identified as lesbian, where they can celebrate and develop women's culture together, apart from men (gynocentrism). These radical feminists believe that if women would only absent themselves from patriarchal culture altogether, then the power of patriarchy would be overthrown (Clifford 2001:24). It emphasizes the pervasiveness of male domination which is the cause of all societal problems, and the importance of "women-centred" culture characterized by nurture, closeness to nature, and compassion, while seeking to eliminate patriarchy in order to liberate women from male control in every facet of life, including family life (Clifford 2001:23).



#### 3.2.1.2.4. Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism agrees with radical feminism that patriarchy is a major problem, but faults the tendency of radical feminists to attribute women's oppression solely to patriarchal males. They also do not support the movement towards a separate culture. Women's oppression is located in the broader context of an economic class struggle. Economic class greatly influences women's oppression. In capitalist societies those who control the means of production define the division of labour according to sex and race. In the capitalist structure, white males are responsible for production in the public sphere and females are responsible for production in the private sphere. The patriarchy of capitalism manifests itself in the undervaluing of the work of women in childbearing and -rearing because it is not considered economically productive (Clifford 2001:24). Socialist feminism emphasizes white male dominance in the economic class struggles of capitalist societies. It believes that this dominance is the reason for the division of labour according to sex and race and the devaluing of women's work, especially the work of raising children. It wants to end the dependence of women on men, and to achieve major social reforms that will end class divisions and enable all women and men to have the same opportunity to be gainfully employed and to be actively involved in parenting (Clifford 2001:23).

Engels and Marx held that industrial labour (despite its doubly brutal conditions for women) was providing the conditions that would emancipate women. Industrialism would give women economic independence by giving them incomes outside the home in autonomous jobs. The work of anthropologists like Bachofen and Morgan who proposed a matriarchal communist state as preceding the patriarchal society and private property brought them to the conclusion which Engels publishes in 1884 as *The Origin and History of the Family, Private Property and the State*. This work still forms the basis for socialist doctrines of women's liberation. Feminists who nowadays seek to envision a reconstructed society and family as basis of women's liberation, still go back to this text (Ruether 1975:167). Western feminists should take socialism in the women's movement seriously. If social equality created by the economy is not realized, the rights that feminists gain remain middle-class privileges, while the majority of women will remain tied to their traditional caste roles of support system of male work, both at home and at work, despite the amount of "equal rights" they earn. Liberal feminism remains token feminism if it cannot change the caste status of the majority of women (Ruether 1975:179-180).

Marxist feminism today focuses on the critique of the economic function of housework. This is the front where women still appear as the last slave who labours without getting paid and whose effort is not counted. Housework is the "second shift" that women work, and forms the economic base of male autonomy. This second shift keeps women tied to the home and to menial types of jobs that will still allow them to fulfill the tasks of the home (Ruether 1975:180). Rosemary Ruether's critique crosses lines between women from various continents:

*No person who does heavy labour or engages in intensive executive roles demanding long hours, continuous concentration, and mobility, can also be expected to be able to return continually to the home to do several more hours a day of domestic drudgery or to spend time in long lines to buy food or merchandise. Women cannot be equal on the job according to their true abilities until they are truly freed from the second shift through collectivization and professionalization of these tasks by society and/or the distribution of these tasks equally between men and women and between persons in every form of employment, ie the abolition of both sex and class structures. As long as all jobs, and especially the more demanding and prestigious jobs, are based on having a wife, plus a battalion of invisible female support staff on the job, women cannot be equal on the job, despite all fictions of equal opportunities. This abolition of the second shift cannot be left to the private arrangements of individual couples. It must be socially institutionalized in a transformed home/work relation (Ruether 1975:180-181).*

This view of Rosemary Ruether is understandable and true, but not so easy to implement. In the South African context, women leave children at day care centres where they are fed, clothed and washed and almost "packaged ready for collection" at the end of the day which may be as late as 7pm. Is a life of long work hours and microwave dinners the utopia we seem to want? The good support institutions (at a hefty price) that allow women to climb the corporate ladder (and in South Africa this is mandatory according to legislature), might not be the solution to the problem. It still seems that women have to choose: climb the corporate ladder at great personal expense, or remain in a menial job (Ruether did not define her opinion of such a job) and gain personal rewards. For women, the choices are as tough as ever, even in the favourable South African climate. One also is confronted with the fact that what we are addressing, remains elitist Western feminism. What is furthermore not reckoned with, is the burden of the extended families of black people and their inherited values — surely these cultural values are not all reflections of oppression?

### 3.2.1.3. Third Wave

In the late 1970s a new development in feminism arose which drew attention to differences in race and social class of women. This is called the third wave of feminism. It emerged in the US when women of colour took up this name to expose the whiteness of the interests of second-wave feminism. All focus fell on difference at an international conference held in New York in 1979 (Clifford 2001:12).

The third wave of feminism (official in the 1980s) takes the differences in women's experiences around the world seriously, and envisions justice for all women. Despite various differences, women as a group share a common experience, while feminists are committed to the struggle for the liberation of women. Within this dynamic, the individual perception and interpretation of women's experience of oppression, as well as the concrete formulation of the values and goals for women's liberation, vary considerably (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:3).

In Africa feminism is unique in its coupling with the processes of post-colonialism, and these are very localized — they differ from state to state.

Third-wave Feminism shows three new tendencies:

#### 3.2.1.3.1. Attention to Difference

Attention to difference. Womanist, mujerista, and other feminists of colour emphasize that they have unique experiences and concerns that are connected with their special social locations. Each group seeks to develop its own agendas for liberation that respond to its unique experiences and desires for positive transformation. Dialogue and solidarity play a role in forming alliances that extend across the lines of difference (Clifford 2001:28).

#### 3.2.1.3.2. Ecofeminism

In the Third wave, Ecofeminism must be mentioned briefly since it had such a profound impact on the work of many feminist theologians. It is during this wave that Ecofeminism really came to the fore as a science. The parameters of this science will be explained in greater detail under 4.3.1.



**HEAD STUDY OF A GIRL**  
JANET MCKENZIE

Ecofeminism brings together a plurality of voices that connects the domination of women with the exploitation of nature, and argues that the two forms of domination are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. Ecofeminism is guided by a vision of ecojustice that encompasses all realms of life, and seeks to bring an end to all forms of discrimination and exploitation, because no attempt to liberate women or any other oppressed group will be successful unless it is connected to the liberation of nonhuman nature (Clifford 2001:28).

### 3.2.1.3.3. Women's Experience as Source of Knowledge

Feminist theology draws on women's experience as a source of knowledge. Traditionally it has been assumed that any experience is subjective and culture-bound and cannot compare favourably with the Bible's objective disclosure as "Word of God". As a narrow and contemporary source, experience cannot compare with the accumulated weight of theological tradition. It has been said that it is impertinent to suggest that women's experience can be used to judge Scripture and theological tradition (Ruether 1985:111). Such a response not only trivializes women's experience, but also misunderstands the role of human experience in the formulation of Scripture and theological tradition. Human experience is both the starting point and the ending point of the circle of interpretation. Under experience fall both the experience of the Divine and the human self, in relationship to society and the world, in an interacting dialectic. Received symbols, formulas and laws are either authenticated or not through their ability to illuminate and interpret existence in a way that is experienced as meaningful. Systems of authority try to reverse this relationship and make received tradition dictate both what may be experienced and how it may be interpreted. But the relationship is just the opposite. If the symbol does not speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead and is discarded or altered to provide a new meaning (Ruether 1985:111). Religious traditions start with breakthrough experiences that shed a revelatory light on contemporary events so as to transform them into paradigms of ultimate meaning. Experiences like the Exodus or Resurrection are the primary data for the religious tradition. But such experiences do not interpret themselves. They are always interpreted in the context of an accumulated heritage of symbols and codes. The new experience becomes meaningful by being related to this heritage. The community then revises, recombines or transforms the traditions in ways that allow the new experience to become a new insight (Ruether 1985:112). The foundational experience is only available in a transformative dialectic between experience and accumulated

interpretive keys. The foundational experience itself later becomes an interpretive key, which then helps to make ongoing experience meaningful (Ruether 1985:112). Traditions die when a new generation can no longer appropriate the foundational paradigm in a meaningful way — it is experienced as meaningless. To use an example: if the Cross is experienced by women as only pointing them towards victimization and not redemption, it would be perceived as false, and women could no longer identify themselves as Christians (Ruether 1985:112). The new thing about feminist hermeneutics is not the appeal to experience as category of interpretation, but the use of *women's experience*, which has been shut out since the beginning. Women have not only been excluded from shaping and interpreting the tradition from their own experience, but the tradition has been shaped and interpreted against them. The tradition has been shaped to justify their exclusion (Ruether 1985:112). Women's silence and absence is the norm, and even questions about their absence have been silenced (Ruether 1985:113). Criticizing tradition from women's experience, does not only add another viewpoint to the prevailing one. Women's experience explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology as shaped by male, rather than human, experience. Women's experience exposes the androcentric bias of the original formulations and ongoing interpretations. No longer can these male intonations hide behind Divine authority. Women's experience questions the universality of the claims of the tradition (Ruether 1985:113).

What is meant by women's experience? Women have different experiences depending on culture and life. Women's experience does not signify experience created by biological differences, but rather those experiences that were created during the social and cultural appropriation of biological differences in a male-dominated society. In such a society even own biological differences are experienced in ways filtered and biased by male dominance and women's own marginalization and inferiorization (Ruether 1985:113). When feminists talk of women's experience as key to hermeneutics or theory of interpretation, they mean *that* experience which arises when women become critically aware of falsifying and alienating experiences imposed upon them as women by a male-dominated culture (Ruether 1985:114). The process of the critical naming of women's experience of androcentric culture is what is meant by women's experience as an interpretive key for feminist theology. Women's experience then implies a conversion experience through which women get in touch with, name and judge their experiences of sexism in patriarchal society. Experiences of sexism vary according to culture and individuals. Feminism leaves room for such differences. Despite this, patriarchy

leaves enough of a common body of experiences for women to find commonalities. This conversation can only happen when women become freed and empowered to criticize sexism as an unjustified assault upon their beings, and stop accepting sexism as the norm (Ruether 1985:114-115). Experience is an intrinsically unstable aspect of Christian feminist theological discourse. This is proven by the criticisms against groups and individuals at the location, representation and translation of this experience. The challenge for feminist theological discourse thus becomes only more complex, and never easier (Pears 2001:15). Criticism by feminists of other feminists' work brings a necessary critical edge to feminist theological discourse. It helps to avoid the normative positioning of any one woman's or any one group of women's experiences (Pears 2001:17). In all three waves, feminists have stressed equality and mutuality in relationships as the basis of the way the world should be (Clifford 2001:5).

An example of the above statements in action in a local setting is the work of Yvette Abrahams, a womanist theologian. Yvette Abrahams sites practice (experience) as the most important thing one needs to know about womanism. She states that, like Marxism, it is a body of theory which must be tested in practice. In epistemological terms, it may be said that its ultimate truth test lies in revolutionary practice. While womanist ideas may look great on paper, this is not the issue. Abrahams states that the worth of womanist theories will only be seen in the ability of womanists to change the world. She calls it "learning by doing". After the thinking and the theorizing, it remains to be seen if the theories are correct. Abrahams calls her activism her form of action research (Abrahams 2001:71).

*Perhaps the central organizing principle of womanism (if it can be said there is one) is the absolute necessity of speaking from and about one's own experiential location and not to or about someone else's. Black women's scholarship has placed black women and their experiences at the center of analysis just like the traditional White men's scholarship has placed White men and their experiences at the center of analysis. The crucial difference is that Black women's scholarship has articulated and owned the centering... Black women's scholarship does not parade as universal, but rather it emanates from a point of acute authenticity and invites others to participate in a similar, equally authentic process (Phillips & McCaskill in Abrahams 2001:71-72).*

Abrahams writes that while womanists share a starting point, you will often find that they do not agree in either their theoretical conclusions or their preferred course of action. For Abrahams this comes as no surprise, because each one's location is different. What gives womanism its strength is precisely its ability to provide space for women to define and develop their understanding of their individual experiential location, in safety and without compromise (Abrahams 2001:72).

Because feminist theology is part of the family of liberation theologies, it begins with the experience of oppression, in this case the oppression of women, and the ways in which gender has been constructed in society (Rakoczy 2004:15).

Rosemary Ruether describes the hermeneutic circle of feminist theology:

*Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle. Codified tradition both reaches back to roots in experience and is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience. "Experience" includes experience of the divine, experience of oneself, and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialectic (Ruether in Rakoczy 2004:15).*

Emancipatory praxis is both the beginning and the goal of feminist theological reflection. Women's experience as a norm for theology is so crucial because it shows how certain claims to universality in theology are really only claims for half the human race because the experience of women has never even been considered (Rakoczy 2004:15-16).

#### 3.2.1.4. Contemporary Feminist Theology

Anne M Clifford further divides contemporary feminist theology into:

1. Revolutionary
2. Reformist, and
3. Reconstructionist modes of critique (Beck 2003:383).

##### 3.2.1.4.1. Revolutionary Feminist Theology

Revolutionary feminist theology is affected most by radical feminists, especially by those who advocate women-centered culture. Many radical feminist theologians can accurately be described as post-Christian (Clifford 2001:32). Their major problem with Christianity is the centrality given to the revelation of a male God, whom they



believe is used to legitimate patriarchal oppression of women by Christian Churches. They also point out that Christians continue to subordinate women in their Churches and in their marital relationships. These theologians have abandoned Christianity as oppressive to women. Many have turned to ancient goddess traditions for their theology, and envision the goddess to be an appropriate symbol for the creative power of women (Clifford 2001:33). In current times, the emerging feminist consciousness attacks majority positions and points out the injustices in history. Feminists are currently angry and revolutionary. Feminisms currently do not only stretch horizons of knowledge, but also tears down many of the old patriarchal structures (Brown Zikmund 1985:27). Contemporary feminists approach reality with new questions and formulate new interpretations. Their motive is not just reform, but also reconstruction. Mature feminist critical consciousness is revolutionary in nature (Brown Zikmund 1985:28). The foremost proponents of this theology are Mary Daly and Carol Christ.

#### 3.2.1.4.2. Reformist Christian Feminist Theology

Reformist Christian feminist theology has almost nothing in common with the revolutionary model. Reformists do not want the God revealed in the Bible, and do not want to worship goddesses, but are looking for modest changes in the existing Church structures. Reformists are committed to the Christian tradition, and can be Protestant or Catholic. In the Protestant traditions, the more conservative theologians are the evangelicals or fundamentalists who are committed to the inerrancy of the Bible and to a literal interpretation of its texts, yet are also opposed to gender bias in the treatment of women in their families, Churches, and civil societies. Proponents of this form of feminist theology believe they can solve the problems of women's secondary status with measures like better translations of the Bible and more emphasis on egalitarian passages in the Bible. Roman Catholics in this tradition have a deep respect for the Catholic Church but hold that women need to be more included in the life and leadership of the Church. They are largely uncritical of the structures of the institutional Church and support Church teaching, yet also champion having women involved in other Church ministries and in theological education (Clifford 2001:33). A leading theologian in this field is Phyllis Trible.

### 3.2.1.4.3. Reconstructionist Christian Feminist Theology

Reconstructionist Christian feminist theology also shows a commitment to Christianity. Reconstructionist feminist theologians seek a liberating theological core for women within the Christian tradition, while also envisioning a deeper transformation, a true reconstruction, not only of their Church structures, but also of their civil society. Patriarchy is critically appraised, while believing that reconstructing the traditional symbols and ideas of Christianity without abandoning the God revealed in Jesus Christ is possible and desirable (Clifford 2001:33-34). Many reconstructionist feminist theologians envision feminist theology to be a form of liberation theology. This liberation is not one-dimensional, but calls for repentance by righting wrongs. The wrongs of primary concern are the life-denying effects of patriarchy, sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, and naturism (Clifford 2001:34). The term reconstruction rarely appears as a subtitle in feminist theological writing. The related term "revisionist" is used at times for this third type of feminist theology, but "reconstructionist" is preferred because third-wave feminist theologies are doing more than revising and adjusting an already-existing tradition by calling for renewed vision in Christianity. They are incorporating women's experiences of God in dialogue with primary theological sources (Clifford 2001:35). Reconstructionist feminist Biblical scholars embrace a great variety of methodologies in interpreting Biblical texts. This leads to great diversity in their theological writings. The thing they have in common is their commitment not only to expose patriarchal biases in Biblical texts and their traditional interpretations, but also to put forward constructive alternative interpretations that would focus attention on the liberating elements in the text that have been ignored or overlooked. Biblical texts, as other texts, have the ability to take on a life of their own apart from the intention of the author, and this makes it possible for feminist interpreters to retrieve elements from these texts that are sources of liberation from patriarchy, despite the fact that these texts were formed in patriarchal cultures (Clifford 2001:54-55). Proponents of this theology would include Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, David Hammond and Gerda Lerner.

David Hammond writes that feminist thought has left him in no doubt that misogyny and sexist distortions are prevalent in Christian tradition. He yet suggests that, due to the ambiguity of classical symbolism and the layered meanings in this ancient tradition, it might be possible to carry feminist values compatible with Christian faith. He is not convinced that a reform-minded manipulation of these shared symbols and metaphors will allow the community to carry all of the meanings and values that

constitute the Christian Church (Hammond in Procaro-Foley 2002:148). His remarks show a reconstructionist view of theology as it pertains to the Church and tradition. Feminism is also characterized by the inward glance as much as the outward glance. The inner world is as much to be criticized as the outer. Once the inner constructions come under scope, consciousness is raised. Man is not the measure of what is human, but men and women are both this measure. Along the same lines, men are not the centre of the world, but men and women are both. To have this insight is to transform consciousness (Lerner 1986:13).

One such an example of raised consciousness as a result of self-examination is Gerda Lerner, who states after thorough self-analysis that she herself has represented in her own person all the internalized obstacles that have through history stood in the way of women's thinking on a grand scale (Lerner 1986:viii). She further describes two questions that feminist criticism should be asking when it takes a view of women:

1. What are the needed concepts and definitions that explain the separation between women and the making and interpretation of their own historical past?
2. Why was there such a long delay in women's consciousness of their own subjugation, and what could explain women's complicity in upholding the patriarchal system and transmitting this system to their children of both sexes? (Lerner 1986:6).

There are currently efforts undertaken to define a post-feminism, although this does not mean that feminism has been passed temporarily. It rather focuses on a "beyond feminism" as a fixed condition of experience. "Beyond" in this sense would then deal with the process of creating and reconstructing meaning in the light of the past of oppression, the struggle for liberation and emancipation, etc.

This strain opposes the efforts of defining female identity as a fixed reality or in any form of essentialist manner. In this respect, it ties up with the typically post-modern view.

### **3.3. THE NATURE OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY**

Apart from the gift of raised consciousness, what sets feminist theology apart from other types of theology, is its fundamental challenge — the contention of feminists that our ideas about God and humankind has been and currently are male-oriented

and male-shaped by a patriarchal culture. The result of this is a distorted understanding of the nature of God, humankind (as created in the image of God) and the interrelatedness and interdependence of God/humankind/earth (Bennett 1989:50).

In its critical application, feminist theology shows correlation with prophetic literature as found in the Bible itself. This is not without problems of its own. The correlation between the Biblical critical principle and the feminist critical principle is sometimes seen as insufficient because the Bible does not criticize sexism and patriarchy. The argument is then that women denounce these practices without Biblical authority. When responding to such a justified objection, one must be clear about the sociology of consciousness of all critical prophetic literature. Critical prophetic movements cannot simply be reified as definitive texts which then set the limits of consciousness or the meaning of liberation. The prophetic tradition rather remains true to itself, its own impulse and spirit, in constant restatement and engagement with the issues of justice and injustice of its times (Ruether 1985:118). The feminist interpretation of prophetic critique as feminist critique continues the process of scriptural hermeneutic itself, whereby the text is reinterpreted in the context of new communities of critical consciousness (Ruether 1985:122).

What makes feminist theology prophetic in nature? Prophetic theology differs from academic theology in the aspect of concentrating on those aspects of the Word of God that have direct bearing on the critical situation in which people find themselves. The theology of the prophets does not pretend to be comprehensive and complete, but speaks to the particular circumstances of a particular time and place (West 1991:40).

What follows is a typical illustration of feminist theology as prophetic critique. One aspect that comes under the lens, is the impact of living on the earth. In this capacity, feminist theology amply shows its ability to speak as a prophetic voice to a life situation outside the traditional walls of religious life. The name given to the critique of the way we live on/with the earth, is ecofeminism.

### **3.3.1. Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism is a characteristic of the Third Wave of feminism, and greatly influences the way feminist theologians of this wave think about nature and humanity, and the

interconnectedness between the two. In this section, more attention is given to the characteristics of this science. Some participants in the Third Wave of feminism are very attuned to ecological concerns and have proposed that there are connections between the domination of women and the exploitation of nonhuman nature. This form of analysis is called "ecofeminism" (Clifford 2001:211).

Ecofeminism is a term that reconceives the goals of the second wave of feminism by incorporating concern for the health of the planet. In the 1970s some feminists began to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to human destruction of nature, and concluded that this was yet again a manifestation of patriarchy. They reasoned that patriarchal attitudes and systems that have diminished the human dignity of women also exploited nonhuman nature. The connection between the subjugation of women and the destruction of nature was first called ecofeminism by author Françoise d'Eaubonne (Clifford 2001:222).

Ecofeminists express their critique of the need for control as "domination". Ecofeminism has ties with radical feminism, but is rightly located among third-wave feminist movements. The tie with radical feminism lies in the agreement that the root cause of the inferior status of women and the exploitation of the earth is patriarchy. In ecofeminism, the connection is made between patriarchy's domination of women and nonhuman nature. In the drive to dominate, patriarchy forgets about the human biological connection to nature. In the opinion of feminist philosopher Karen J Warren, every true feminist should also be an ecofeminist (Clifford 2001:223). Ecofeminism prefers the term "ecology" over "environment". The term "environment" refers to what is apart from human beings, while "ecology" signifies the earthly home that humans share with all other forms of life and alludes to organic and inorganic components of an ecosystem (Clifford 2001:223).

The value of ecofeminism goes beyond its own scope and field of critique, and speaks ultimately to the heart of the feminist problem with reality — dualism. Ecofeminism presents an invitation to something radical: conversion of mind and heart from an almost unchallenged hierarchical dualism to a new egalitarian holism. Egalitarian holism is a type of consciousness that affirms that all of nature is interdependent and interconnected. Every small facet has worth in a holistic system. Equality does not mean that everything is reduced to sameness. Ecofeminist egalitarian holism requires attention to the interdependent relationships needed to foster life, and wants to erase species chauvinism (Clifford 2001:225-226).

Such a holistic vision once again stretches far beyond the religious realm. In the field of pure science, for instance, a holistic view can lead to radical results. What might science be like if the scientific community had adopted a holistic vision instead of a dualistic vision? In this regard, the perspectives put forward by Barbara McClintock (Nobel Prize winner 1983 in medicine and physiology) are very important. McClintock's contribution to science was the groundbreaking discovery of the way certain genes function in plants. She developed the theory of transposition, which ultimately later led to the discovery of DNA. McClintock's methods are more important to ecofeminists than her discoveries, since she showed a "feeling for the organism" in her research. McClintock herself described her work as listening to what the organism had to say by personal identification with it. To achieve this type of personal identification, a scientist must develop a capacity for an emphatic union with the plant or animal that is being studied (Clifford 2001:231-232). It is sad that McClintock's way of doing science is the exception rather than the rule. She does, however, illustrate that it is possible to be a scientist while being mindful that humans are part of the "nature" that a scientist studies. McClintock never identified herself as an ecofeminist, but she does illustrate what ecofeminists mean by a transformation of human consciousness to an organic vision of nature (Clifford 2001:232).

### **3.3.2. Identity**

The question of identity remains central to feminist consciousness. In the study and affirming of identity, feminism must navigate between a minefield of easy opt-outs which are all subtle. When identity becomes exclusionary, it becomes dangerous (Ackermann 2001:110). This can happen as easily in the feminist movement as anywhere else. Especially Western feminists have been criticized for action and speech that has led to the exclusion of women different from them. Miroslav Volf has pointed out that exclusion carried to its extreme can lead to elimination (if you are not like me I will eliminate you). He identifies various forms of elimination which deserves attention:

1. Assimilation. You can survive and thrive among us if you become like us. You can keep your life if you give up your identity. This form of elimination is experienced by many women in religion when they dare question basic tenets of tradition. It also has political implications in the world.
2. Dominance. The "other" is deemed as inferior and must be subjugated and exploited. A great example of this in history is the praxis of colonialism and

resultant slavery. Many women also experience this not just in society, but also in their homes.

3. Abandonment. The rich simply abandon the poor and move on. The literate abandon the illiterate, or the Western World abandons the Third World. Many women also feel simply abandoned by the Church and its tradition (Ackermann 2001:110).

What does a typical exercise in feminist theology look like? In what way does it bring one to a different theological view?

### **3.3.3. Putting Feminist Theology into Practice**

In the following short section, attention is given to the various ways in which feminist theory leads thinkers down paths towards different and new perceptions of religious concepts. In this case, the praxis of feminist theory is made to bear on the traditional image of God, and His relationship with creation. As will be seen in what follows, such exercises lead to new images that can greatly benefit those who have been traditionally subjugated in religion, specifically. The argument and illustration moves from the idea of God's relationship with all created things, to the feminist discomfort with traditional concepts of God, and ultimately towards the new feminist conception of God as a Being characterized by relationship.

In chapter one I mentioned a link made between feminist theology and Quantum Physics, resulting in Quantum Theology. This theology also touches on the language used of God, but takes it from a perspective of the view of the universe and its relationships first, and flowing to a view of the relationships of the Deity.

When one views reality as a whole where nothing is independent but related, and all things exist as part of a whole which is greater than the sum of the parts, the view of the human being also changes. We then see human beings as subjects in the world in relation to other subjects. There is then a move away from the view of human life in terms of a subject-object relationship. Humans are then part of a continuous evolving process in the universe, but no longer the end product. There are now no claims to a superior position of supremacy or domination, but only a move towards a position of co-operation with the evolving universe. Human consciousness is but a part of this evolving universe. Humans can then never relate to anything as object, since perceptions are never isolated or separated from emotions and feelings, which

all make up human and cosmic reality. All life forms are resultingly seen in relationship of interdependence demanding that humans play their part in the communal universe (Rafferty 2001:110).

What does a vision like the above, with a feminist theology informed by Quantum Science, lead to in terms of a view on God and language?

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity then shows that the essential nature of God is about relatedness and the capacity to relate, and that the power to relate is the very essence of God. The doctrine of the Three In One then calls people to mutuality, or, using the language of the Bible "God is love!". In Quantum Theology, the individual is the product of the relationships of interdependence on others both human and non-human. O'Murchu writes that *We are our relationships just as God is relationship* (O'Murchu in Rafferty 2001:110). The result is communality, dependent on the interaction of individuals with one another and the rhythm of the universe (Rafferty 2001:110).

Is this aim of being communal and in harmonious relationship with each other and creation, possible? It seems that not even feminist theology in its aim towards mutuality can encompass all the women it wants to embrace. Is mutuality really possible between such different entities as human beings? Are we not only truly one within the praxis of the Body of Christ? Does not the high divorce rate show that mutuality between one man and one woman is highly fallible?

Carol Christ uses Charles Hartshorne's idea of divine relativity in her book *Rebirth of the Goddess*. In contrast to traditional notions of Divine transcendence, Hartshorne argues that God is the most supremely "relative" being in the universe. God is intimately and perfectly related to every individual being in the universe, from atoms to human beings. God brings all beings to fulfillment, and cares about the fate of every individual in the universe. He rejoices in our joy and suffers with our suffering, and remembers each of us in the best possible way. This notion of relation and relativity as the highest values in the universe resonates with feminist conceptions of the relational self, with ecofeminist ideas of the web of life, and with some feminists' conceptions of a relational Goddess (Christ in Mantin 2002:121).

Traditional notions of transcendence, whether they be imagistic or philosophical, are being rejected in this current time. These include traditional notions of omnipotence



(all-powerful), omniscience (all-knowing), changelessness (things which change can become more or less perfect), disembodied (since the body is finite and limited God cannot have a body), and impassivity (God does not suffer or rejoice, He is not affected by things that happen in the universe). In terms of traditional gender stereotypes, God could not possibly be female, because females are powerless, defined by their bodies, and deeply affected (emotional) (Christ in Mantin 2002:122).

The notions of omnipotence and omniscience have left little room for the freewill of anything other than God. A notion of God's changelessness and impassivity is incompatible with Biblical notions of God's concern for creation and Christ's suffering for the sins of the world. The idea of God's disembodiment also becomes less viable as we understand the role the body plays in shaping the human mind (Christ in Mantin 2002:122).

Christianity's God cannot be reduced to one Person or three individual Deities. God is a communion of three, a trinity of persons for whom being in relationship is not something extrinsic to being God. Trinity as the central symbol of Christianity has the potential for remolding the identity of Christians as persons. From a hermeneutical perspective, the Trinitarian symbol gives rise to a new understanding that being a person is to be in relationship to others, and support and nurture life in community (Clifford 2001:115).

Emphasis on community relationship is not new to Christianity. In the early Trinitarian theology of the Church in the East, relatedness was the supreme characteristic of God. Since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Eastern Orthodox Christians have described the Trinitarian relatedness in terms of *perichoresis* (literally "being in one another"). The notion of total permeation corrected the tendency to locate the unity of the Trinity in the Father (Clifford 2001:115). These terms lead a.o. Anne Clifford to develop the idea of God as dancing Three, the ultimate symbol of relationship.

The verbs *perichoreō* (to encompass) and *perichoreuō* (to dance around) makes it possible to imagine the Trinity as three persons engaged in a circular dance, circling and encircling one another with unending energy. The trinitarian *perichoresis* (God as the dancing three) is an example of a picturesque metaphor. In this image each of the dancing three retains individuality, while affirming collectively that they are not separate. Like any God symbolism, *perichoresis* is only moderately helpful. Its strength lies in what it most clearly affirms about God: the relational character of God

as a communion of persons. This symbol stands in opposition to the individualism, competitiveness and isolationism of patriarchy. It reflects the Christian highest good and most authentic truth: loving community (Clifford 2001:115-116).

Feminist thought has led to a new view of God as a relational being, as opposed to the traditional Father view taken.

In contrast to the feminist ideal of this new creation/society where communality is definitive of the way relationships between humans and their surroundings, each other, as well as with their God is perceived and function, stands the reality of the society we live in presently. What does this society look like and how do women fit into it on the basis of their religious status?

### **3.4. THE STRUCTURE OF WESTERN SOCIETY**

Feminists find the question of the reason for God's revelation's exclusive masculine terms more pressing than any other. The absence of feminine symbolism makes Judaism, Islam and Christianity different from any other religion in the world. God is never addressed as mother in the Bible, and never thought of in terms of being a female deity. This masculinizing of a personal God remains unique till this day (Achtemeier in Kimel 1992:7). Feminists argue that the origins of the masculine terms spring from the patriarchal society in which the Bible arose. They hold that the Holy Spirit is the feminine aspect of the Deity, but this rests on flimsy arguments since the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is one with them. The language of the Bible remains steadfastly masculine (Achtemeier in Kimel 1992:7-8).

Does the lower status women have in society have some origins in the language used for God in the Bible? Does God's identification through male terms influence women's religious status and experience?

Gerda Lerner makes the statement that the emergence of Hebrew monotheism involved an attack on the cults of the various fertility goddesses. In the Book of Genesis, creativity and procreativity now become ascribed to an all-powerful God whose epithets of "Lord" and "King" establishes him as a male god. The outcome of this move away from the fertility cults is that female sexuality other than for procreation becomes evil and sinful (Lerner 1986:10). Gerda Lerner makes a strong point of associating male language, patriarchal culture, and the perception of the

evilness of female sexuality together with the fall of the fertility cults, with female status in society. Her view certainly carries a lot of weight, but might go crumble under a misreading of the available information, based on the modern experience being transposed on the ancient situation.

If Yahweh was not conceived of as a gendered God but rather as a principle which embodied male and female aspects, as some theologians argue, this is significant in showing that, to the writers of the early texts, there were available alternatives to the traditional patriarchal interpretations and that these alternatives were not chosen. For over 2500 years the God of the Hebrews was addressed, represented and interpreted as a male god Father-God, despite all other aspects He embodied. Historically this meaning was given to the symbol, and this meaning was the one which carried authority and force. This meaning also became of the utmost significance in the way men and women were able to conceptualize women and place them in the Divine order of things as well as human society (Lerner 1986:178).

The natural flow from this was an all-male priesthood. The struggle against the Canaanite fertility cults must have hardened the emphasis on male cultic leadership (Lerner 1986:178).

Gerda Lerner makes the statement that under this all-powerful God it was proclaimed to the Hebrews and all who accepted the Bible as moral and religious guide that women could not speak to God (Lerner 1986:179). I do not find such a sweeping statement to be accurate. The Old Testament gives examples, albeit few and far between, of women speaking to God. Their conversations furthermore proved important enough to be taken up into the text.

It is not to say, however, that worship of YHWH was the only religion practiced by Israelites. Archeology gives proof of other gods being worshipped, sometimes alongside YHWH. It was not until the Babylonian exile period (late 500s BC) that the Jewish people gave YHWH special status among the other deities as *the* God of land and nation. In the early history of Israel it was not uncommon for female deities to appear alongside male ones (Asherah in 2 Kings 23.7; the Queen of heaven in Jer 44.25). Female deities were gradually pushed into the background (Clifford 2001:100). From the writings of the prophets it is clear that this syncretism was never condoned, and that the presence of female deities was deemed immensely offensive and sacrilegious.

The word Elohim is frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to God. It is not a proper name for God in the technical sense, and neither male nor female pronouns properly fit it. Elohim is a generic term for God and denotes strength and power. The word may simply mean "deity". Elohim is most often translated as "God" in English Bibles. Elohim and YHWH gradually became identified with each other, referring to the God of Judaism (Clifford 2001:100-101).

When God was identified as male, a hierarchy of values was established. Since man was made in God's image and God was male, females were excluded from participation in that image. Collins expresses the result in the following equation:

Man is to God as woman to *no God*. Paul puts it plainly in 1 Corinthians: *For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not made from woman, but woman from man.*

Since all that was not God was sinful, woman became identified with sin; and this identification was further reinforced by the myth of Adam and Eve (Collins 1972:32).

If women were pushed into the background of society in alignment with the dwindling influence of fertility goddesses, did this have an impact on the way women were seen as bearers of human life? Were men exclusively perceived to be the originators of life, with women being the passive recipients of fertile seeds then? It seems that both mothers and fathers were seen as contributors to the life of babies. John Chrysostom wrote in the fourth century that a child is produced from the comingling of seeds from both mother and father. Despite this knowledge of both parents begetting life, the Church kept the practice of calling God Father (Belonick 1992:305).

If women were pushed to the background in official religion due to the prominence of the male identification of God, is it possible that another avenue might have remained where femaleness was important? Even the area of Christian mysticism can be scrutinized for clues as to whether women were really silenced and excluded. CS Lewis said that all creation is feminine in relation to the Creator. When Mary heard the message of the angel, she spoke for all creation when she declared herself a willing servant. She was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit in the same way the universe was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit on the first day (Wiley 1992:318).

Some feminists claim that women were excluded from the Christian mysteries. It might be more correct to say that *only* women were allowed entrance to the mysteries. Any man who would participate need first become symbolically female.

...the study of theology from the women's perspective is a gift to the Church and a gift to women. It is a gift to the Church because it calls the Church to repentance for its role in the subordination of women. It is a gift to women because it has opened our eyes to the fact that the future of society and the future of women depend on our trusting the message of God rather than the message of men. We can read and interpret the Bible by ourselves and we can count on God's word that says God created men and women in God's own image (Gen 1.27). The study of theology by women is the proverbial equivalent of the lion learning to write.

Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro 2002:90-91

The reason for this is because all souls are female according to traditional Christian terms. Within mysticism, the femaleness would entail that we hear the word of God like Mary, and, like her, let it take root in us and grow in us. We are to bring Him to birth (Wiley 1992:319). All mystics in the Christian tradition through the ages agree on this. They see God's choice image as the Bridegroom, and all of Israel, Mary, the Church and all *men and women* as the Bride (Wiley 1992:319).

It has repeatedly been stated that feminist theology criticizes society on various levels. But what is meant by society, and what is the state of the society being criticized? Over the past hundred years, the way people work has changed, with a resulting change in roles of males and females making up the fabric of society. Urgent issues that were addressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century seem less pressing today, while new problems have emerged with the rise of new morals and roles in society. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, labour division was a function of hard and demanding work outside the home and arduous and time-consuming work inside the home. No one argued that working-class work outside the home was a privilege retained by men and perversely and selfishly withheld from women. The Labour Party in Britain was the party of male and female equality, and demanded a high standard of fidelity, sobriety and refinement of fathers (Dennis 1997:49). Rosemary Ruether tied such a society to specific religious assumptions. She calls Protestant theology a theology of bourgeois society. Protestant theology sanctioned the split between the consumer home and alienated work as a form of the split between moral man and immoral society. Reinhold Niebuhr was the chief articulator of this dichotomy. With the secularization of society, religion and morality became feminized or privatized, and morality became appropriate only to the person-to-person relation found in marriage. Love morality became "unrealistic" in the public sphere. The only acceptable morality for the public sphere became a justice defined as a balancing of competitive egoism. The private sphere became the "moral" sphere with women as its symbol. They are now "moral man" while the male sphere of public life becomes rational in a way emptied of human values. Morality becomes privatized, sentimentalized and identified with the "feminine" in a way that conceals the immorality of sexism and rationalizes an unethical public world. Such a "feminine" morality has no place in the "real world" of competitive male egoism and technological rationality (Ruether 1975:199).

The past forty years saw the weakening of the law, and increasing crime, drug abuse and violence. This led to the rapid weakening of public opinion that has previously

required men to marry and stay married to the mother of their children. Today we see a structure that does not even imagine the possibility of a child having married parents and living in their home until adulthood. When the child still had these things, it also had a clear lineage of grandparents, great-uncles and aunts, uncles and aunts and cousins, all of whom provided services and sentiments (Dennis 1997:50). Our era has seen the emancipation of the boy from socialization. The youth and man have been emancipated from social control that formerly required him to be a father to his children in one home for the duration of his adult life. The result of this has been a period of degeneration, which eventually ended in loss of male motivation in education and employment (Dennis 1997:50). The question needs to be asked, and is seldom asked by feminist critics themselves: what was the role of feminism and liberalism to bring about the negative shifts in society such as the aforementioned? In the scope of this specific study, such a question cannot be answered, but in the spirit of true self-critical feminist analysis, the possibility exists that not all liberation and changes in "patriarchal-defined roles" are negative.

The Church itself cannot be oblivious of these shifting changes. These moral transformations have also impacted the way Churches are seen, and how strongly the voice of the Church carries in modern Western society.

Davies comments that sexual (not gender) tensions will carry the market into the Church. It will be abandoned by the majority, who will see in a sexually "liberated" Church nothing to distinguish it from the general sexual market of a secular culture, less ludicrously handled by the efficient exploitative competence of capitalism than by increasingly ludicrous, if endearing, Church leaders (Davies 1997:27).

Was it always a problem to the Church that male terms were used in speaking of God? It seems that this suspicious and critical mindset is a fairly new thing when compared with the centuries the Church has been alive and functioning. According to Green, it was Paul Ricoeur who dubbed the term of "hermeneutics of suspicion". This critique (according to Green an anti-religious one) wants to dissolve the images and metaphors of the Christian tradition, while saving its own projections from the same fate (Green 1992:53).

The last three decades has seen various theologians arguing the point that standard forms of Christian speech about the triune God encapsulate masculinist

misconceptions of God. These misconceptions are said to affect women negatively in at least two ways:

1. They legitimate patterns of male domination and patriarchy in the Church and society at large.
2. They make it difficult, if not impossible, for women to relate to the Divine in a way that is religiously meaningful (DiNoia 1992:165).

In response to such critique one might point out that the Jewish and Christian Bible authors were not ignorant of the consequences of worshipping female deities. They were surrounded and at times almost overwhelmed by cults who worshipped the Great Mother and other gods of both sexes. Another thing to keep in mind is that societies with female deities were just as patriarchal as the society in which the Bible had its roots. It is safe to say that Biblical writers were more familiar with the female alternative than we today, and that this knowledge was both direct and existential (Frye 1992:27).

The prophets were not slaves to patriarchal culture, and could amply imagine female deities, being surrounded by them — they rather *would not* use such language since they knew that female language for deities resulted in a distortion of the nature of God and his relation to creation. Such theologies most often identify creator with creation, and eventually makes no distinction between the two, as will be pointed out later in this chapter. This does not mean to say that male images and male language can never be misused. Female deities have historically been false guides to religious truth on a broad range of subjects such as Creator and creation, nature and grace, time and history, sin and salvation, and revelation and Scripture (Frye 1992:27).

It seems that while these are liberating times indeed, there is a call and a need for the things "traditional and secure", where the rules are set out from the start and where people are able to measure where they stand on the spiritual highway. But how to go about this? The false polarity which is created by the Animal Farm slogan "Repression — bad, Expression — good" does not address the issues of life realistically. Many forms of sexual expression are obsessive and destructive, as are some forms of repression. The real polarity in which we are involved as part of our relationship with God, is between sexual relations which are destructive and dishonest, and those which are holy and healthy. This involves respect for marriage, family and others' integrity (Storkey 1997:88-89) as illustrated throughout the ethics of the Bible. Feminist theology as liberative force should always be sensitive towards



its own power and the impact it can have on society. Although the goal of freedom from oppressive patriarchal power is in itself not wrong, feminist theology should ask itself whether it only wants to address the social reality and needs of people, or whether it remains true to the religious life of the community it wants to influence. To wish and work for all male influence (translated dominance) to end, does not of itself produce tolerance and forgiveness and a new way of living life as community of males and females.

### **3.5. FEMINISM'S ADVOCACY STANCE**

Attention has until now been given to a brief history and analysis of feminist theory and theology through the past two hundred years, as well as some main contributions feminism has made to the modern thought world. A brief explanation was given of the way feminist consciousness works and what it entails, and some of the dangers involved in the praxis of feminist theology.

#### **3.5.1. Neutrality Exposed as Myth**

One of the most important contributions feminist theology has made to the theological world, has been its insistence that neutrality is a myth, and that even the most "objective" research is guilty of hidden commitment. Women's studies are committed, which implies that there is no claim to ethical neutrality. The claim to ethical neutrality is in fact a ruling class ideology that hides a commitment to the status quo. In effect, all liberation scholarship is advocacy scholarship, which *does not* mean that it is less objective in analyzing objects than "neutral scholarship". Liberation movements are not interested in justifying a mythological history that falsifies the past, but has an objectivity that serves passionate commitment (Ruether 1975:xii).

#### **3.5.2. Feminism's Committed Nature**

In theology, especially the act of interpretation of a text has to be proclaimed as being committed. The **conceptual framework is the approach used in interpretation**. This framework determines the outcome of all study, and is never value-free (Lerner 1986:15).

Science has been critical of feminism's committed nature and has tried to cast its research into a questionable light because of its rejection of "objectivism". Feminism replied by showing that even the questions asked of and in science itself have as basis a conviction and interest. The process of question formulation is crucial in feminist theology. Into the process of question formation a subjective and political component is built in, since questions themselves are interpretive frameworks. Subjectivity should not be a reason to abandon the pursuit of accuracy (Day 1989:4).

Feminism has also pointed out the importance of stating one's place in society — the great where-I-fit-in scenario. An example of criticizing an author for failure to state his where-I-fit-in, is on the work of Hauerwas. Hauerwas assumes that the gospel he brings to liberal societies is the same gospel that should be brought to the world. Gloria Albrecht points out his failure to acknowledge his gospel as a social construction within the liberal Western World. She also criticizes his conviction that a foundational, fixed narrative can exist to guide a community through history and changing contexts (Albrecht 2002:26).

On the local continent, black and liberation theology also have to declare their assumptions and ideologies beforehand. Itumeleng Mosala writes about the importance of black theology for the black liberation struggle, and notes that the key contribution made was its insistence on the necessary *ideological* roots of all theology. He mentions that especially black theologians have not always identified this in an explicit way, but that they have managed to expose the cultural assumptions of white theology and its link with white society and white values. In its own way black theology has exploded the myth of rational objectivity in theology, which presumes to preclude cultural and ideological conditioning (Mosala 1993:52).

Two aspects of liberation theology are especially compatible with women's concerns: the preference given to those who are poor and on the margins — as women are in society and in Church — and the universal love of God for people, including women (Rakoczy 2004:9)

### **3.5.3. Reading and Interpreting are not Objective**

Not even when one is engaged in the act of reading itself, does one do so in a state of neutrality. Bonino points out that texts are always read "out of a praxis" and "into a praxis". As Christians we already have an "enacted interpretation" of the text which

will be confirmed, deepened, challenged or rejected in the confrontation, but which will set the terms of that confrontation. Marxist thinking has called attention to the relation between theory and praxis, which is very complex. Any course of action already incorporates theoretical presuppositions, known or unknown. Theoretical thinking that examines the course of action as well as its underlying theoretical presuppositions is very important for a basic understanding of Biblical interpretation (Bonino 1993:112).

The conclusion is that, to be able to interpret a text, one has to be conscious of and declare one's presuppositions. One proponent of this is Athalya Brenner, who seeks to incorporate in her work a biographical hermeneutic — she situates her self-position when she reads a text, eg when she interprets Song of Songs. This is especially true when dealing with the Biblical text. First and foremost, the “privileged locus” of the hermeneutic function is the interpretation of *texts*. It is secondly a matter of common knowledge that all interpreters condition their reading of a text by a kind of *preunderstanding* arising from their own life context. Thirdly, the interpreter *enlarges* the *meaning* of the text being interpreted (Croatto 1987:1).

In order to be able to state one's assumptions, one has to be sensitive to the influence of the context in which one finds oneself. Another legacy of feminism, but in this case greatly amplified by African theology, has been a renewed emphasis on contextuality. The main characteristic of African Biblical scholarship is its sensitivity towards the context of interpretation. African Biblical scholars point out that there are numerous religio-cultural and socio-political factors to be reckoned with when the Bible is interpreted in an African context. This sensitivity to contextuality benefits Biblical interpretation in Africa, but may also benefit global scholarly communities to come to grips with the issue of the role of the ordinary reader and the aspect of relevance in interpretation. Within a “communal” approach, African Biblical scholarship can contribute to the reflection on how the three publics of theological and hermeneutical discourse are related. African scholars should be competent in using the different socio-scientific, socio-anthropological, and religious-scientific methods. The sensitivity to contextuality and relevance should be accompanied by a thorough scientific study of the context (Jonker 2001:81).

### 3.5.4. Feminism Sees the Bible as a Patriarchal Text

Feminist theology has a specific view of the Bible. This view permeates the way the text is studied and handled, and all activity in handling and practical living of the text. The view holds that the Hebrew Bible is mainly the result of the literary activity of a part of Israelite culture that is unrepresentative. One should keep in mind that the parts of the Bible that seem the most useful in our task are the products of a literate elite. Much of the Pentateuch (first five books) is the result of priestly activity or editions of more broadly based materials. The priesthood was exclusively male (Meyers 1987:11-12). The problem is that the sources that contain the most material about women are also the most removed hierarchically and demographically from women. This social distance between the shapers of Israel's religion and women is reflected in the androcentric orientation of the Hebrew Bible. Women were never priests and were never a direct part of the ruling elite. It must, however, be kept in mind that this exclusion *per se* is not necessarily by itself the main source of bias in the Bible. The writers of the texts were not just unrepresentative of women, but also unrepresentative of the population as a whole (Meyers 1987:12).

Katharine Sakenfeld indicates that once the patriarchy of the Biblical text has been recognized, feminists can approach the text with three different emphases:

1. Texts about women are used to counteract famous texts "against" women.
2. The Bible is studied in general (not just texts about women) for a theological perspective that offers a critique of patriarchy (the so-called liberation perspective).
3. Texts about women are studied to learn from the intersection between the ancient and modern stories of women living in patriarchal societies (Sakenfeld 1985:56).

### 3.6. CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY

The feminist view held of the Bible springs from a specific view of society and the way it is structured. The name given to identify the way society is structured, is patriarchy. Feminists do not all agree on the exact definitions of patriarchy which should or should not be held against the Biblical text. While Rosemary Ruether judges the text quite harshly in light of patriarchy, Carol Meyers brings another view to the fore. Rosemary Ruether equates patriarchy with enslavement and chastises Biblical prophecy for its failure to address class and gender hierarchies. Mary Daly

saw the text to be so steeped in patriarchy that it was totally irredeemable, and left Christianity as a result. The mistake Ruether (and Daly) makes is to assume that patriarchy exists in the Biblical record and in the society which that record reflects. Though she is correct in broadly associating patriarchy with Ancient Israel, the mistake made is to define patriarchy as a limiting, harsh, enslaving or oppressive system. Patriarchy cannot be used as a synonym for male dominance or the system in which male characteristics are valued above female characteristics. It is unfair to use contemporary feminist standards to measure the cultural patterns of an ancient society that was at the time struggling to establish its viability under vastly different circumstances (Meyers 1987:25-26).

On the other hand, the argument is made that a critical measure against patriarchy springs from the Biblical text itself, and that its prophetic voice plays the role of an internal critic. Hebrew prophetic thought came to formulate slavery as unjust. The understanding of Israel's special relationship to God, was one of a person who delivers slaves from servitude. They shaped an understanding of religion that challenged the social hierarchies. The vision of God as redeemer was broadened to a hope for deliverance for the whole of history from the conditions of injustice (Ruether 1998:111). Thus the text that is used to criticize society, is also used on itself by many feminist theologians.

Patriarchy is also a factor to be reckoned with in modern religious life, and its roots runs back into Church history. While it would be easy to show how Catholic history has established male hierarchies, Protestant history has its own brand of patriarchal thought. The Reformation revolted against clerical celibacy. Married clergy were restored, and monasteries for men and women were abolished. The meaning of this was that it rooted itself all the more firmly in the patriarchal type of Christianity that saw the patriarchal family as the nucleus of the Church. The household codes became the norm for Christian society (Ruether 1998:90).

Patriarchy brings the Church to a crisis in modern times which feminist theologians are pointing out. While it has been ignored in the past, the contradiction between secular egalitarian anthropology and patriarchal Christology for Church hierarchy reflects a new Church-world split. Patriarchy is sacralized as order for the Church, while the secular world found it can no longer defend it. The result is that Christology loses its basic integration with creation. Christ does not restore and redeem creation, but stands for a sacred patriarchal order of the Church that is disconnected with

creation. Classical Christianity assumed creation patriarchal, and saw redemption in Christ as overcoming female inferiority (Ruether 1998:92). Ideology paints all oppressed groups in a picture that makes them lacking in rationality, volition, and capacity for autonomy. They are characterized with passivity, sensuality, irrationality, and dependency. The dominant class/race/sex models their self-image to correspond with ego or consciousness. They are the true humanity who has characteristics like initiative, reason, higher virtues and a capacity for autonomy. These myths are still rife even in the current era (Ruether 1975:4).

Since patriarchy had a beginning, it can also have an end (Lerner 1986:228). Such is the nature of things constructed.

### **3.6.1. Sexism**

Feminism does not stop at a critique of patriarchy, but is critical of all forms of sexist behaviour that stems from it. To critique sexism is to be fundamentally judgmental of it. Sexism does not exclusively take the form of man-against-woman, but also has other manifestations. Homophobia is defined as the irrational fear of homosexual persons, while heterosexism is the assumption of heterosexual superiority (Stuart 1997:187).

This critical principle of feminist theology remains firstly, however, the affirmation and promotion of the full humanity of women. All that deny, distort, or diminish the full humanity of women is asserted to be non-redemptive. All that denies or diminishes the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the Divine or authentic revelation to the Divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things (Ruether 1985:115).

This principle is not new. The uniqueness of feminist theology is not the concept of full humanity, but that women claim this concept for themselves. The use of this principle in male theology is perceived to have been corrupted by sexism. By naming males as the norms for authentic humanity, women have been scapegoated as sinful. By correlating maleness to divinity, the understanding has grown of male humanity against or above women (Ruether 1985:115-116).

### 3.6.2. Influence of Feminism on Society

Feminism should not be associated with a more promiscuous attitude to morals and life, but its effect on society, coupled with a new liberalist mindset, cannot be ignored. In the current era the whole picture of marriage, relationships, and sex within these boundaries, have seen a considerable change. Society has become secularized. Virginity is no longer a primary issue, while heterosexuality is no longer monopolizing the relationship scene. Marriages are becoming less while the divorce rate is historically high. People no longer bother to get married. Marriage has lost its sexual and procreational monopoly. It is hard to measure whether this has happened due to feminism's presence, liberalism, degeneration or any other factor in and of itself specifically. The reason why it is mentioned here, is cautionary in goal: many of the changes mentioned are changes feminists have worked for, and not all changes have been for the better. The question, to put it simply, is: would a child rather have a bossy/dominant father than no father at all? Would a woman rather raise a child without a male partner than accommodating a male view also in a shared life? First sex happens at an average age of 17 years. The average for having a first child is 29. 33% of births and 60% of conceptions take place outside of marriage. Abortions are easily available and contraceptives are now the responsibility of both sexes. Heterosexual sex is mostly taking place outside of procreation and marriage. In Britain the Conservative Government abolished the legal concept of "illegitimacy". We are moving to a society of subsidized matriarchy where 75% of women believe that a single parent can bring up children just as well as couples (Davies 1997:26). The statistics quoted by Davies spring from a European context. African figures will look differently and are quoted elsewhere as they apply. African statistics are also difficult to measure from a First World setting, since issues such as marriage, polygamy, sexuality etc, for instance, are seen in such a different light. As far as the argument about the influence of feminism on society goes, it is apt to cite figures from First World contexts.

The shifting values and views surrounding sexuality in society has great bearing on the way children are raised and handled. Eventually this influences the child's self-esteem, and their view of where they fit into the world, as well as the ultimate view of male and female, God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Modern culture is child-indifferent or pro-adult. One in four children will see their parents divorce before they are 16. This despite all data showing a flourishing of

children in the proximity of their monogamous biological parents. We are realizing this in a strange way: we are either not having children, or nationalizing them, or simply treating them as adults. Children are being treated as an indivisible public good, everyone's responsibility, and therefore no one's. Children have simply ceased to be regarded as part of the culture of sex (Davies 1997:27).

From 1836 to 1969 in Britain the ratio of men not marrying the mother of their child had fluctuated between 4-10%. Between 1960 and 1984 the rate has jumped to 17%. In the twelve years after 1984 it doubled again. If we consider men occasioning conception outside marriage (not a birth) the figure rose from 40% to 60% to 1990 (Dennis 1997:35).

Once again it is not clear whether the rise in more liberal praxis surrounding gender relations are exclusively due to feminist activism and possibly coercion. My opinion is that feminism has been working towards a less "repressed" society for decades — should it be a surprise that it has come to pass? The popular notion that previous centuries were earmarked by repressed sex, was turned on its head by Michel Foucault. What is interesting is that, as far as men were concerned, getting a man who was reliable and would not leave the woman unsupported was key. Men were expected to show their respectability, their ability to hold a marriage and family together (Storkey 1997:81). Marrying a person for life was the focus of domestic life, and a sexual relationship, along with childbearing, heavy domestic housework, bringing up children, earning a wage and illness was part of the deal. Marriage with sexual intercourse was a normal part of life. Sex occurred as part of a complex set of relationships, and was not simply "repressed". Marriage, family and class relationships, were more fundamental than having sex (Storkey 1997:82). Storkey makes an interesting point that the history of "repression" is largely invented by late 20th Century culture obsessed with reified sex. What concerned previous generations much more was marriage, faith, work, love and family (Storkey 1997:85).

Another feminist myth is that *religion* is associated with repression in a straight and unproblematized line. There is more to religion than just the issue of sex and sexual matters. The whole of life is involved, and the meaning of sex is relativized in the context of married love and celibacy. In religion the point is marriage and even this occurs within the wider context of our relationship with God (Storkey 1997:86-87).



Modern children learn relationships from the media. The sexual tradition has today become a massive metanarrative that is reinterpreting history, shaping individuals and defining success. Its claims to being a form of modern salvation and liberation are rampant. Postmodern sex is fragmented and yet people pay devotion to it. A great part of the individualism of the last century has been the motive of self-gratification. The ego-focus of sexuality is frightening. It makes celibacy seem impossible, and validates anger in sex. It justifies unfaithfulness and abuses the young. It destroys trust (Storkey 1997:95-96).

The calamity of myths is that they do not allow people to address issues of life in real Biblical terms. Escaping from myths involves moving out of the cultural construct because it is not true. Myth has cast religion and marriage in the role of repressor and has constructed itself as liberating sexual knowledge (Storkey 1997:96). This is exactly what feminist theology is guilty of. By placing a tremendous amount of effort into a campaign of mistrust and critique against the Biblical text, and setting itself up as the better measure for morality and justice, it has managed to move the ability to criticize to rest solely within the cultural context of modern times.

More recently, Christian reflection on sexuality started to define love anew. Traditionally the term was vague or rendered in terms of agape (self-giving), but the modern move has been to render love in terms of eros. Feminist writers have been very influential in this regard, spurred on by the insight of how agape understood as self-sacrificial love, can be detrimental to the lives of Christian women. Exponents of eros theology argue that eros is a force that undermines forms of domination and submission. It is radically mutual, passionate, angry, energizing, dynamic, creative and joyous. This psychic power is especially potent for women. It is sexual but also more than sexual. It is a sacred and unifying life force that seeks to bind all things together in true connectedness (Woodhead 1997:104-105).

Eros theology tries to move sex into a still wider context by claiming that eros underlies a new political vision and the ability to realize this vision. Thus eros can fight the forces of oppression — it can break down the barriers between private and public, private and political (Woodhead 1997:105).

Thatcher introduces a concept called "plastic sexuality". This is brought into relationship with the "pure relationship". It has nothing to do with conventional purity but refers to a situation where people enter a relationship for its own sake, where

they can get mutual satisfaction, and where the relationship can be ended if there is not sufficient fulfillment of needs. In this line, marriage is increasingly seen as a pure relationship. Intimacy is transformed and "democratized". Partners no longer accept traditional gender accounts where men dominate and women reproduce. In this plastic sexuality, monogamy refers not to the relationship, but to sexual exclusiveness. Fidelity is an aspect of integrity (Thatcher 1997:128). There is a freedom in plastic sexuality that throws off patriarchal domination. Equality is introduced and monogamy is reworked. Christians may counter this with their religious experience. Whatever they want, the first desire is to become like Jesus Christ, whose love for God and neighbour was coextensive with his earthly life and death. Neighbour-love excludes domination even in marriage. Plastic sexuality also has the danger of being too self-occupied (Thatcher 1997:129-130).

Why this trodding onto a path that seems to have nothing to do with feminist theology? The heart of true feminism wishes to show that all things are interconnected, and from a certain vision of sexuality springs a certain vision of self, a certain image of self and others in society, in religion, etc, and ultimately a certain vision of the Divine. It is thus necessary to have a brief look at less-obvious fundamental building blocks that ultimately lead to what we are encountering as a feminist view of creation.

Beattie wrote about intimate body parts and brought it into play on an outlook to life. The theological "discovery" of the clitoris might lead to a new appreciation of non-reproductive sexual pleasure. If the phallus can symbolize a culture of domination, maybe the clitoris can symbolize a culture of playfulness and small delights in normal daily life. If this is an overstatement of the symbolic power of the body, we should ask why so many women suffer clitorectomy. If women's sexual pleasure were not so subversive to men's power, it is hard to understand the energy spent in trying to eradicate the clitoris culturally and physically (Beattie 1997:180).

### **3.7. FEMINISM AND THE BIBLE**

#### **3.7.1. The Background**

In our times, one of the most influential feminist theologians is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who was in turn influenced by the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Who influenced Stanton herself and what arguments were the starting point of her feminist critique? JJ Bachoven wrote a highly influential book called *Das Mutterrecht*, which

greatly influenced Friedrich Engels and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. What makes it mentionable, is the impact it had on the thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Lerner 1986:26).

Bachoven had a basic evolutionist and Darwinist framework, describing the various stages of society and its evolutionary stages leading from barbarism to modern patriarchy. He claimed that women in primitive society developed culture and that there was a stage of "matriarchy" which served to lead society out of barbarism. Despite great value placed on the role of women, he saw the patriarchal system as the triumph of superior religious and political thought and organization. He did, however, advocate the incorporation of the "feminine principle" of nurturance and altruism in modern society (Lerner 1986:27).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton developed a further argument which blended natural rights philosophy and American nationalism with maternalism (Lerner 1986:27). It was woman's right and duty to enter the public sphere because of her superior values and her maternal strength. Stanton changed the "separate sphere" doctrine into a feminist argument. Women were also citizens and enjoyed the same natural rights as men because *as mothers* they were better able to improve society (Lerner 1986:28). The later suffrage movement had a similar argument, which held that the role of women properly extended to "municipal housekeeping" (Lerner 1986:28).

A major contribution of Stanton was her conviction that it was important for women to interpret the Bible from their own perspective. This would aid their true and total emancipation (Clifford 2001:47).

The roots of modern feminist thought can thus be traced back to evolution and Darwinism, a specific view of matriarchy and the female role and nature, blended with American nationalism, maternalism and emancipation ideals. Later in this chapter, a brief overview will be given of the view of female identity and nature.

### **3.7.2. Challenges to Academic Feminism**

Feminist study struggles with numerous problems and challenges, of which many result from the long and ingrained patriarchal thought patterns one unconsciously has. Feminist theology also struggles with the great danger of good-natured tolerance without any real commitment from other academic fields. Along this line,

feminist study is tolerated as a type of rebellious little sister who does not need to be taken too seriously, while all can listen to what she has to say.

Feminist inquiry has thus far failed to take an interdisciplinary approach to Biblical scholarship in large part because the motivation and energy required to develop a new aspect of any discipline that will address gender issues, lies with female scholars. Many male scholars support feminist scholarship, while very few engage in such scholarship themselves. This leads to an academic work division along gender lines that puts feminist scholarship at a disadvantage when compared to all other sciences. Biblical studies have long been dominated by men. The result is that few female scholars have been academically equipped with the necessary skills to deal with Biblical texts. Of the women that were involved with Biblical sciences, few reflected feminist interests in their work until recently (Meyers 1987:20).

Feminist theology, with its emphasis on experience as measure for reality, experiences the difficulty of people who have internalized an inner critic against their own experiences. Simone de Beauvoir made a statement in her book *The Second Sex* that woman has not transcended, if this means that she can define and interpret human knowledge (De Beauvoir in Lerner 1986:221).

Academically trained women of the past hundred years have had to learn to think like a man. Many of them have internalized this training and lost the ability to conceive of alternatives (Lerner 1986:224). These women have learned to distrust their own experience, and even to devalue it as patriarchal thought taught them to do. Patriarchal thought devalues female wisdom and limits it to the realm of the "natural" and "non-transcendent". Women's knowledge then gets called intuition and gossip (Lerner 1986:224).

The cost of the exclusion of women from the human enterprise of abstract thought has never and could never be reckoned (Lerner 1986:225). As a result of women's gender-conditioning, women have aimed to please and sought approval. This serves as poor preparation for people who want to create new systems. Every woman has also been fully schooled in patriarchal thought, and holds at least one great man in our heads, while remaining oblivious of heroines (Lerner 1986:227). A possible heroine is Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who took on the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the founders of the American republic (Lerner 1986:227).

Women who started to study went through a phase of paying closer attention to what women were doing, but still they were constrained by the thinking imparted by their male mentors and internalized by them, which held that men were busy with more important things. They tried to find women to do the "more significant things" men were doing, and thus compensatory history was born (Lerner 1986:13). What feminists are only lately starting to do, is pointing out that the framework within which we function is unequal, and then tearing it down (Lerner 1986:13).

Apart from the difficulty of overcoming distrust of own experiences, feminism has had to face the difficulty of varying experiences among diverse races, cultures and genders. One such an example is given by Rosemary Ruether when she states the difficulty for the black movement to respond to the feminist theology represented by Mary Daly in her book *Beyond God the Father*. The liberation symbols that Daly use are mariological, with focus on virginity, immaculate conception, and the assumption as symbols of female superiority. The judgmental symbol she uses is castration. For the black movement, all these symbols are clothed as white racism which has been victimizing both black men and women. Such symbols are not liberating, but rather expressions of white sexual pathology being manifested in the usual ways (Ruether 1975:121).

### **3.7.3. Challenges in the African Context**

This challenge is not unique to theology in the Western and/or First World. In South Africa, West and Holter are correct in asserting that the predominantly white South African Biblical scholarship could hardly be called African. Holter, when speaking of "African" Biblical scholarship, defines it as sub-Saharan Africa, but also north of the Limpopo River (excluding South African Biblical scholarship) (Jonker 2001:84).

Emmanuel Obeng claims that those trained in the West are still under the influence of Western scholarship, but they have not seriously reflected on how to make the knowledge acquired, relevant to Africa. Feminist theology with its ideal of liberation, as well as liberation theology, and all other theologies that want to speak in a multi-cultural context (as the global village is increasingly becoming), should aim for the adoption of symbols that are understandable for all races and classes. It becomes clear that, however well-meaning, simply putting forth a theology without problematizing its language, symbols and ideals, can no longer be acceptable academic practice. Even the work of Gerald West in reading with local people is eventually clouded by suspicion because of the systematization of the insights.



**SAINT JOSEPHINE BAHKITA**  
JANET MCKENZIE

How does the African rural community experience the academic work done on the Biblical text? How important is the work of theologians to them? Musimbi Kanyoro has observed communities give their own interpretations to the same texts for which translators and Biblical scholars have studied and laboured in order to provide interpretations presumed to be faithful to the meaning of these texts in ancient Palestine. She has noticed that popular Bible readers do not care what the scholars think. These readers read the Bible with the eyes provided by their own cultures and they apply a mirror-image reading. Sometimes their cultures are being interpreted at the hand of the Bible, but often the culture rather gives meaning to the Biblical text (Kanyoro 2002:20). The conclusion from this is inescapable. Clearly for Christians, the Bible is too important to be left to the experts (Mojola 2001:91).

The work of Lorraine Code develops the idea of epistemic community and goes beyond the traditional boundaries of the traditional isolated knower to now include the whole dynamic network of human relationships in the process of knowing. Technical reasoning now meets partners in emotion, memory and body experience (Warne 2002:53-54). In this regard, the ideals of feminist theology merges with the praxis of theology as experienced by African theologians — the reader/hearer interprets at the hand of own experience which is given as much credence as other ways of knowing.

As feminists have found, a person's, culture's and group's own history needs to be researched and claimed in every new generation, by itself and for itself. The same holds true for theologians on the African continent, regardless of race and culture. African scholars will have to reconstruct the history of their culture, in the same way that academics in other cultures have had to reconstruct their own in turn. Unfortunately, this task cannot be delegated across cultures and generations (Mugambi 2001:10).

Minority groups and women must research their past and insist that it be remembered and celebrated. If not, they will continue to be considered an inferior "other", not to be counted as full members of the community. When one is able to recognize that the group one belongs to has been involved in significant human events, one comes to feel part of human experience beyond oneself, and the sense of participation in the human community and the making of history. These things give individuals a sense of self-esteem (Bennett 1989:40).

Whereas men have a sense of participation and belonging, be it in the reading of history or the rituals of celebration, women do not have this since, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, only men are ever named in celebrations of praise and thanksgiving. A quick example of this is the fact that it is easy to think of the praises David offered, but is it ever mentioned in religious life that Miriam also praised, or Deborah? (Bennett 1989:40).

In Africa, the search for history gives rise to unique challenges. There has been a tendency to regard literacy as an end in itself, and then especially among the literate elite. This tendency has led to the prejudiced view that a written record is superior to an oral one. Historians are especially interested in studying records. It should, however, be remembered that written records represent a selection from a greater body of "oral" texts. The records a historian studies have been greatly influenced by the writer, and sometimes tell more about the author than the events they are meant to describe. This fact once again points us to the ideological nature of all written texts. A text does not explicitly state a context. It remains the job of the reader to discern it (Mugambi 2001:12).

African Bible readers and academics should also be taught that Bible translations are implicitly interpretations themselves. In order to work on an academic level with the Hebrew Bible in any of its dimensions, one requires a knowledge of the Biblical languages as well as knowledge of Ancient Near Eastern history. The broad availability of translations in various languages (increasingly user- and culture-friendly) can be misleading. Translations are themselves interpretations and are subject to the bias of the translators. Serious researchers need to go back to the original languages in order to avoid making the same mistakes that centuries of translators have made. One such an example is the use of the generic word for "human" that is translated in English as "man". This leads to the gender-specific potential of the word "man" being attached to a Hebrew word that signifies all of human life (Meyers 1987:21).

#### **3.7.4. The Importance of the Bible**

Some feminist theologians find the Bible and the Church so steeped in patriarchy that they can no longer remain Christians. Cady indicated that it is possible to judge a tradition bankrupt and distorted to such a degree that it is unacceptable to still align



with it. Especially the work of Carol Christ and Mary Daly has indicated their judgment of Christianity and Judaism as irredeemable (West 1991:100).

Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza differ from Christ and Daly in their view of the roots of the Biblical tradition. They both argue that it is sheer romanticism to abandon the reformation of a tradition in favour of creating/discovering an alternative tradition (West 1991:100). Fiorenza goes on to point out that a feminist position is in danger of becoming ahistorical when it concedes that there is no retrievable authentic history of women within the Biblical tradition. Such a stance also abandons all the modern women who find positive experiences within Biblical religion.

Why bother with the Bible at all? In many a group concerned with human liberation, some people feel that the Bible and myths are no longer relevant for a scientific, technological world. The answer is that we forget myths and mythological language at our peril. These ancient myths undergird and legitimate cultural and religious ideologies and structures even on the deepest and subconscious level. It is impossible to overstate the power of ancient myths in our modern lives (Bennett 1989:125-126). Robert Alter writes that, in our culture, whether it be Judeo-Christian or post-Judeo-Christian, the first textual association with the idea of authority is the Bible (Alter 1992:197). Polls actually indicate that well over 80 percent of all Americans still claim to believe in the Bible as revealed truth (Alter 1992:200).

Ellen Blue agrees with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza that the Bible is too powerful a weapon to abandon. In the foreseeable future, many damaged women are going to continue, for a variety of reasons, to attach authority to the Christian faith. Their understandings of what that faith and the God described by that faith have to say to them will make a difference in how successfully they are able to heal. It is crucial to help these women to reinterpret what the Christian faith might have to do with their own life stories. They need not just a helpful myth, but a helpful history (Blue 2001:139).

The dominant Western world of today is moulded by the Judeo-Christian tradition and Scriptures. In a world where the cries of oppressed people are rising all over the world, we need to ask ourselves whether there is something in our religious myths and concepts, as well as in our theology and language about God that has and does support racism, classism, sexism and the exploitation of the earth (Bennett 1989:126). Religion is different in the fact that it is not just studied but also lived.

Changes in religious questions and assumptions affect people deeply. It is really a fact that in the area of religion, the personal is not just political, it is also ontological in the way it informs the way we relate to God, our way of being, and our situation in the world (Brown Zikmund 1985:28). Even though trends show that we may be moving beyond a religious society, we are not necessarily in a society beyond spirituality.

The Biblical text carries after it a wake of canonicity, not only for the believer, but also for the half-believer and the nonbeliever. One critic of the new wave of literary interest in the Bible, speaking on behalf of a latter-day piety, has protested that, after all, Jacob and Joseph are not fictional characters but rather our forefathers, the founding fathers of God's covenanted people. The real point for Alter is that they are both at once, and that that double identity is the source of their special authority, even for the reader who is not prepared to refer them to the category of revelation (Alter 1992:209).

The authority of the fictional imagination, as it speaks from the canonical text, assumes a cultural and a spiritual force (Alter 1992:209). It may be only for a minority that Scripture remains unambiguously authoritative, yet most of us continue to feel the pressure of authority exerted by this extraordinary collection of writings (Alter 1992:209).

The way feminist theology reasons about language, the authority of the text, and religion in general, is rooted in its view of the authority of the Biblical text. Not all feminist theologians agree exactly on the degree of authority the Biblical text as it stands, holds for people in religion. At the furthest point are those writers who have dismissed the text, deeming it unsuitable and unredeemable, with writers covering the spectrum up to the other point where the text is still hailed as inspired work. The schism between feminist theology and traditional theology comes to the fore when the argument of the authority of the Biblical text is put forth. For feminists, the text stands under the authority of female experience, while traditional theology holds that the text has authority on its own volition, as Word of God.

The Catholic and Reformation tradition hold that authority is situated in the Church and the Bible, and that such authority should be submitted to. Feminist theology aligns with the Renaissance and Enlightenment, which emphasizes the infinite possibilities of the human being. Where traditional religion places authority in external standards such as the Church or the Bible (heteronomy), feminists locate

authority in the self, and then in conscience, experience, or mystical insight (autonomy) (Bloesch 1992:203). This self is ideally represented by females.

*A methodological commitment to the primacy of women's experience as a source for theology and ethics yields.... A feminist hermeneutical principle which functions in the selection and interpretation of all other sources... In some feminist theologies it leads to the rejection of the authority of the Bible altogether; in others it allows the relativization of the authority of some texts; in still others, it leaves all texts standing as a part of an authoritative revelation, but renders their meaning transformed under a new feminist paradigm. The same is true for theological doctrines, historical events, and for other sources of theology and ethics (Hitchcock 1992:345).*

Feminists give experience a very high status as measuring stick, and then specifically feminine experience. Rosemary Ruether states that *Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle. Codified tradition both reaches back to roots in experience and is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience (Ruether in Bloesch 1992:195).*

What of men? How do men share in this new experiential theology? Men who embrace feminism can, for obvious reasons, not appeal to feminine experience, and are less likely to celebrate cycles of nature. They find as source of authority the consciousness of living in a male-female world, where hierarchy and duality are replaced by mutuality and unity. Both sexes align themselves with a vision of androgynal unity. The norms for feminism are thus cultural rather than ecclesiastical, and experiential rather than Biblical (Bloesch 1992:196-197).

The sense of meaningfulness as defined by female experience spills over from religion in general to the Biblical text itself. The key for understanding the Bible is "women's experience" and then specifically the experience of the feminists themselves. Their own experience determines what is acceptable in the Scriptures as "Divine revelation" and what not. Ruether expresses this lens as *whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer (Ruether in Zeigler 1992:322).*

The irony is that the feminist claim to personal (or women's) experience as the critical standard for all truth about God and creation, necessarily implies a destructive dualism between those with the "right" consciousness and everyone else with a

different consciousness or experience (Scott 1992:254). The process of conscious intentionality is not gender-specific. There is no conscious access to God unique to woman (Morelli 1992:235). In their ideals for human liberation, mutuality and inclusion, feminists prove to be as exclusive as they blame traditional religion to have been through the ages.

How does the feminist view of authority as rooted in experience, and then specifically experience of liberation, affect the Bible and its use in religion? Schüssler Fiorenza holds that only the parts of the Bible that support the struggle for liberation are authoritative. What her call amounts to, is for a canon within a canon. The parts that promote equality, are to become the measure by which the rest of the Bible should be measured. She states that *only the non-sexist and non-androgenic traditions of biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible is not to continue as a tool for the oppression of women* (Schüssler Fiorenza in Bloesch 1992:197). Her tool for Biblical authority is emancipatory praxis. According to her theory, the Bible is not an archetype, but a prototype, and should always be open to the possibility of its own transformation (Bloesch 1992:197-198). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza set out to reconstruct Biblical history by searching for women mentioned in the New Testament. She believes the Bible to be both the source of women's power as well as their oppression, and thus attempts to read the Bible in a new light so that women will be liberated through feminist vision. Schüssler Fiorenza advocates reconstruction of the Bible on the basis that the experience of oppression and liberation must become the criterion by which Biblical authority is measured. She herself does not hold to a closed canon, but states that other texts can have just as much spiritual value for women.

*A feminist theological hermeneutics having as its canon the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchal text, structures, institutions, and values maintains that – if the Bible is not to continue as a tool for the patriarchal oppression of women – only those traditions and texts that critically break through patriarchal culture and plausibility structures have the theological authority of revelation* (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:32-33; Schüssler Fiorenza in Jenson 1992:279).

Sallie McFague gives the Bible the authority of a classic poetic text. It can be interpreted in a flexible style, and is open to different understandings. It is great literature rather than Divine revelation. McFague holds that the Bible as model can never *be* the word of God or capture His ways. The Bible should be interpreted as other poetic texts, in an existential, open, flexible way. For McFague, focus falls on

the relative character of this human work, rather than its inspiration and canonicity (Bloesch 1992:198).

Rebecca Chopp sees the real task of feminist theology as proclamation. For this task, privileged concepts are needed. If transformation and emancipation cannot be read from the text, such a text is basically useless (Jenson 1992:285). The question yet again pops up: Who decides this? On what basis is the decision for the value of a text made, and where is an objective standard of emancipation and liberation found? Feminist theology builds on feminist theory. Feminist theory begins with the experience of oppression by males. All texts must be examined through this experiential lens. Only those texts that speak of liberation to women, can be said to have value (Jenson 1992:285).

Once again, questions that come to the fore are:

1. What about the experiences of men?
2. Who decides the validity of experiences?
3. Some people are more easily offended than others. Is this not a problem?

As far as feminist authority given to the text is concerned, the imposition made on the text is exterior. Textual value is decided by our cultural situation. Feminist theology now experiences a problem with the texts, since it has a particular history, place and value within the Christian community. Feminist theology then imposes a theory upon the text to establish whether or not this text speaks of liberation for women. This method serves to replace the text with theory. The core truth is that feminist theology does not live easily with the particularity or the complications of the Biblical story (Jenson 1992:285).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gives

1. A feminist model of Biblical interpretation that identifies sexist and patriarchal texts
2. A feminist hermeneutics of proclamation which insists that all texts that are sexist or patriarchal must not be proclaimed in Christian worship (Zeigler 1992:322).

On this, she builds her hermeneutics of suspicion and proceeds to try and convince the reader that she honours the text.

Feminists are, in short, willing to use the Bible, but then selectively. Passages that speak of a patriarchal worldview must become marginal areas of the canon, while those that tell only of equality in Christ are the only binding parts. It must still be pointed out that even here the authority of a text is laid at the mercy of the current understanding of equality. The Bible is then read in light of this intellectual and experiential understanding. The final authority for our faith can thus not be objective, since it is experiential and subjective (Bloesch 1992:199).

Feminist theologians seem to have handed the believer a new "canon" as well as specific directions of how it should be read. This new canon proves to be not an authoritative guide for Christian faith, but rather a tool for promoting the feminist agenda. Thielicke would define this as Cartesianism (Zeigler 1992:322).

The great irony happens when the critical reader starts understanding that feminists seem to have denied the Spirit as well as the Bible the voice to speak to the reader/believer in any voice other than their own (Zeigler 1992:322).

### **3.7.5. The Bible as Word of God**

More radical strains of feminist theology holds that the Bible is a human work, written by male authors with their own patriarchal agenda, for a male audience sharing the same agenda. Due to this fact, the Bible does not carry sufficient authority to be called the Word of God, or to make claims about its own inspiration.

Sister Ann Patrick Ware states that the Word of God is in need of correction because it has been corrupted by the mores of the culture in which it was received (Bloesch 1992:199). Most feminists see the Bible as only having an intimation of transcendence (Bloesch 1992:201). Since this book is not a work of authority, it does not have the mandate to define, among other things, the way God should be named/called/identified. Since it is a human work ridden with problems, it can be changed to accommodate the people who have been left out of it.

In her book *Bread not Stone*, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has stated that all Biblical texts are formulated in androcentric language and that they reflect patriarchal social structures. She calls for a recognition of the need for feminist critical interpretation (De Marco 1992:291). Her call did not go unheeded. One group to attempt ridding

Scripture of patriarchal traces is the Liturgy Commission in the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton, Alberta, USA (De Marco 1992:291-292).

K Thraede has indicated some important methodological rules for dealing with the information of androcentric texts:

1. These texts must not be seen in isolation but always in their immediate textual contexts.
2. These texts should always be analyzed in their specific social-political context in order to establish their "function".
3. Especially normative texts often maintain that something is a historical fact and a given reality though the opposite is the case (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:59-60).

The work of Jacob Neusner has shown that a systemic analysis of androcentric texts does not suffice. It has to be complemented by a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion that understands androcentric texts as ideological articulations of men expressing and maintaining patriarchal historical conditions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:60). In the spirit of such a hermeneutics of suspicion, some feminists call the Trinitarian doctrine a creation of (mainly white Western) men, with the purpose of ensuring male power in Church and society through the use of masculine titles for God. Such thinkers call for the apophatic qualification of all words and concepts applied to Divinity, since they see all names and images as metaphors derived from human experience. The names of Father and Son are especially in need of emendation or, if need be, elimination because they are seen to be male-serving metaphors that were produced by a patriarchal culture whose structures and institutions they serve to establish and secure (Hopko 1992:144).

Feminism has pointed out that such androcentric texts (but mainly the Bible) do not mirror historical reality or tell how it actually was. Our early Christian texts as androcentric texts are interpretations, projections, argumentations etc that were rooted in a patriarchal culture. These texts must be historically evaluated in terms of their own time and culture, and assessed theologically in terms of a feminist scale of values (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:60).

The feminist principle of discarding that which is offensive and that which does not enhance the liberation of women, when practiced on the Biblical text, would have grave consequences. When Brian Wren suggests that we abandon a text because

its cultural assumptions are foreign, like the text of Hosea 2, this would lead, eventually, when done consistently, to the abandonment of the Bible itself (Green 1992:60).

Classical orthodox doctrines such as the Trinity of God, Creation *ex nihilo*, and Jesus being the unique revelation and Redeemer, may be better theological resources for our time than some of the feminist proposals that have thus far been examined (Scott 1992:257), offensive and androcentric as they may be perceived to be.

Feminist theology also needs to take stock of not just its own vision of the Bible, but also of the way the average Christian sees this text. The average African-South African Bible reader regards the Bible as the Word of God that is able to transform lives and address different life situations. This concept of the Bible makes the reading experience inseparably tied up with a faith experience. To this reader, the Bible is not just a book to be critiqued. Sarojini Nadar agrees with this conclusion drawn by Masenya, and states that it is also true for Indian South Africans (Nadar 2001:172). The big challenge to this issue is the clash of divergent views on the authority of the Bible. There seems to be no middle ground on this issue, and the view held on this podium influences the outcome of most other exercises undertaken with regards to the Biblical text.

What is meant by the Bible as "Word of God"? Presumably the Word of God cannot be the object of criticism rooted in experience of any kind. Experience can rather be seen in the light of the Word of God, but not vice versa. Can modern struggles not be connected to the struggles put forth in the Biblical text, such as struggles against the economic and political domination and exploitation by the Israelite monarchical state such as is found in 2 Samuel 7? Does it mean that no hermeneutic affinity can be established between working-class citizens and landless peasants, exploited workers and destitute underclasses that made up Jesus' following? One cannot select one part of the Bible as "Word of God" while neglecting others (Mosala 1993:54).

An approach to the study of the Bible that begins with the notion of the Bible as Word of God, presupposes that truth is not historical, economic or cultural. The Word of God is pre-established. Its relevance does not issue from its very character as a historical, economic or cultural product, but rather from its ability to be applied to these sectors of life. The aforementioned is called the contextualization approach by



Itumeleng Mosala. One local (South African) proponent of this approach is Allan Boesak, who admits that the approach is not new but simply the proclamation of the age-old gospel (Mosala 1993:56). Another Black theologian, Elliot Khoza Mgojo, also sees black theology as contextual. By this he seems to understand that it is the application of universal theological principles to a particular situation (Mosala 1993:57).

Mgojo believes in the fundamental universality of the gospel. This understanding is rooted in a hermeneutic commitment to the Bible as "Word of God". Such an understanding leads to the view of black theology as a logical development of Christian theology, and not as a rebellion against Christian theology. The problem Mosala identifies with such reasoning, is that there is no break with traditional Western theology. Mosala further identifies contextual theology as white theology in black clothes (Mosala 1993:58).

The problem with the contextualization approach (the context determines the mode of reading and interpretation) is that it conceals the hermeneutically important fact that the texts of the Bible are problematic — they bear the marks of their origins and history. This reality is concealed by the ideological aura of the Bible as Word of God (Mosala 1993:56).

Mosala contends that the category "Word of God" does not help to bring out the real nature of Biblical liberation because it presumes that liberation exists everywhere and unproblematically in the Bible (Mosala 1993:56).

Both African liberation theology and contextual theology share the same position with feminist approaches, namely, emphasizing the context of the text as well as the situatedness of the reader/interpreter. This position is in fact typical also of the neo-Marxist position. The literary theoretical position of Marxism has a lot in common with feminist approaches.

The aforementioned shows that it is not just feminist theology which finds itself in a struggle with the Biblical text, but Black theology and Liberation theology from the African perspective as well (this springs from the fact that they share similar positions with regards to the authority of the text). Not even foremost feminist authors themselves agree on a universal view of the Biblical text. It must be pointed out that the view taken of the Biblical text lays the groundwork of all critical stances that

follow. Although Fiorenza, for instance, does not discard the Bible, she uses extra-Biblical texts to further clarify and even critique the Bible itself. Her view of the Bible is also not one of an archetype, but of a prototype. This stance, wherein she rejects the finality of the canon, will be explained more fully in chapter four. Cady pointed out that feminist theology does not reflect the conventionalist approach to the past, whereby the past is appropriated uncritically as an authoritative precedent. One cannot in modern theology sanctify the patriarchal distortions of the ancient Near East. Feminist Virginia Mollenkott also agrees that the patriarchal background of the Bible cannot be accepted as the absolute culture. One must rather distinguish between what was written for an age, and what was written for all time. This rule also allows feminist theologians to interpret Biblical messages as a whole, rather than citing isolated texts (West 1991:84-85). Opposed to the conventional vision of the past, stands the naturalist vision. The naturalist vision holds that the past is taken into account to sustain or modify an existing symbolic order, but the symbolic order can still be criticized. The existing order is only taken into account if it is still able to add meaning, truth and power to life (West 1991:99). The naturalist model of hermeneutics may be seen as the type that continues to see the past as disclusive of truth, but refuses to capitulate to it uncritically (West 1991:100).

The polemic over the authority of the Bible continues for feminist and liberation theology. From the works of various authors it is clear that it is possible to honour the Bible as Word of God while still maintaining a critical stance. When Croatto is asked which text we need to read today, his answer is the current form, even though it may not be to our taste. He argues that any earlier addition to the text is now no longer an addition, but that what has been handed down makes a new text that hands down meaning as it is. In this way the Bible is a single text from the moment it constituted a fixed canon of literary compositions (West 1991:134).

Croatto goes on to argue that, while the Bible is a single text, it is not the cumulative sum of a plurality of literary units. It is the unification of a linguistically coded central kerygma. This extended account has various semantic axes that orientate the production of meaning that is our reading of the Bible (West 1991:134).

One of the axes of meaning is the kerygma of the liberation of the oppressed. Croatto recognizes that there are contending ideologies in the Bible, as well as that the Bible is a book put together and structured by a (mostly) middle class generally alienated from the people (West 1991:134-135).

Croatto sees the canonical form as normative for ordinary readers. The text becomes normative and archetypal within a community that lives in its atmosphere, and the Christian community of faith asserts that the Bible is our paradigmatic text as the Word of God. Croatto implies that this is particularly true of ordinary readers (West 1991:136).

When one looks into the history of interpretation and theology, it also becomes clear that predecessors from the time of the Middle Ages and before were no strangers to a critical hermeneutic. The centuries between Augustine and Bullinger show variance but a major point of consent: the message of the Scriptures, in their whole or somehow in each part, is a message of God's mercy and goodness toward all creatures (Thompson 2001:248).

This fundamental stance has been described as a *hermeneutic of charity* because it is an approach to Scripture that seeks to clarify any passage in light of the presumption that the text as it stands and as it is narrated is overseen by a sovereign, benevolent, and ultimately trustworthy Deity. This determination can come into play even in the texts of terror (Thompson 2001:248).

John Chrysostom eagerly defended human choice but was also inclined to defend the story of Jephthah's daughter as having been guided by a provident, loving God. Chrysostom did not harbour any reservations about God's reputation and credibility (Thompson 2001:248).

Reformers and their predecessors spoke of interpreting Scripture in accordance with the analogy of faith that evaluates the difficult passages of Scripture by their agreement or consent with clearer passages and with the rule of faith (Thompson 2001:249).

The work of precritical commentators drives towards the coherence and consistency of Scripture as expressing a unified Divine revelation and as teaching and illustrating a benevolent Divine providence throughout human history (Thompson 2001:249). They believed that the Bible may be trusted to make sense *internally*, in its own narratives, and *externally*, in addressing its readers (Thompson 2001:249).

Feminists and traditionalists all seem to agree that our access to God is to be understood as the most fundamental core of the human spirit (Morelli 1992:236). How this access is to be undertaken starts a dividing gap between various groups. Feminists would argue that experience of liberation and mutuality offers the most authentic experience of religious relationship with Divinity. This view is not shared by Evangelicals, who place less emphasis on experiences of liberation and mutuality. Feminists furthermore hold that the Bible's authority as revelatory tool stands under the criticism of the experience of liberation, while this is a view completely rejected by Evangelical Christianity.

What does Evangelical Christianity define as the contours of the authority of Scripture? How central is Scripture in this school of theology? What effect does this view have on the use of inclusive language in religion? The defense of the traditional Trinitarian language used for God appeals to the authority of Scripture, as well as to the Scripturally and narrationally warranted self-description of the triune God (DiNoia 1992:170).

The criticism of traditional theology against feminist theology, is that it offers in its more extreme and radical forms, a religion which is not Christian or Orthodox. Leslie Zeigler gives a summary of the boundaries for argument which have to be accepted if one is to stay within the perimeters of the Christian tradition.

1. The authority of the Bible must be recognized. She states that without the Bible there can be no Church.
2. The significance and centrality of Jesus as Christ must be recognized. The Christian faith stands or falls by the answer to the question of who Jesus is.
3. The self-revelation is the basis for the requirement of speaking of the Trinity. If we wish to speak about the Christian God and not some other god/ess, there must be clarity regarding the meaning of the Trinitarian formula for God (Zeigler 1992:314).

According to the evangelical view, the Bible's authority does not stem from alignment with personal experience of the individual, or developments in the natural and social sciences. Evangelicals locate the authority of the Bible in its self-disclosure of the living God who became flesh in Jesus, dwelt among humans and rose from the dead. On this, the Christian faith stands or falls (Bloesch 1992:205).

CS Lewis remarked that all that is not eternal, is eternally out of date, and that, the less the Bible is read, the more it is translated. It seems that a culture as time-bound as the present one, given its obsession with fashion, novelty, expediency etc, seems hardly in the position to correct the eternal Word of God (De Marco 1992:296).

John Calvin said that God is not shown to us as He is in Himself, but as He is towards us. Such a view of Scriptural authority has laid the foundation of the faith through the ages, and does not make the Bible into a paper idol but holds it as an antidote to ignorance and tampering (Frye 1992:32).

In order to be able to understand the message of any given text, the reader has to get rid of inappropriate connotations associated with the vocabulary used, and note the text itself. This is even more necessary in the case of the Bible, which should be read as *Scripture* and sets the context within which people understand God, themselves, and the world (Green 1992:63).

Divine revelation is essentially singular, since there cannot be a multiplicity of revelations any more than there can be a multiplicity of Gods. The exclusive nature of God's self-revelation is given through the Holy Scriptures (Exodus 20.2-3; Deuteronomy 5.6-7). The Holy Scriptures have been given by Divine inspiration, and cannot be revised or rewritten. In the Scriptures, God has set his seal upon His self-naming as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and has thus also set His seal on the language people are bound to use in praying to Him and speaking of Him. We do not have a mandate to bypass God's self-naming, and this Triune name has an essential place in our knowledge, experience and worship of God. God has chosen to be known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we are not to choose other names we devise for ourselves (Torrance 1992:140).

Feminist theology's main point of departure from Evangelical theology is thus its contention that the Bible is not the Word of God, but the words of men. This contention is the result of a deeper suspicion of the Biblical text. The following paragraph gives more insight into this suspicion.

### **3.7.6. Suspicion of the Biblical Text**

Here may lie the most serious point of contention between precritical commentators and some feminists: Is the Bible, or any specific passage, finally coherent or not?

Many feminist critics hold that the Bible has lost credibility. It holds no confidence today and must now be read under a cloud of suspicion, if at all. These readers feel both justified and obliged to read the Bible with a presupposition of its probable incoherence. One might say with Fiorenza that the goal of the reader should be to destabilize the center and the margins of malestream Biblical studies by constructing the *ekklēsia* as a feminist counter-public-sphere from which a feminist critical rhetoric can speak. One might read against the grain with Cheryl Exum and expose male control of the production and interpretation of literature. Many researchers feel that the writers and redactors of the Bible are unable to transcend their own patriarchal self-interest, and must find some corrective, be it from the Bible itself or from other sources (Thompson 2001:250).

The debate over the canon is likely to never be solved, since the debate is grounded more on presuppositions about the enduring authority of Scripture than any other evidence. It is very important to note, however, that there is a distinction to be drawn between those who use a hermeneutic of suspicion as a tool and those whose commitment to a *hermeneutic* of suspicion masks still deeper commitments to an *ideology* of suspicion toward the Bible and its history of interpretation (Thompson 2001:251).

One might learn a great deal from precritical commentators in their handling of Scripture. Precritical commentators could engage in fruitful discourse with those who advocate using suspicion as a hermeneutic, but not so easily with those who has it as their ideology. When Fiorenza writes that the hermeneutic of suspicion turns its spotlight on the reader's own reading practices and assumptions, there is an echo to be found with early precritical commentators who highly prized self-examination and discipline as preparation for the interpretive task. One might even correlate applying suspicion to oneself with the Calvinist recognition of one's own depravity as an essential consideration in good exegesis (Thompson 2001:251-252). Neither of these formulations stand at odds with the hermeneutic of charity or consent, nor with an understanding of the Bible as somehow the Word of God (Thompson 2001:252).

Precritical commentators had the ability to use their own reading strategies to bend the silences in the text toward the Divine norm of fairness, justice etc. Precritical commentators would not have gilled the text to divulge its own writing strategy. Their view of the inspired nature of the Bible disinclined them to read the text against itself. They did, however, read the tradition of interpretation against the grain and even

Feminism in the Church may indeed be a revolt, not against the feudal or the ancient, but against the modern and the domestic, and Christian feminism may be a movement of and about elites. But feminism in the Church has broken open and remade the face of the Church, and old things have become new.

Katherine Sonderegger 2001:386-387

against Paul, but they were not prepared to treat the text itself as treacherous or liable to misdirect them (Thompson 2001:252).

This presupposition limits their options from a feminist perspective, but they assumed that the universe depicted in the Bible made sense. Silences were mined for coherence and not incoherence. If coherence was not seen, the fault did not lie with the text or its Divine Author, but with human finite minds or the limits of revelation, for God does not tell us everything. Even where the text baffled and disturbed, it was still trusted as an expression of the Author and Finisher of our faith (Thompson 2001:252).

Feminists have yielded some considerable influence over the last few decades, and in the praxis of some Churches, religion is now lived to a degree that speaks of great care not to offend feminist-oriented members.

*Women today are increasingly sensitive to the presence of a dominant male language, outlook and societal structure in the Bible — an outlook that affects the persuasiveness of the Biblical texts that enter the discussion. When passages that women regard as offensive are read in the Church lectionary, they are often hurried over to avoid an outcry (Hitchcock 1992:344).*

But feminists seem to have gone further than just making people aware of the problems faced by women in Church and society. They have been, and are, actively campaigning for the transformation of all structures of life. In light of this ideal, how possible do feminists find it to live as people of the faith within the body of Christ, made up of the Church? Mary Daly published her famous slogan in 1974: Since God is male, the male is god. The nature of a slogan is to minimize evidence whilst increasing conviction, and became a foundational slogan for radical feminism. During this time Daly also summarized the significance of the women's revolution as anti-Christ and its import as anti-church (Mushat Frye 1992:217). She stands as one of the few feminists willing to state this fact so blatantly.

Rosemary Ruether's comments sum up the dilemma ultimately existing for feminist theology: *feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible* (Ruether in Mushat Frye 1992:216). Ruether and all feminists who aim to erase the distinction between God and creation, end up abandoning the Christian Church and faith. Their new theology looks more like Wicca than anything else (Achte-meier in Kimel 1992:13). The meaninglessness of feminist theology that strives for



identification of God with creation, comes most fully to the fore in Ruether's views of death. There is no eternal life for the faithful. In the end the most we can aspire to is being compost. There is then finally no purpose for the creation of an individual human being, and life holds no more meaning external to our brief appearances on earth (Achtemeier in Kimel 1992:14).

Most disturbing is the feminist claim to embody the Deity within themselves. Feminists are then divine. Carol Christ stated this when she said *I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely* (Christ in Achtemeier. Kimel 1992:14). Carol Christ has since left the Church and Christian religion.

Dorothy Sölle holds that God is unnecessary. God is in us as our capacity to love. We and God are one in a mystical relation, where we do not serve God, but rather, manifest Him:

*To live, we do not need what has repeatedly been called "God", a power that intervenes, rescues, judges, and confirms. The most telling argument against our traditional God is not that he no longer exists or that he has drawn back within himself, but that we no longer need him* (Sölle in Achtemeier 1992:15).

It seems that the logical conclusion to such radical feminist theory (making female experience the bane of life) is the rejection of not just traditional interpretations of the Bible, but the Bible itself, followed by the rejection of the Father figure of God, and ultimately, Christianity itself. Feminists who believe themselves divine, think that they are sufficiently able to restructure society, restore creation and overcome suffering. Our history as humans show rather the opposite when we think we are a law unto ourselves with no responsibility to God. Feminists are just as prone to fall into sin as everyone else (Achtemeier 1992:16).

Naomi Goldenberg writes that *the feminist movement is engaged in the slow execution of Christ and Yahweh... It is likely that as we watch Christ and Yahweh tumble to the ground, we will completely outgrow the need for an external God* (Goldenberg in De Marco 1992:295). While many feminist theologians seem to be unaware or undisturbed by these problems, some leaders of the movement have candidly faced them. Mary Daly has described the significance of the women's revolution as anti-Christ and its import as anti-Church. She has left Christianity. Rosemary Ruether has not gone as far as that, but her statements like *"feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible"* should never be discarded (Frye 1992:26).

The crucial principle to keep in mind, is that the logic of the *imago Dei* is irreversible. When God makes us to His image, it is called creation, but when we fashion God to mirror our image, it is called idolatry. It is this crucial distinction that role-model theology misunderstands in both patriarchal and genderless forms (Green 1992:54).

We cannot escape it: it all, at the very core, centers around the questions of:

Who do you say I am?, and

Do you believe My Word?

In my opinion, these are the questions central to the problem. All other issues surround this central theme. Making a case for the oppressed is a worthy cause, but the roots of such an argument at the end still comes from these central questions. Working for the liberation of women and other marginalized parties can be made to seem like the central motif, but the grounding of such work and the way one goes about it, remains rooted in the central questions defining the identity of the Christian religion: View of God, view of self, view of others and view of the Bible.

The feminist theologian Sallie McFague finds the image of God as distant and controlling unacceptable. For her, the primary metaphors of the Christian tradition seem to be hierarchical and dualistic. McFague experiences that, to speak of God as King, Ruler and Lord, is to show God to be so omnipotent and other from His creatures, that it makes reciprocity and love impossible. She states that even the metaphor of "father", which had the potential of permitting mutuality, has been compromised by its association with omnipotence in the phrase "almighty Father" (Soskice 1992:86).

The only option left for a feminist who finds the language of "divine fatherhood" unacceptable, would be to abandon Christianity. Post-Christian feminists have not refrained from taking this step. The question that faces feminists not willing to leave the faith, is whether they have to accept all apparatus of patriarchal religion if they accept the language of God's fatherhood (Soskice 1992:87).

Conflict between feminist theologians and believers along traditional lines is inevitable since what is at stake is not the interpretation of a commonly acknowledged objective standard of revelation, but the validity of the standard as such (Scott 1992:254).

Blanche A Jenson asks the question of whether feminist theology can live with the Biblical narrative. In order to rightly understand feminist theology, one must first grasp its dependence on feminist theory. Feminist theory begins with the experience of oppression. Feminist theory further holds that the Western world has been constructed as a patriarchy and has regarded women as nonpersons. The goal of the feminist movement is the liberation from this oppression (Jenson 1992:277). Keeping in mind that there is no single feminist theology, there is an almost universal starting point and goal. Rebecca Chopp aptly summarized it as follows: *The radical activity of feminist theology is...nothing short of a transformation of Christianity itself* (Chopp in Jenson 1992:278).

In the beginning stages of the feminist movement, women within the Church found the Bible to be the common oppressor, and names such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, Sallie McFague, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza became well-known as people wanted to participate and understand feminist theology (Jenson 1992:277).

Pamela Dickey Young tried to answer the question of "Can one be a feminist and a Christian at the same time?". To answer positive to this question, the matter must be credible to the feminist, and it must be appropriate to the Christian tradition. Young states an awareness that many feminists find this impossible due to the fact that Jesus as male Saviour is a stumbling block. The move Young then makes, is to state that God is not limited by human biological definitions, and that the fact of Jesus' maleness is purely accidental. God could indeed be represented in a female form, but that recognition of a male Saviour is easier in patriarchal societies (Jenson 1992:280-281).

Rebecca Chopp warns feminists to constantly read the Bible with a hermeneutics of marginality and to receive it as a monument of patriarchal oppression, while still knowing the Bible through its credible claims of freedom. Feminists must read to identify two sorts of words — those that elevate and those that devalue women (Jenson 1992:281-282).

Daphne Hampson wrote a book *Theology and Feminism* in which she explains the reason why she deems Christianity and feminism to be incompatible. Having once started out as arguing for the ordination of women in the Anglican Churches of Britain, she has since left the Christian Church. According to her, if Christianity

proclaims the revelation of God in history, the belief in the uniqueness of Christ, and the inspiration of the Bible, then it is impossible to be freed from its offensive patriarchal past. The Christian tradition of particularity of Jesus bound her to reject Christianity. True to her feminist credibility, she states that a feminist will only accept into her own formulation of religious position such ideas that do not conflict with her ethical position (Jenson 1992:282-283).

Daphne Hampson expresses her desire to be a religious person who works at conceptualizations of God in which the present is normative, and where the past is only drawn upon as seems appropriate. She harshly criticizes feminist theology that wishes to remain within the Christian tradition, by stating that feminist theology seems to have replaced talk of God with talk of women's experience. It is not even women's experience of God, but merely women's experience (Jenson 1992:283).

The feminist who wishes to have a relationship with the Christian tradition has the dilemma of giving up the Bible or finding a way to fit it into her life. Can the Bible, despite its patriarchalism, still manage to serve the cause of liberation from that patriarchalism? Various ways have been tried to accommodate this dilemma. Letty M Russell and Rosemary Ruether try to find some theme in the Bible that can align with "women's experience". Ruether is helped by the prophetic-liberating tradition of the Bible, while Russell uses "God's intention to mend all creation". This intention of God enables women to work as His partners in this task. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza rejects this "correlation approach" in favour of an untarnished women's experience in the struggle for liberation from oppression (Zeigler 1992:321-322).

Hampson points us back to the core ideal of theology itself — talk of God.

Daphne Hampson shows her insight into the problem posed and makes a clean break with the (past/) Christian tradition. Theologians such as Schüssler Fiorenza are not willing to make this break, and rather choose to remain within the Biblical tradition. They realize that the Bible offers female believers a source of strength even amidst oppression. Such theologians then propose to distinguish the good from the bad. Schüssler Fiorenza uses "new lenses" and Chopp uses privileged concepts, all aimed at helping to distinguish good from bad as far as the text is concerned (Jenson 1992:285-286).

The problem with this is that both the privileged concepts and the new lenses are culturally determined. It is assumed that we know how to define emancipation, transformation and mutuality, and that we know what ethical behaviour would be appropriate to God and that we can conceive God. The core assumption is that we as humans are able to distinguish good from evil (Jenson 1992:286).

The Church through the ages has taken the opposite stance in confessing its dependence on the Bible for definitions. But in the Bible we find that real stories complicate neat theories. In the words of Jenson *The Bible, however, is not always easy to live with or within. It appears too exclusive for our commitment to inclusivity. Its God is jealous. Its stories are not examples of democratic behavior* (Jenson 1992:286).

How do feminist theologians read the text? Emphasis is placed on a holistic reading strategy.

### **3.7.7. Reading the Bible Holistically**

The strategy of narrative semiotics is often used by feminist theologians with great success when reading the Bible. "Narrative semiotics" teaches that the message of a text is not in a fragment of the account, but in its totality, as structure codifying a meaning. In the account of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22) there is no "main sentence" to manifest the signification of the episode. Croatto argues that the whole narrative sequence enters into the production of meaning by a subsequent reading. His argument is that when one account is "woven", "textured", with another, a *new* account is produced that is not the sum of its parts, and the meaning will be in this new codified totality, now constituting one text, and not in the sum of the literary units or their original significations. *The production of meaning is modified successively as texts join one another, with intertextuality growing into a greater intratextuality* (Croatto 1987:54).

It would be beneficial to remember that the synagogue understood the canon of Scriptures as a "totality". Texts alluding to the "law" referred not only to the Pentateuch, but also to all the Scriptures. They are considered as one great divine collection of statutes for Israel. The term "prophets" also often refers to the totality of books that are understood in terms of an eschatological message. The primitive Church also held this outlook. It additionally *reread* the whole Old Testament as a *single* text on the semiotic level with a single hermeneutic key (the Easter mystery). This rereading did not involve the despoiling of the Old Testament of less suitable

books, or of passages that validate the law and sometimes even contradict Christian praxis. It might have been expected that the book of Leviticus, for example, should be eliminated, since it regulates the priestly order which the Christians discontinued. This, however, did not happen. The so-called Old Testament, as a unit, is the Word of God, overflowing the contextualization of each passage as such and orientated to a kerygmatic *telos*, Christ (Croatto 1987:59).

When looking at the view of the Bible for the reader on the African continent, Africans have a great affinity towards the Old Testament that is explained by Professor Kwesi Dickson:

1. The Old Testament has political appeal which has given Africans a frame of reference for their struggle against imperial domination.
2. The legalistic moralism of the Old Testament has been contrasted with missionary moralism by African converts.
3. The similarity between Hebrew and African cultural religious heritage makes it appealing. Both have been permeated with religion without separation between sacred and secular domains (Dickson in Mugambi 2001:15).

Katie Cannon wrote in 1985 that the Bible is the highest source of authority for Black women (Cannon 1985:39-40). Despite this statement being written from an American viewpoint, it is definitely true to a degree for Black women of Africa, as well as white Christian women in Africa. Feminist theology needs to take count of this sanctuary that women find in the text when criticizing the Bible itself. If not, it stands to lose the very audience it means to serve.

### **3.7.8. Rhetorical Criticism**

A rhetorical approach recognizes that texts, as rhetorical works, function in a social milieu. Rhetorical theory is honest about the ideologies and pragmatic goals of authors, speakers and interpreters. Rhetorical analysis analyzes texts as communicative acts. Schüssler Fiorenza describes rhetorical criticism as focusing on the persuasive power and literary strategies of a text which has a communicative function in a concrete historical situation (Stratton 1995:125-126) — in this case the Bible. For most African readers the historical gap has little significance because of a much more immediate existential reading.

Literary texts obviously functioned differently for their original audiences than for contemporary audiences. Whether or not we can find the original intent, we are still able to consider a text's functions for today's audiences and contexts. Schüssler Fiorenza contends that rhetoric seeks to instigate a change of attitudes and motivations. It wants to persuade, to teach and engage the hearer/reader by eliciting reactions, emotions, convictions and identifications. The evaluative criterion for rhetoric is not aesthetics but praxis (Schüssler Fiorenza in Stratton 1995:126). If Fiorenza is right, we should evaluate the contemporary impact of Biblical rhetoric by how it persuades us to live our lives (Stratton 1995:126).

### 3.7.9. Internal Critics in the Bible

Feminist theology does not rely exclusively on experience as measure of critique to the Biblical text. Some feminist theologians find traditions within the Bible itself which act as internal critics. The Bible can be appropriated as a source of liberation only when there is a correlation between the feminist critical principle and that critical principle by which Biblical thought critiques itself. Rosemary Ruether states her belief that the Bible contains such a critical principle that correlates with the feminist critical principle. The Biblical principle she identifies is the prophetic-messianic tradition, as set forth in her book *Sexism and God-talk*. This is not just a single body of texts that would form a canon within the canon. She means by this a critical perspective and process through which the Biblical tradition constantly reevaluates what is the liberating Word of God over against the sinful deformations of contemporary society and the limitations of past Biblical traditions (Ruether 1985:117).

She finds four themes in this prophetic-liberating tradition:

1. God defends and vindicates the oppressed.
2. Dominant systems of power and their powerholders are criticized.
3. There exists a vision of the new age to come with no injustice.
4. Ideology (or religion) is criticized (ideology in this context is primarily religious) (West 1991:85).

Ruether finds these themes central to the prophets and the work of Jesus. In claiming the prophetic-liberating tradition of the Bible as norm for criticizing the Bible, feminist theology is choosing a central tradition in the Bible itself, by which it has always critiqued and renewed itself and its own vision (West 1991:85).

### 3.7.10. Feminist Criticism of Language

Feminist theory has problematized not just society and religion, but the very nature of language itself. The main problem has been identified as generic language, which includes women under male terms. American language use is unbalanced in terms of visibility of women and the nature of gender specific vocabulary. Women's invisibility is often attributable to the use of so-called "generic" masculine language and pronouns. Despite claims that the term "man" and "he" include women, feminists point out that such language is at best ambiguous (Stratton 1995:113).

Both French and American feminists agree that women's relationship to language is ambivalent. Language dominates and excludes women, but also offers them an avenue of escape from patriarchy. Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* observes the power of language in subordinating women. In patriarchal discourse woman is man's Other. She is associated with absence and negativity and is outside representation. Women's options are to be silent, or to mimic male discourse. Women's discourse must adopt male norms to be seen as something other than babble or chatter. Julia Kristeva notes that some women find language cold and foreign to their lives because of this. French feminists thus attend to the ways in which language as discourse retains or reinstates oppression (Stratton 1995:118).

Gender asymmetry is evident in the very way language works and in vocabulary. Women are often deprecated by language and defined by or in terms of men. Sally McConnell-Ginet calls these differences "significant lexical gaps" (*henpecked* but no *cockpecked*), lexical asymmetries (*mothering* is a long-term affair but *fathering* is an act of an instant) and nonparallel distribution of items (*cleaning lady/garbage gentleman*). Other examples include the predominance of sexually promiscuous terms for women over those for men (what is the male for *bitch/nymphomaniac*?) and terms for women's marital status (old maid, spinster) that are demeaning (if compared to bachelor) or have no masculine counterpart (Mrs and Miss when used as marital status)(Stratton 1995:114).

American feminists worked hard in the 1970s and 1980s to promote the use of nonsexist language, which they differentiate from gender neutral language.

*Gender-neutral* is a linguistic description while *nonsexist* is a social, functional description. Feminists rightly point out that when terms like "domestic violence" or "spouse abuse" are used rather than "battered women" (when 95% of battering of



women is done by husbands and boyfriends) the gender neutral language obscures the oppression of women and renders sexism invisible (Stratton 1995:115).

French feminists are less concerned with particular vocabulary, but rather find the whole realm of language and discourse and how it relates to women problematic. Recent feminists' work builds heavily on that of male scholars: the linguistics of Saussure, the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan, and the philosophy of Foucault and Derrida, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's *the Second Sex*. According to Rosalind Jones, French feminist criticism targets:

*French theories of femininity, using Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, centre on language as a means through which men have shored up their claim to a unified and relegated women to the negative pole of binary oppositions that justify masculine supremacy: subject/object, culture/nature, law/chaos, man/woman. Phallogentrism—this structuring of man as the central reference point of thought, and of the phallus as the symbol of sociocultural authority—is the target of Franco-feminist criticism (Jones in Stratton 1995:116-117).*

Postmodern critics and contemporary rhetorical theory share many assumptions about knowledge, language and meaning. French social theorists saw knowledge as being created by discourse, rather than reflecting reality. Classical Sophists also argued that rhetoric makes knowledge. Derrida is in agreement with Foucault when he insists that language is not referential or representational, but figurative. Sophists, Foucault and Derrida alike see language as rhetorical and persuasive in intent (Stratton 1995:124). Sprong writes that even though language is "owned" by the dominant ideology of its time, it does not mean it should refuse to acknowledge its limitations (Sprong 2002:125).

Men built a vast conceptual error into all their thought by making the term "man" subsume "woman" and appointing it to represent all of humanity. The reality was that the half was taken for the whole, the essence of the thing described was missed, and things were distorted to a degree as to make them unrecognizable. As long as men believed that their experiences reflected that of all humanity, they were unable to define reality of the abstract (Lerner 1986:220).

The simple "adding of women" cannot rectify the androcentric fallacy. A radical restructuring of thought and analysis is needed that consists in equal parts of men

and women's views and experiences. Every generalization made about humans should also represent views by both sexes (Lerner 1986:220).

Feminists have pointed out the issue of language in exposing the sexist bias of the dominant consciousness (Ruether 1995:xiii). Language is the prime reflection of the power of the ruling group. This group defines reality in its own terms and demotes oppressed groups into invisibility. More than any other group, it is women who are overwhelmed by a linguistic form that simply excludes them from visible existence (Ruether 1975:xiii).

The use of pronouns reveals part of the nature of language — it is a social phenomenon, and in this capacity it can influence the construction of society. "I" and "you" show that language is self-referential. The pronouns "I" and "you" have no content outside of the instance of spoken discourse. "I" is the one who speaks, and "you" is addressed by "I". The opposition of "I" and "you" is essential for speech and identity. Emile Benveniste stated that

*Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use I only when I am speaking to someone who will be a you in my address. It is the condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person, for it implies that reciprocally I becomes you in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as I...Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as I in his discourse (Benveniste in Stratton 1995:157).*

Saying "I" or "you" indicates something of the identity and subjectivity of the speaker. These pronouns serve as reminders that language and discourse exist as *social* phenomena subject to implicitly agreed upon conventions (Stratton 1995:157).

In contrast to "I" and "you", the third-person pronouns are not persons at all. "He", "she" or "it" is the one who is absent, the non-person. "He" and "she" are referential forms. When "he" or "she" appears in character's speech it is a sign that they have taken over one of the narrator's roles as focalizer and/or rhetor (Stratton 1995:158).

French feminists have developed two conceptions of women's relation to language and two avenues for taking language back from patriarchy: women's speech (*parole de femmes*) and feminine writing (*écriture-au-féminin*). According to Irigaray, women's speech emerges when women speak with women, but disappears when men are present (Stratton 1995:118). Wenzel pointed out that women's writing and women's speech recreates long-held stereotypes about women as being natural,

sexual, biological etc. This rhetoric tells women what they want to hear about themselves instead of having them demand political power. Kristeva's linguistic theories about discourse and meaning offer a good alternative to the above. Kristeva sees language as a complex signifying process rather than a monolithic system. She insists on the semiotic and symbolic, and attends to process to create her "theory of signification". This theory allows for the breaks in meaning that we sense in puns. Her theories also insist on the importance of context, shifting the focus from language to discourse (Stratton 1995:120). For African women especially, context remains the defining factor in all activity undertaken towards liberation.

### 3.8. THE VIEW OF AND LANGUAGE FOR GOD

A further aspect feminist theory has problematized, is the human view of God. By focusing on the problematic male language used of and for God, the idea of God as female, or God depicted in female language terms, has come to the fore. Some strains of feminist theology have aligned with a practice first seen in the Shaker community, where God was declared to have been incarnated in the female messiah, Mother Anne, whose appearance was necessary to complete the revelation of God in the male Messiah Jesus. Salvation could not be completed as long as there was only a male messiah, and it was only with the female messiah's help that women and the "feminine half of men" could be fully saved (Ruether 1975:165). Such feminists concentrate on the femaleness of God, and even a female God herself. The more extreme strains find themselves unable to worship God as traditionally known from the Biblical text, and theologians like Carol Christ have turned to Goddess worship altogether.

What is the implication of male-type language used exclusively for God in the Church?

How we name God, the Trinity, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in exegesis, prayer and general faith life, has a great influence on our concept of the world surrounding us and the men and women who constitute the community of believers, as it is, the entire "People of God" (Fraser 2002:193).

The argument used by feminist protagonists to change language about God, holds that the Church has been oppressing women since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and that language has been instrumental in this oppression. By using generic terms such as mankind, the male has become the definition of being human. Use of masculine

titles for God further serves to make the male absolute. Mary Daly went as far as to state that *Since God is male, the male is God* (Achtemeier in Kimel 1992:1).

Since the time of the Exodus there has existed a prohibition of making God in any form. Despite the modern age and our sophistication, God is described in almost exclusively masculine gender nouns and pronouns (Bennett 1989:92). Judeo-Christian traditions are dominated by patriarchal language and symbols, with the result a lack of knowledge of the richness of analogies, metaphors and vocabulary used of God in the Bible. God is comforter, nurturer, mother, midwife, and provider of food and drink (Bennett 1989:92-93). The Hebrews were aware that in their language, which gives gender to nouns, the core ideas about God were mostly depicted in words of female gender, such as:

Torah

Shekinah

Chokmah

Ruach (Spirit of God)

Bat Kol (Voice of God — "the daughter of the voice" — double feminine)

Binah (Understanding)

Rehem (Mercy)

(Bennett 1989:93).

Jewish tradition sees God as beyond gender. God is seen in terms of ruler and parent. Sometimes this divine being is wrathful and judgmental, but at other times merciful, forgiving and compassionate. God is thought of as androgynous. Female metaphors are sometimes used for the "maternal" aspects of God. The male pronoun that is used for God, however, suggests that God is an androgynous male (Ruether 1998:85).

Origen gave a striking response to Celsus' attack on religious language in the second century. This response might cast a light on our current language dilemma. Celsus had argued that God could not be reached by word, and that He cannot be expressed by name. Origen distinguished between two things in his response. God cannot be reached by words or names that humans originate, but He is revealed by His Word to us. God can thus be expressed by the name He names himself with. In this action, he takes the hearer by the hand and enables her/him to comprehend something of God, as far as is possible for our limited human understanding (Mushat Frye 1992:227).

Judaism rejects literalism about verbal or visual images used for God. To take images literally is idolatry. In God's self, God is neither male nor female (or humanly gendered at all). Our metaphors, however, must include both male and female. Simply giving a male God a feminine side would still leave women without full humanity (Ruether 1998:86).

Pope John Paul II spoke of masculinity and femininity as being based on "two different incarnations", two ways of being a body. According to Irigaray, recognition of these two incarnations would affect the structure of language and meaning. In the steps of Nietzsche, she connects God and grammar, thus arguing that the development of a feminine syntax would necessitate a feminine God. Man has a male God. Woman has no God to act as the limit to and fulfillment of her gender. Woman needs a God who is the perfection of her subjectivity (Beattie 1997:170).

Feminist theology has opened our eyes to the extent to which ideas of God have been male interpretations and to what lengths female imaging of God has been denied. But if Irigaray is right then mere words/inclusive language will not be enough (Beattie 1997:170).

If women are equally theomorphic, then God must be imaged as female as well as male. This means that the maleness of the historical Jesus has nothing to do with manifesting a divine "Son" of a divine "Father". The gender as well as the parent-child character of these symbols should be deliteralized (Ruether 1998:92).

In Jesus we encounter the Logos-Sophia of the God who is both father and mother, who is a liberator, a friend and a lover. But how do we then deal with the historical Jesus as a male? Does this not continue the assumption that women receive redemption from men, but that they cannot represent God as redemptive actors? (Ruether 1998:92-93).

Christian feminists cannot take the easy route through Jesus' empathy and sensitivity to make him "feminine". This only serves to make Jesus an androgynous male, but does not affirm a holistic humanity for women. Rather, it is better that Christians affirm the particularity of Christ in gender as well as ethnicity and culture, and accept the limitations on any individual to be universally paradigmatic (Ruether 1998:93).

When one moves away from God himself as male, the focus falls on Jesus and His male incarnation. For feminists, the problem of the incarnation of Christ has moved beyond the issue of atonement, to the incarnation itself. Why did God become a *man/male*? One can call God a Mother by switching terms, but Jesus cannot be made into a female (Anderson 1992:288).

Heine gave one answer to this by pointing out that the more important reason for retaining the grammar for God the Father is positive and constructive. In an age such as ours that is sensitized by feminist and liberationist critiques, a change of gender would obscure the ironic reversal of power, and in this case, specifically masculine power. Susanne Heine pointed out that gender was crucial to the meaning of Jesus' vicarious representation. She writes that a woman could not represent the humiliated because she herself is already in such a position. Vicarious representation means to illustrate the voluntary renunciation of power and privileges. The image of a suffering woman would not change the power in the world because she would be merely one more victim. One might argue that the solution has to be put forth in masculine terms in as far as the problem is "masculine". God sends His Son to be a scapegoat. Far from justifying male dominance, this symbolism calls it under judgment (Green 1992:62-63).

Susanne Heine takes a position that is less radical than that of other feminist theologians. She says that, when God moves in the human world, He moves in the reality of the difference between genders. The incarnation holds that the alien becomes near. God comes near to the feminine in the masculine form. For men too, Jesus, not Jesa Christa, the man, becomes near as alien — the man who serves others (Heine in Anderson 1992:299).

Are women excluded from the person and work and particularity of Jesus and what He symbolizes and means for us? JH Walgrave answers that Jesus must be the centre of the cosmic event in His bipolar unity of incarnation and suffering. He is the living centre of human history. *The whole creation then, included in man, participates in the curve of incarnation, cross and exaltation in which Christ included in Himself that humanity which He saved from death* (Walgrave in Anderson 1992:310). Women are included in the fact of Jesus' humanness, and not excluded by His gender.

One might agree with the great point made by Elizabeth Johnston in her book *She Who Is* on this issue:

The heart of the problem is not that Jesus was a man, but that more men are not like Jesus (Fraser 2002:211).

Two ways to solve the problem are briefly presented here to illustrate the way feminist theologians try to solve the male problem surrounding the image of the Divine — one a bodily/sexual solution and the other a solution of language/translation.

In liberal theology, the body/sex has replaced gender. A new community is located in the body (the body in question being Jesus). The incarnation, the embodying of God, demonstrates the legitimation of the body as a moral order and community. Becoming "one flesh" does not signify sexual intercourse or its product, but human existence as a whole under the aspect of corporeality. The important qualification for body-based sexual theology is that the penis/phallus/erect penis has to go as it signifies the hierarchical Church:

*Ideally the phallus is big, hard and up. So we have accented those values in the divine. God, too, must be big, hard and up: sovereign in power, righteous in judgment, the Transcendent Wholly Other (Nelson in Davies 1997:29).*

The Jewish notion of a Messiah was always male. The title signifies the king of Israel. Though rulers were thought of as male, female rulers were not unknown. Jesus' own preferred title was rather "*ben Adam*" (Son of Man). This term is drawn from the apocalyptic book of Daniel and signifies the Messiah as the collective expression of Israel, representing corporate humanity (Ruether 1998:87). *Ben Adam* refers to both males and females in Jewish liturgy, even despite the androcentric form. Generic humanity cannot any longer be seen as normatively male. A more accurate translation would rather be "The Human One" (As translated by the *Inclusive Language Lectionary*, National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA) (Ruether 1998:87).

We might use gender symbols in a way that illustrates that God both transcends gender and yet includes the fullness of humanity of both men and women. Women will be affirmed as rational agents who reflect these qualities of God, while men are affirmed in their caring and nurturing capacities. Only then can we say that men and women both reflect the image of God in mutuality and as individuals (Ruether 1998:86).



**PARADISE**  
JANET MCKENZIE



Hebrew tradition also sketched the immanences of God in female metaphors. The best-known of these is Wisdom (חכמה in Prov 8). The way in which Wisdom cares for the cosmos is like a mother looking after the household (Wisdom of Solomon 6-8 in Ruether 1998:86). For Christians Wisdom is important since, theologically, it plays the same role as the Logos. Jesus' divinity is sometimes identified as the "Wisdom" of God (Luke 11.49; Matthew 11.18-19).

By emphasizing the "wisdom" version of the concept, the metaphor "Son of God" is deliteralized. God as Logos-Sophia is neither male nor female, and can be imaged in both male and female metaphors. We must also ask whether the parent-child metaphor might not be more misleading than revealing as it pertains to the divine transcendence and immanence (Ruether 1998:86).

Not just the image of God is scrutinized, but also language used for God. The starting point for Jewish feminist God-imaging is the recognition of the patriarchy of traditional Jewish God-language. Classical Jewish theology recognizes that God-language is metaphorical — God is neither male nor female. Nonetheless, masculine God-language is deeply embedded in traditional liturgy and theology. The occasional use of female imagery does not detract from this. Inherent to this male imagery are concepts of domination and hierarchy which mirror male social roles. These images describe the Divine nature, while legitimating a human community that reserves power and authority for men (Reinhartz 1996:66).

Feminist theology relies heavily on the argument that androcentric language is to blame for the lesser status of women in faith. Androcentric language is also blamed for women's less authentic faith experiences, since women cannot relate to a God described in male language in the same intimate way that a man can relate to such a God. Feminist theory is based on the assumption that women's experience is distinctive in ways that can be specified. An interesting irony is that feminist theorists disagree on the content of this specification! In order to be true, Christian speech about God must also then reflect the experience of women. According to feminists, traditional Trinitarian language is thoroughly biased in favour of men's experience (androcentric language). Such language must be corrected and rid of its androcentric bias before it can currently refer to God. Keeping in mind God's incomprehensibility, such language can only reflect our experience insofar as it redresses the harms done to women by the hegemony of androcentric language and thinking, and insofar as it encourages the reform of social structures that this male

language legitimated in the past. It seems that literal forms of speech embedded in the tradition can be reconstructed to possess a metaphorical force (DiNoia 1992:175).

The above reformist argument implies that the distinction between metaphorical and literal utterances, while applicable to ordinary speech, is inapplicable to Christian speech (DiNoia 1992:175). The reformist case above is implausible in requiring that all apparently literal speech about God be reconstructed as nonliteral, metaphorical speech (DiNoia 1992:176).

Terms used literally of God apply primarily to Him and secondarily to creatures (eg God is creator, redeemer and sanctifier). Terms used metaphorically of God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God (eg God is angry, God stretched out His arm, God is a rock). The classification of such predications as metaphorical is a logical remark (DiNoia 1992:180).

Anne Clifford writes with regards to language about God that she issues a firm and steady invitation not to let any one image or word "hold the imagination captive in a conception that is too narrow to encompass the mystery of God". For her, God's self-revelation is in and through relationship, and this symbol has the potential for remolding the identity of Christians as persons (Murray in Procaro-Foley 2002:144).

Sheila Collins wrote in 1972 that images, when solidified in language, have a way of surviving in the imagination so that a person can function on two different levels that are often contradictory. This enables one to speak of God as spirit, while still imagining Him as "male" (Collins 1972:32). This forms part of the body of the feminist argument: despite knowledge that God is not male, He is still perceived to be male and experienced as a male. In order to change this, male language used to describe and name God should thus be changed, which will result in not only knowledge that God is not male, but also in the experience that He is not male. The language that comes under scope, are specifically literal descriptions of God and the metaphors used of God.

In the case of metaphors for God, the "is" and "is not" tension is more pronounced than in other language forms. In a metaphor, ideas that are very different are brought together to facilitate the emergence of new understandings in a particular time and place. One example is found in Deut 32.15, where God is said to be a rock

(Clifford 2001:102). Sally McFague stresses that a metaphor finds similarity in the midst of dissimilarity and therefore says not only "is not" but also says "is", and not only "no" but also "yes" (Clifford 2001:102).

According to feminist view, metaphors for God in the Bible are figurative and should not be taken literally. "Father" is both a metaphor for God and an analogy. It has been said that the male parent is an important analogue for God, but the title "father" is also metaphorical, having an "is" and "is not" tension. Viewing "Father" in reference to God as a metaphor draws more explicit attention to the inherent tension in naming God "Father". God's fatherhood is more unlike than like the fatherhood of human fathers. If the necessary "is not" element is not given due consideration, then the title "Father" may become a literalism or even a definition for God. Sandra Schneiders draws attention to the danger involved in the neglect of the "is not" element when she says that a literalized metaphor paralyzes the imagination. It can hold the imagination captive in a conception that is too narrow to encompass the mystery of God (Clifford 2001:103).

A typical feminist analysis and practice of this view of metaphors is found in the work of Anne Clifford when she studies Deut 32.18. For her, metaphors for God particular to women's realities also appear in the Bible. She identifies in Deuteronomy a maternal metaphor for God which is found in conjunction with Moses:

*You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave birth to you* (Deut 32.18). The author uses the device of a mixed metaphor to make an important point. Clifford identifies this point as being that the people have lost their way and forgotten the divine Mother, the rock-like (breast-endowed) dependable source from whom they and all creation received life. Mindfulness of the Mother who gives birth is basic to a proper relationship with God (Clifford 2001:104). Motherhood metaphors also appear elsewhere in the Bible. Isaiah 49.15 depicts God's faithfulness as the steadfast love of a nursing mother. Isaiah 66.13 assures the people of Israel that God cherishes them with a Mother's love:

*As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem* (Clifford 2001:104).

In response to this, it can be said that personification, metaphor and simile need closer definition. GB Caird defined personification as a literary device whereby something that is not a person, is treated as a person. The Old Testament is full of

personification of nature, cities, peoples, love, jealousy, death, and marks and attributes of God (Frye 1992:36).

According to EW Bullinger, simile differs from metaphor in that it merely states resemblance, while metaphor boldly transforms the representation. He goes on to say that, while the simile gently states that one thing is like or resembles another, the metaphor boldly and warmly declares that one thing is the other (Frye 1992:37). Biblical writers used these devices substantively and not ornamentally — figures of speech were for them typically figures of thought (Frye 1992:37).

Frye uses two examples to illustrate the difference between simile and metaphor. Both examples pertain to human mortality. In 2 Samuel 14.14 human beings are told that they must all die, and that they are like water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. This provides an example of illustrative simile. Genesis 3.19 states that humans are dust, and shall return to dust. We find here a striking metaphor that identifies the human being with a physical element (dust), and recalls the creation from dust. The simile compares human life to water, and proceeds to explain why this comparison is just so. The two figures function in two distinct ways, and humanity cannot be said to be like water as it is like dust. The dust metaphor also appears oftentimes in Scripture to give a universal understanding of human contingency (Frye 1992:37-38).

A simile operates in a more restricted way compared to a metaphor. A metaphor has a direct invocation or a plain grammatical subject-predicate-object relationship which it expresses. On the other hand, a simile draws a self-limiting comparison (Frye 1992:39).

Isaiah 42.13-14 describes God going forth like a mighty man, stirring his fury up like a man of fury. The prophet is careful not to compare God with a war god. Rather, God is simply compared to a man of war in a very formal way. After that, God speaks after a long silence, and once more a simile is used to show that God cries out like a woman in travail, gasping and panting. God specifically compares himself to a woman giving birth, but does not identify Himself as mother or warrior (Frye 1992:39).

Another example exists in Isaiah 66.13, where God offers maternal compassion. God will comfort in the same way a mother comforts. A simile does not give a

general association; it rather applies an association to some particular sense within an encompassing lexical meaning. The similes that compare God to a mother, illustrate a specific phase of Divine attitude or intent as defined in the simile's context. It is important to remember that similes are not and do not claim to be a transparent equivalent to personal identity as are predicating metaphors such as "the good Shepherd" and the "lamb of God", or, even broader, God "the Father" and Christ "the Son" (Frye 1992:39-40). This distinction between simile and metaphor stands in contrast to claims made by feminist theologians on metaphors of God being female. It is clear that a great chasm exists between language for God when He is (a) actively called "Father", and when He is (b) called a Rock, and when He is (c) likened to a woman in travail. To loosely state that all the differing uses of language are the same, is an oversimplification of the uses of figurative language that leads to wrong conclusions and inaccurate theology.

The following uses of figurative language with Divine reference are examples of simile:

Isaiah 66.12-13

Thus says the Lord:

"Behold, I will extend prosperity to  
 Jerusalem like a river,  
 And the wealth of the nations like an  
 Overflowing stream;  
 And you shall suck, you shall be carried  
 Upon her hip,  
 And dandled upon her knees.  
*As one whom his mother comforts,*  
*So I will comfort you;*  
 You shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

(Wainwright 1992:216).

Matthew 23.37

Jesus said:

"o Jerusalem, Jerusalem...  
 How often would I have gathered your children  
*Together as a hen gathers her brood under*  
*Her wings, and you would not!"*

(Wainwright 1992:216).

Illustrative similes are not extendable in the ways that metaphors typically are. Though God may be compared to a mother, He is never called Mother or addressed as Mother in the whole Bible. The maternal association remains that of similitude or *homoeosis*, never that of appellation or metaphor (Frye 1992:42).

Jewish feminist theology sees as its task the transformation of metaphors for God that have informed the Jewish imagination and shaped Jewish self-understanding and behaviours. Approaches to this task fall into two categories: reinterpretation of traditional imagery, and revisioning of God-language (Reinhartz 1996:66).

It must be kept in mind that Church tradition through the ages has linked essentialist and ontological references to the metaphors and names (attributes) of God. This tradition has made it even more difficult to communicate easily about alternatives to these concepts.

### 3.8.1. Reinterpretation of Traditional Imagery

Though feminists may differ from the patriarchal emphasis of traditional liturgy, they may value the connection the liturgy provides to the broader Jewish community. Feminist reinterpretation of patriarchal language allows for the retention of at least some of the Divine epithets while imbuing them with a content that is more consistent with a feminist theology (Reinhartz 1996:67). Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb experimented with this. *Elohim* is not God, but "all spirits"; *Adonai* is not Lord but the "I as the ground of experience", *Shaddai* becomes "my breasts" and *Shekhinah* "She who dwells within" (Reinhartz 1996:67). *Hammāqôm* (המקום — the place) can also be reinterpreted in feminist fashion. This spatial term may be used to express the sense of community as the space within which God's activity is made known and acknowledged. Even traditional male imagery for God as father might find a place in the re-imagined feminist Judaism, not as paternalistic image of hierarchy and domination, but simply as parental image (Reinhartz 1996:67).

Marcus Borg refers to Jesus as the "Wisdom of God" (Sprong 2002:68). Borg believes strongly that the early Christian movements saw Jesus as both the spokesperson and the child of Sophia, and that Jesus may have spoken of Himself in these terms (Sprong 2002:69).

### 3.8.2. Revising God-Language

One way of creating feminist God-language is to replace masculine pronouns and images with feminine ones while retaining the traditional structure of blessings and other liturgical formulae. The image for God as "King of the Universe" may become "Queen of the universe" by adding the feminine ending to the Hebrew word for king. This simple solution is mostly considered inadequate. Replacing masculine images with feminine equivalents does not erase images of domination, which are seen as inappropriate in feminist liturgy (Reinhartz 1996:67). A second approach is to utilize the Hebrew words for goddess: *Elohut* and *Elah*. The most popular female God-image is *Shekhinah*. The attractiveness of this term lies in the explicitly feminine language in which it is described. *Shekhinah* is identified with the community of Israel, and represents the mystical idea of Israel in its bond with God. The *Shekhinah* is not only queen, daughter and bride of God, but also the mother of every individual in Israel (Reinhartz 1996:68). God can also be seen as a Lover. The feminist understanding of God as lover is taken from the Song of Songs (male and female as pursuer and pursued) rather than from Hosea (God is the male lover and Israel the errant but beloved woman) (Reinhartz 1996:68).

What are some of the main current trends in the debate surrounding androcentric language in the Bible and language depicting/used for God?

Feminist activists have posited four objections to current speech patterns in English. What is specifically the focus is the inclusive use of "he", generic use of the term "man", and related features. The following objections appear in a booklet prepared by the National Committee of the American Society for Public Administration, called *The Right Word*:

1. It reflects the inferior state of women.
2. It perpetuates this inferior status.
3. It represents women as inferior to or different from men.
4. It insults women by making them "invisible" (Levin 1992:120).

Marie Shearer puts it as follows: "Male pronouns...imply that everyone who is anyone is male" (Levin 1992:120).

The case against (androcentric) language does not remain in the sectors of public (secular) life, but spills over into religious language. Exclusive language about God gets questioned by feminists because of two twin failings:

1. It is seen to support the oppression of women since it fails to confirm women as also made in the Divine image, and
2. It robs the Divine of its continuing mystery and incomprehensibility by encasing God in exclusively male metaphors (Fraser 2002:203).

Many feminists hold that there is no harm in using single male language for God, but that the harm lies in its exclusive use to such an extent that using female language for God is experienced and seen as subversive (Fraser 2002:203). If we say that we know God is not a male, why is there such an outcry when God is described as "Mother"?

The argument is put forth time and again that a new inclusive translation of the Bible could be the solution to the problem, at least as far as religious language and the exclusion women experience, is concerned. This argument is answered later in the chapter. It might be mentioned here, that the problem with this endeavor to translate Biblical language into more inclusive terms, goes further than just gender, and touches class, violence and oppression.

Feminist faith is the greatest influence on the drive towards linguistic "inclusivism" in religious language. Various arguments are used to further inclusivism, of which the fact that current language excludes women, is the most influential and most oft cited. According to feminist argument, the generic term "man" is not generic at all, and is an offensive and sexist term when used in such a fashion. It is compared to a term like "nigger" to show its ability to offend. With regards to this example, feminist linguistics runs into trouble. "Nigger" is an epithet, and as such, demeaning in purpose. Standard usage strives to be neutral, so at the very least, the offence is not meant consciously. Feminist argument points out that the generic term "man" always signified only the man, and only later came to signify humankind in general under the dominance of patriarchy (Brennan in Hitchcock 1992:31). This argument may stand on shaky ground for a language like English, but it falls completely flat for languages where there is no generic "man". In Afrikaans, the generic term is "human/ human person", and as such causes no offence at all. The cause for androcentric language must be sought elsewhere.

Support for this argument might be found if the rest of the world is as uncomfortable about this language use as feminist theorists claim. Is the rest of the world moving in a direction away from the use of generic man? It does not seem as if poets,



playwrights, novelists, critics or translators are finding the use of generic man something taboo (Wright 1992:104).

George Bush himself used generic man at least twice in his inaugural address. This despite the fact that the whole speech was conciliatory in tone. *The first read as follows: For a new breeze is blowing, and a world refreshed by freedom seems reborn, for in man's heart, if not in fact, the day of the dictator is over* (Wright 1992:108). The speech was written by a female, Peggy Noonan. It can be assumed that Ms Noonan would have found other means of expression if this use of generic man would have been offensive to the majority of women. On the contrary, it seemed that everyone liked the speech and reacted positively to it (Wright 1992:108).

When one points out to feminists that masculine language use for God does not mean that God is male and that this has never been taught in Jewish or Christian tradition, the response is usually that the language is heard in this way and that it is offensive to women. One needs to consider the fact that, when such language use (God is male) is heard, this is a gross misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Christian faith (and tradition). The solution would rather be education in the meanings of the faith. Feminist standpoint boils down to a condemnation of the text on the basis of its use, even if such use is misuse (Zeigler 1992:326).

We seem to come full circle back to one central question, which remains inescapable when dealing with this issue, and the one item that seems to create a divide between those for and those against language changes:

Is the Bible the inspired Word of God, or not? Is the Canon unchangeable and untouchable, or not?

Roy Clouser is one author who sees the Bible as Sacred Scripture and God's Revelation. He states that religious language gives univocal truth about God. It does not give us something like what is true of God while it is incomprehensible. It also does not only talk about God as if He had certain characteristics. Clouser states that religious language in the Bible is ordinary language that ascribes to God the properties He really has (Bloesch 1992:201).

It is agreed that ordinary names for creatures are subject to human custom and change, as well as choice. But the name of God does not fall into this category. According to Biblical religion, God is the only one who can name God (Frye 1992:17).

To Christians it has been clear from the outset that knowledge of God is initiated by God Himself and actualized through Himself (Torrance 1992:120).

Humankind is not the offspring of the Divine nature, and cannot reflect the nature of God through its own nature. Humankind is rather designed to live in faith-response to the purpose of God's love towards them as creaturely partners (Torrance 1992:125). The Creator/creature relationship in being and knowing between God and humankind cannot be reversed (Torrance 1992:125).

Throughout the Old Testament, one can find an attack on the naturalization of religion in the worship of Baalim and Ashtaroth, with its heathen projection of male and female into Deity. The prophets consistently proclaim the Word of God to denounce all images of God conceived by the human heart. All humanly conceived images of God, whether conceptual or physical, are denounced as forms of idolatry (Torrance 1992:126).

How then to speak about God? Modes of thought and speech about God that have arisen under the influence of God's self-revelation, should be spiritually appropriate to the transcendence of God, since He as Spirit cannot be represented in visual or sensual images. Early theologians were corresponding to teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures when they held that all images properly used of God in speech and thought refer to Him away from themselves without ever imaging Him. This does not imply the banning of all images from theological speaking and thinking of God. It simply means that these images should be used in a "see-through" way, and not in a mimetic or descriptive way (Torrance 1992:129).

When the Incarnation took place, all excuses have ceased whereby we had an excuse to look for Divinity in other places. God has chosen the time, place and way by which we may meet Him. Jesus defines and interprets the reality of God, and embodies decisively and conclusively the essence of Deity. This is not Christological triumphalism, or Christo-fascism, as though the Church is limiting knowledge of Deity to a select few. It is simply the recognition that in Christ, we are given access to the Triune Being. Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, and we may not evade Him in our quest to find Deity (Kimmel 1992:198).

Sociologists and psychologists suggest that use of fatherhood language in today's world needs some reflection. Does the proclamation of God as "Father all loving and just" speak to the men and women whose fathers have abandoned them or abused them? Where can images of contemporary compassionate fatherhood be found? Is there a human experience of a father who responds to our needs in the model of a Biblical covenantal relationship? Do we experience a generous father who gives before we ask along the lines of Jesus' words in Matthew 6.8 and 7.11? (Fraser 2002:204).

Jesus reveals the Father precisely in his identity as the begotten Son. Jesus discloses the Father as the Son, so that the Father is the Father of Jesus, and Jesus is the Son of the Father. Neither can be known apart from the other. Jesus is the place where the Father is encountered. We meet both simultaneously and coincidentally in a mutually defining relationship. Jesus insists that He is the sole mediator of our knowledge of the Father (John 14.6,9). This offers a theological explanation to the infrequent usage of the term "Father" in the Old Testament, and the frequent usage in the New Testament. The God of Israel in the Old Testament is known in His undifferentiated oneness, and is addressed mainly with the ineffable name of Yahweh. In the New Testament, we encounter the Son, the only one able to introduce us to His Father (Kimel 1992:198-199).

Because God-language is not literal, the language one uses in reference to God can never be equated with who or what God is. To promote such an equation is to make an idol of a particular concept or image for God. This is why Ruether stresses that equating a particular image drawn from one gender and one social context with God is idolatry (Clifford 2001:95). God-talk is metaphorical.

God is associated with fire (Deut 4.24), the sun (Ps 84.11) and other inanimate objects of nature, including rocks and mountains. Animals like mother bear (Hos 13.8), mother eagle (Deut 32.11-12) and mother hen (Matt 23.37) are also used in reference to God. None of these, however, are as important as personal references, especially the names and narrative metaphors, that the Biblical authors use in their speaking to and about God (Clifford 2001:98).

Nowadays we experience a move away from sovereign terms, where words like "king" and "lord" are seen as forms of dominant masculine rule which have now become unacceptable. If God is not the creator and validator of the existing

hierarchical social order, but rather the one who liberates us from it, then language of kingship and hierarchy is inappropriate in Christianity (Fraser 2002:203-204).

Because of the important role of Moses in the Exodus, the name for God given to Moses is very important in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. The name YHWH became so revered that it was not spoken aloud by religiously observant Jews. Out of respect for this Divine name, when Jews come to YHWH in a Biblical passage, they substitute the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which in the Greek Septuagint is *Kyrios* and in the Latin Vulgate is *Dominus*. All are masculine nouns rendered in English as "Lord". In the recent New Revised Standard Version (1990) of the Old Testament, the word LORD appears. *Adonai*, *Kyrios*, *Dominus* and LORD obscure the fact that YHWH is a proper name for God and not a title, wrongly suggesting that YHWH has a male identification. This word choice is all the more troubling because "Lord" carries with it the added baggage of a term often associated with power over others. Therefore, imagery associated with "Lord" is not only male; it is also patriarchal (Clifford 2001:99).

What Anne Clifford here points out is that translation plays a decisive role in the understanding of the terms used for God in the Church. Inaccurate translation, or translation which goes unexplained, can influence our understanding and reception of the way in which God wants to reveal Himself to the Church. It might be said that the original language used is in some cases less problematic than the translated language used for God.

What role does Christian tradition play in the debate about androcentric language in the Bible and language used for God?

Feminist theology gives a great deal of attention to Christian tradition, and criticizes it at length. Tradition is one of the culprits blamed for women's inferior status in religion and society. Due to this criticism and the focus falling on tradition so often in feminist arguments, a closer look at the nature of tradition itself is warranted.

Katherine Sonderegger wrote on this topic and I find her arguments the most helpful. Her insights could also furthermore be less easily classified as serving a male agenda or an androcentric model, since she as scholar is a female herself, having been disadvantaged to the same degree as her feminist theologian colleagues, and all other women.

Sonderegger writes that the tradition of the Divine name is so deep and fundamental to what is meant by "Christian tradition" that to defend or justify it as orthodox is to undermine it. Specific claims are justified by appeals to a specific method. Local arguments are then marshaled to justify these propositions. Such arguments or second-order reflections tie the thesis defended to a parochial position or authority. Tradition, as general, catholic and profound, cannot be justified (Sonderegger 2001:389).

Katherine Sonderegger goes on to prove the above claim superbly by quoting from the *Philosophical Investigations* by Ludwig Wittgenstein. He points out the incomprehensibility and ineffability of the "form of life" that gives most basic shape to human culture. It is impossible to step outside such forms in order to obtain the perspective needed to draw their contours or name their basic ligaments. We are the very ones shaped by these contours and allowed to speak by their authority. Sonderegger uses a second analogue to her claim about tradition, and uses for this Saul Kripke's use of Bishop Butler's law of identity. Everything is what it is and not another thing, and this rule governs the praxis of analysis. "Philosophical analyses of some concept like reference, are very apt to fail". The necessary and sufficient conditions for something so basic as the act of referring or naming can never be specified, and will have to be parasitic on the very concept of reference or name (Sonderegger 2001:389).

Christian tradition is the same. We stand under it and in it, while it shapes our very concept of tradition. We rely upon it even as we define it, and our attempts to defend it in terms outside of it are very apt to fail. There is nothing sufficiently general outside of tradition itself that will enable the Christian to define tradition without making it the universal tradition, but, rather, a species of local practice, philosophy, or school (Sonderegger 2001:389).

"Narrative" cannot justify or test tradition, and neither can a theological school. Such concepts and methods claiming to do this, remain sectarian in character, since they speak for the Church as a whole rather than a movement inside of it. Sectarian debates cannot be conflated with a heterodoxy of error without undermining the very notion of tradition by which we stand or fall (Sonderegger 2001:389).

In the end, Katherine Sonderegger points out that it may very well be that the most we can do is to point to particular examples of the tradition at work, search for neutral or generally colourless terms of Christian agreement, cite documents from an early and uncontested unity of the Church, and describe assumptions that appear to give shape to broad stretches of the tradition handed on to us. A living and authoritative tradition can only be described or recognized, or enacted or exemplified; it is too deep and too basic to be grounded on anything outside itself. This is not much and is dissatisfying to people of opposing view. It is also not an argument to defeat all new arguments. But, as tradition is the very form of Christian life, we cannot hope for any better (Sonderegger 2001:389-390).

Every appeal to tradition, however, is not traditional. By embracing this fact, we confront the mistake that mars much feminist reconstruction of the name of God. Feminist liturgists often appeal to tradition in a deeply untraditional way. They do not stand in or under it, but rather seek to "mine" it or "retrieve" from it a "usable past". This seems to be a general pattern in feminist literature, and is dangerous in its mistaken logic (Sonderegger 2001:390).

Tradition conserves, and within a Church or denominational context it creates an internal system of meaning, which defines terms for in— and exclusion.

To cite the personification of Wisdom or the intertestamental literature as evidence that the address of God as Lady, She or Mother is traditional, is to refrain from using holistic exegesis. When St Anselm, Julian, Bernard or Hadewijch are quoted as aids to evoke a traditional name of God that is female, is to overlook how modern the exercise of imagining that we have freedom, authority and insight to put tradition to the use of our own tasks and aims in order to serve our own ends, truly is. (The representation of the acts executed by Wisdom is also quite patriarchal). Such acts are not traditional in either interpretation or relation to the Church's past (Sonderegger 2001:392).

Every modern theology proves that acts of using (perceived) tradition to our own ends are possible, but to consider them acts from the tradition will require an unending defense and will probably prove impossible (Sonderegger 2001:392).

The Fatherhood of God stands central to tradition. How does feminist theology handle this name/title?

Radical feminists have pointed out their discomfort with a god who is identified as a father. Feminist theologians themselves find this concept of God as Father disconcerting. The issue is very important, and cuts to the heart of the female experience of an intimate relationship with the Deity. Feminists particularly do not wish to recognize *any* Lord or higher authority, and especially not the Lordship of "Father" God or Jesus, the Son, since this represents the same patriarchal oppression from which they are fleeing (Zeigler 1992:322-323).

What stands at the centre of this debate? The philosophical debate about the use of the Name of God turns on the puzzle of what a name represents. When a person, place or object is named, what is that act signifying? Is it shorthand for the description of the object, or a synonym for a description/definition? Have we simply fixed the referent by naming, or are names simply "tags" that refer directly to an object? After a name has been given, does it pick out an object apart from any other meaning? Does a name have sense, or, if not, just how does it refer? (Sonderegger 2001:393).

The above questions point out two consequences for the discussion of the Divine name:

1. It does not stop, but rather starts, the debate when it is said that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are proper names. To separate names from descriptions and claim that names reach out and grab their objects (refer to the works of Ruth Marcus and Saul Kripke), does not settle the debate around the fittingness or irreplaceability of the original name. To use Shakespeare: A rose by any other name smells just as sweet. Things and people can be given new names, and these names can over time become their accepted names. Einstein, for instance, might over time become known as Dinnerstein if enough people use the new designation, and we are no worse for wear as long as Dinnerstein still refers to the same person. Christian feminists believe that by giving God a new name, such as Mother, Lover or Friend etc, the very same triune God of Israel and the Church is intended and laid hold of (Sonderegger 2001:393-394). These namers claim that the communal use of Church and praxis will pass on this new name and that the original object of devotion will continue to be honored (Sonderegger 2001:394).
2. The issue of reality is at stake. Implicit realism is assumed on all sides of the argument. Naming is an act of referring, and assumes the existence of the

object to be named. There would be no argument if we were to assume that names never refer, that there are no objects, and that there is no knowledge (Sonderegger 2001:394). The Christian Church debates the name of God because of theological realism and not skepticism (Sonderegger 2001:394).

Feminists have a great problem with the perception of God as Father in the Bible. Mankowski points out that the Old Testament is careful to paint YHWH's fatherhood as *supervenient*. YHWH comes to an already existing Israel and makes it His child, thus intruding into the history of an already living body. This choice of a nondescript nation, makes it all the more remarkable (Mankowski 1992:166). God is painted without a consort in the Bible. This sets Him apart from every other deity painted in the literature of the Ancient Near East.

*It is a remarkable fact about the religious genius of Israel that it convinces us so totally about YHWH's maleness at the same time that it convinces us so totally that He is 'beyond sexuality'. It is the unique circumstances of YHWH's fatherhood in which this is accomplished. He becomes a father not by approaching a woman, but by electing a son, an election that in virtue of itself creates the son (Mankowski 1992:168).*

The fatherhood of God replaces the sexual creation metaphor. For Israel, creation was thus not an act of sowing seed or coming from a womb, but a creation of order from chaos.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of the remarkable reservation of the Hebrew people. The name relation to God in Exodus is covenant, and not kinship. God adopted Israel; instead of generating Israel biologically. God is not described as father, and Israel is not a true son. The name God gives himself in Exodus, I AM WHAT I AM, is a connotation without designation. This name is the dissolution of all anthropomorphisms, including that of the father. This name is to stand against the idols of the surrounding peoples. The God of Israel is defined over and against father gods and mother gods who beget the world. The paradox is that it is precisely this abolition of the biological father God that makes non-idolatrous, metaphorical "father language" about God possible. Nel writes that the Old Testament does not make the supposed masculinity of God an issue. The relationship of Israel to the Father-God is not understood in biological terms, but God is perceived to be the God who established the nation of Israel — He is their provider of a future and a destiny (Nel 2002:137-138). According to Ricoeur, other designations for God create the space in which God may be called father. Movement now takes place to the declaration of God as father (prophets), to



When trained women theologians begin to make connections between what happens at home and in church with a view of suggesting change in the name of justice, they have to be cautious of disturbing the set order. It takes time with other women in order to establish trust before beginning to do any advocacy. It would be easier just to do academic theology, that is reading, reflecting and writing. But for us in Africa, it does not matter how much we write of our theology in books, the big test before us is whether we can bring change in our societies. This is a tall order and we agonize about it.

Musimbi RA Kanyoro 2001:38

a declaration of the father, and finally the invocation to God as father, completed by Jesus' prayer in the New Testament (Soskice 1992:89).

In the Old Testament, in contrast to the New Testament, occurrences of the designation "father God" are few. Nel states that, although God as father cannot be distinguished from the authoritarian position of the patriarchal father, the metaphor never emphasizes the biological masculinity of God. He states that the dominant references of the metaphor are relational aspects that indicate a caring and protective bond between God and his people (Nel 2002:136).

The name Father Creator, even when taken as shorthand for description, does not mean patriarch or paterfamilias, but rather one who creates through command or free will. The opening words of Genesis claims clearly that God creates all that is through speaking or command. He spoke and it was so. This act of creation through sovereign will has entered the tradition of catholic Christianity as the unique dignity, power and identity of the one God of Israel. Unlike other deities, this god does not create through birth or emanation. The resultant argument that the creature is not of the same order, dignity or essence as the Creator, is the achievement of the Biblical account of creation and the mark of Christian doctrines of creation as distinguished from all cosmogenies, whether they be ancient or new (Sonderegger 2001:395). Nel shows that the creator father is a compassionate father (Nel 2002:137).

Nel further points out that the redemptive aspect of God's salvation exceeds that which can only remotely be described as the redemptive role of a biological father. When seen from this viewpoint, attributes of the Father-God are perceived beyond the caring traits of a natural father. Then one does not have a case of the traits of a natural father transposed unto God, but rather a case of the metaphoric thought structures of God as "father" exceeding the limitations of a biological father (Nel 2002:138).

Max Weber pointed out the disenchantment the world has for a tradition that does not speak of emanations or wombs in the divine act of creation. It laid the foundation for the rise of secular science and society (Sonderegger 2001:395).

But should feminists really demand such a focus on a mother god with a womb? Would this be in the interest of women all over the world? Would such an image ensure a better standing for women in religion and women's emancipation? Ruth

Duck observed that women cannot always be described through womb, birth, and nurture without drawing upon the biological determinism that feminism so much protests (Sonderegger 2001:395). The more feminists demand such an association, the more they play into the hands of biological determinism: what gives a woman value then, would seem to be her womb, her nurturing qualities, and her ability to give birth.

Bible names give another clue to the understanding of God's fatherhood. The name *'abiyya* (YHWH is my Father) is used of eight people, two of which are women. Three persons are called *Yo'ab* (YHWH is Father). Altogether, no names exist that compound with the word "mother" to form the Hebrew onomasticon (Mankowski 1992:168).

Soskice explores the possibility of detaching the language of divine fatherhood from the male idol of patriarchal religion.

God is called Father, and human fathers happen to be male. This still does not imply an exaltation of maleness, but remains simply a statement about the fatherhood of God (Scorsone 1992:239).

Paul Ricoeur shows that, in the Old Testament, the Divine title "father" is qualitatively insignificant. The research of Robert Hamerton-Kelly complements this when he notes that though Jesus calls God "father" more than 170 times in the New Testament (His exclusive title in prayer), God is only called "father" 11 times in the entire Old Testament, and then never in prayer. In Exodus, God is described as the God of "our Fathers". In the Old Testament, Fatherhood remains strictly a symbol/metaphor for God's relationship to his people (Soskice 1992:88).

The argument is often made that to call God "father" is to hamper our relationship with the Deity, since human fathers offer such poor examples of what our Divine "father" represents. This is a typical problem as far as ideal-typical language goes. Human fatherhood may not be used to judge Divine fatherhood, since there is no comparison between human and Divine fatherhood. The designation of God as "Father" is mostly used in the Old Testament to speak of the special covenant relation of God to Israel, in which Israel was regarded as God's "first-born son" (Exodus 4.22; Hosea 11.1). A general conception of God as Father and Creator of all is not incorrect, as confirmed by Malachi 2.10. "Father", however, is not a proper name for God, but is like the other designations used for Him. Calvin calls these

designations "epithets" and "titles". The one exception is "Yahweh", which is the substance name with which God expresses His own self-existent being (Torrance 1992:131).

In the New Testament, Jesus calls God "Father" 170 times. This domestic title "abba" seems central to the eschatology of Jesus. The essence of the good news Jesus brings, is this intimacy and accessibility of the Almighty God. A view of God as distant, aloof, angry, sullen and anti-human does not correspond with this message. The symbol is turned: God who is "not father" in Exodus becomes father and spouse in the prophetic literature, and becomes the intimate "abba" in the New Testament (Soskice 1992:90).

The next question which arises, is whether the term "father" has been chosen by men since it would be in their favour to do so. Did the Church writers use this specific term to downplay women? Were women ever given a chance to make a decision about this designation for God? Is it really necessarily true that the traditional doxology is the product of "male" theology? Were masculine terms used for God because human fathers were thought to be the sole source of human life? Some women did seem to have opportunities of expressing their understanding of the Godhead. Macrina, sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa (4<sup>th</sup> century) was called "the teacher" by her brothers. She raised them in the faith and instructed them in the doxology. What is more, she defended these titles as revelations recorded in Scripture (Belonick 1992:303).

Nina was evangelizer to the Georgians of her own free will, and did not act due to commission by the bishops. She also taught the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Belonick 1992:303).

The patristic writers wanted to retain terms of "Father, Son" and "Holy Spirit" as revelations from God, rather than reflections of patriarchal culture. Their numerous and frequent appeals to Scripture for their arguments prove this point further (Belonick 1992:305).

Rosemary Ruether adds to the above with her insight that *Christians are unwilling to substitute traditional images (fatherhood of God) because they see traditional metaphor as literally true* (Ruether in Bibliography Hitchcock 1992:346).

When the Biblical text is read with a view to get to know the Father as the Father of Jesus, one gets a different picture from the one painted as authoritarian patriarch who is exalted by androcentric tradition and vilified by feminist critique. This Father of Jesus does not beat his unfaithful wife but cries out as a mistreated lover and tries harder to win her back (Hosea 2.25). This Father did not spare His son but gave Him up for humans (Rom 8.32). This Son did not lord it over His subjects but emptied Himself and took the form of a servant (Phil 2.7-8) who humbled himself and became obedient to the degree of death on the cross. As Spirit, this God incorporates people into the body of Christ where there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal 3.28). This King does not isolate Himself in heaven but chooses to dwell with His people, wipe the tears from their eyes, and deliver them from what oppresses them — even death (Rev 21.4) (Green 1992:60).

There are feminist theologians who try to bring different sides of the argument into a workable unity. Anne Clifford writes that the Old Testament speaks of God as Father only eleven times. She does not believe that the fatherhood symbolism can be separated from the strand of Old Testament God-talk that identifies Yahweh-God as “the god of the Fathers” seventy-seven times. In the New Testament, the word “Father” is used of God one hundred and seventy times (Clifford in Procaro-Foley 2002:151). Clifford does not see the appellation “Father” as essential to the nature of God. What is essential to the nature of God, is rather the intimacy of Jesus’ *Abba* prayer (Clifford in Procaro-Foley 2002:151). Kimel states that the Father/Son relation must have primacy over the Creator/creature relation in our apprehension of Divinity (Kimel 1992:197). This would also under gird the focus towards the intimacy of the relationship we can have with the Father as adoptees ourselves, through grace, in faith.

If names are in fact just abbreviated descriptions, then Father means just this: The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus calls upon the Father, and the Father calls Him Son at His baptism. To call God Father is thus an act of Christian boldness, because by that name we refer immediately and without fear to the very God that the Son knew. In calling God Father, we stand where Christ stood: as beloved, adopted heirs (Sonderregger 2001:398).

Katherine Sonderregger calls us bold (as opposed to oppressed victims of patriarchal terms) when we use the phrase Our Father (Sonderregger 2001:397). Christians call God Father not because of patriarchal culture in whichever form, but because Jesus

called the God of Israel by that name. Only a revealer could disclose a new name for the Almighty God — not disciples, mystics, or scholars. Christianity is marked off from Judaism by its willingness to call God by a new name: Father, Son and Spirit (Sonderegger 2001:397-398). Father, Son and Holy Spirit are personal names, while Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier are functional terms. The names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are unsubstitutable self-descriptions of the persons of the Trinity. God chose to be known by these names (DiNoia 1992:170). We know who the first person is (Father) because the Son calls Him by name, and the same applies to the Spirit. These names do not originate in human experience of God, as many of the other names we use for God do. There exists no other basis for naming the persons in the Trinity Father, Son and Spirit, except for the fact that they use these names themselves. We can use these intimate names insofar as we become intimates of the Trinity by grace. Since no uninvited basis for naming the persons exist, there are no grounds to prefer other terms to these personal ones (DiNoia 1992:185). Feminist theology's argument in favour of new names reflecting female aspects for God should be criticized in light of this argument, and Christians should ask themselves whether the discomfort existing with use of the term "father" is natural or artificially cultured.

Our ordinary symbolic and metaphorical language for the Deity is extrinsic to the Divine being and thus exchangeable. In contrast to this, the Son's naming of God is internal to the Godhead. To substitute another name for "Father" is to turn to another God. Where the word Father is replaced with something else, there is no guarantee that we are still addressing the same God as Jesus (Kimel 1992:207).

Feminist theology has made a case for use of female language for God, and in the work of some of these theologians, they put this plea into action in various ways. A note of caution should go out to feminists, who need to beware their own female bias when urging "purging" of "sexist" texts. Some feminists have their children pray the Lord's Prayer by saying "Our Mother". Other instances of female bias would include the naked "Christa" crucifix figure in women-church liturgies, the naming of the Trinity as Mother, Lover and Friend, and having God be the Primal Matrix in whose womb we live, move and have our being according to Rosemary Ruether. The bias stand out most profoundly, however, when feminists tend to discount male critics, and when male authors of the Gospel are suspects based on their gender (De Marco 1992:295). Such a bias is no more than a reverse sexism which these authors would have us liberated from.

Not all proponents of female language for God are equally radical in their thinking. The field even includes male writers who are trying to accommodate the case put forth by feminists in an acceptable praxis in the life of the mainstream Church. David Gentry-Akin writes that it seems to him more helpful to not try rationalizing "father" imagery, but rather to mine all of the other rich images for God, including female ones, in Scripture as well as tradition, and finding ways of making these images integral to our personal prayer and corporate worship (Procario-Foley 2002:141).

Feminists claim that language about God is analogical and metaphorical, and that it can be substituted with feminine or neuter terminology to overcome patriarchy and further liberation. Some substitutes for God are as follows:

God and Christ	She and Her
Father, Son, Holy Spirit	Creator, Liberator, Comforter
Father, King, Master	Yahweh, God, Abba
Father	Father and Mother
Lord	Sovereign
King	Ruler, Monarch
Son of Man	Human One
Son of God	Child of God
God	God/ess, God-She
God	Wisdom, Glory, Holy One, Rock, Fire
	First and Last, Liberator, Friend
	Nurturer, Defender, Maker
Jesus	Liberator, Redeemer, Savior

(Achtemeier in Kimel 1992:3-4).

Are the above listed substitutes above suspicion? Have they been thoroughly tested and tried and withstood the scrutiny of the Church? Paul Minear has pointed out that the movement for feminine God-language (even in its restrained forms) in effect replaces non-sexist metaphors with sexist metaphors. This results in a theological vocabulary that teems with terms found in pantheism, animism and polytheism (Frye 1992:26). Some of the names listed above prove this point.

Feminist theology finds one of the tools for creating female language for God, in the identification of God with creation, which, according to them, results in a theology with an emphasis on mutuality and relationship. When God is identified *with* His

creation, the result is meaninglessness. When one uses feminine language for God, the inevitable result is the identification of God *with* creation. Despite arguments to the contrary, feminist writings themselves show the validity of this statement (Achte-meier in Kimel 1992:12).

The works of Rosemary Radfort Ruether and Virginia Mollenkott show the above. When closely scrutinizing the writings of Ruether (currently the leading feminist writer in the United States), the meaninglessness emerges. She wants to use feminine language for God, and names the deity God/ess. Ruether wants no deity to rule over her in a hierarchical mode. No Lord for feminists! God must not be a Sovereign but a "friend" (Sallie McFague) or, in the words of Letty M Russell, a "householder", or even the power of love-in-relation (Isabel Carter Heyward and Dorothee Sölle). Ruether defines her God/ess as the Primal Matrix. This is described as *the great womb within which all things, gods and humans, sky and earth, human and nonhuman beings are generated* (Ruether in Achtemeier. Kimel 1992:12). Rosemary Ruether states that this image survives in the metaphor of the Divine as the Ground of Being. This God/ess is much more than just image or metaphor, but is a divine reality. She is the empowering Matrix. *She, in whom we live, and move, and have our being... She comes; She is here* (Ruether in Achtemeier. Kimel 1992:12). This God/ess is very much bound up with nature's life, and enables Ruether and other like-minded individuals to start celebrating life cycles and nature cycles like moon cycles, menstruation cycles, and the likes. This theology seems to show more contact points with the worldview of ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian religions than with Christianity. In the celebration ritual of the menstrual cycle, women-church members are instructed to descend into the primal sea (a bath) from which all things emerged in the original creation (Achtemeier in Kimel 1992:12-13).

Would female god language solve women's problems? When feminists propose to change language for God and thus solve women's problems, they are not offering solutions, but rather distractors. A *distractor* identifies an answer that looks right but is wrong. Feminist-oriented language for God is just such a distractor, which does not resolve the issues of women, but rather violates faith structures it is supposed to only modify (Frye 1992:19). In the reading group I have facilitated, this (male language for God) has not proved to be a problem. Participants of the group were not aware of themselves as being alienated from God on the basis of His being called "Father" and being spoken of in male terms. It is, of course, possible that the ingrained Calvinistic and Protestant history runs so deep so as to make such an



awareness completely impossible. The women did not prove to be resistant to the idea of becoming sensitized to the problem as highlighted by feminist theologians, but showed no eagerness in calling God by female names. It is possible to still bring this forward as a major argument in order to aid reflection in the process of becoming liberated. More about this will be said in the last chapter.

For better clarity on the subject of inclusive language for the Deity, one needs to contrast the formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with the modern movement for inclusive language.

1. The formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is a very impressive intellectual achievement.
2. The analyses could be compared to be equally sophisticated to those of present-day astrophysics and physical theory.
3. It achieved coherence of theological meaning while still preserving the Divine mystery.
4. Five or six centuries were required to completely develop these nuances into a careful and balanced formulation.
5. This formulation theologically preserves and presents the three persons of the Deity as divine, without falling into polytheism, but maintaining a single and undivided godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To contrast with the modern movement for inclusive language:

1. The effort to apply inclusive language to the Christian Deity is no more than thirty years old.
2. Feminist proposals for God-language show more similarity with political campaigning than with subtle and judicious theological analysis.
3. It would not be right or wise for the modern Church to disrupt the Trinitarian synthesis by superimposing upon it the irreconcilable God-language of feminism.
4. Some feminists want to substitute the names of the Trinity with *Creator*, *Liberator* and *Comforter*. They seem unaware that the proposed terms are not synonyms of the Trinitarian ones.
5. "*Father and Mother*" is the suggested replacement for *Father*. Gail Ramshaw Schmidt proposed that the Father should be addressed as Mother, but that believers should keep in mind that this is just an epithet and not a Divine name. Very confusing for the believer.

6. Rita Gross proposes use of *God-she* as appropriate for every context and reference to God. Ruether proposes *God/ess*, and Schüssler Fiorenza prefers *Sophia-God*.
7. These terms manage to put the God of Israel in the language and *Gestalt* of the goddess (Frye 1992:22-23).

Would calling God something else mean just the same thing? It is linguistic and literary, as well as historically and theologically false to assume that the *figurae* can be altered. Figures cannot be abandoned and symbols substituted without change of conveyed meaning. In the Bible, figurative expressions serve more often as figures of thought and understanding than mere ornamental figures of speech, which should make them even more compelling in their current form (Frye 1992:33).

Feminist argument has emphasized that the mandate for the use of female god-language lies with the female personification of Wisdom as is found in the ancient Biblical text itself. Both the words for wisdom, *Sophia* and *hōkmāh*, are feminine in gender. It is dangerous to assume that the gender of the word gives a clue to the gender of the being referred to (Frye 1992:34). Knowledge and know-hows are seen as Wisdom in the Old Testament, while the *Hōkmāh* of God is shown as the speaker in Proverbs 8. Throughout the ages this representation has been interpreted not as an independent Divine being, but as an instance of Hebrew personification (Frye 1992:35). In our own time, feminist theologians have taken a radically new route in which *Sophia-Hōkmāh* have been elevated from a set of Divine qualities into a kind of female deity. Though the contours of the female deity differ according to feminist author, striking resemblances crop up with the ancient goddesses of Egypt and the Near East (Frye 1992:35). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza shows signs of this clearly in her work on the "gracious Sophia-God" and the "Sophia-God of Jesus". *Sophia-Hōkmāh* is represented as a divine female being. Schüssler Fiorenza calls Divine Sophia the God of Israel in the *Gestalt* of the Goddess. This line of thinking parallels Gnostic heresy, as when Ptolemaeus declared that the "celestial mother Sophia" bestowed the Logos upon Jesus at His baptism (Frye 1992:35). The old Gnostic pairing of masculine and feminine deities is reintroduced (Frye 1992:36).

Marcus Borg strongly emphasizes the image of God being like a womb. He suggests that *To say that God is like a womb is to say that God is like a woman, just as the personification of God as Sophia suggests that God is like a woman, and Jesus is a spokesperson for the compassion of Sophia/God* (Sprong 2002:69). Schüssler Fiorenza

views Sophia as "sister, wife, mother, beloved, and teacher". This Sophia is described as living in symbiosis with God (Sprong 2002:70-71).

Are alternative neutral terms acceptable? Other formulas such as "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer" are a true expression of God's acts towards us, but do not express what God eternally and personally is in Himself —three persons who mutually contain and indwell one another— but only what He is towards us. Another consideration, is that terms such as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, are primarily correlated with what we are, so that their meaning for us is reduced to symbolic expressions of an in-turned religious consciousness. Such terms fail to communicate the objective reality of God's triune self-revelation. They also fail to express the personal and personalizing substance of God's triune self-revelation. It is furthermore impossible for Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer to substitute Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for that would imply that God creates, redeems and sustains Himself. The effect of reasoning along these lines is that God's functional relations to the created world, are identified with the intrinsic interrelations of His Divine being, which in turn would result in a very bad form of anthropomorphism. There is no Trinitarian formula other than the one He revealed to us Himself, more able to communicate the intrinsically personal, interpersonal, and personalizing being that is God. When we try to know God apart from the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our conception of God quickly degenerates into an impersonal or nonpersonal one, or, more shockingly even, becomes the personification and deification of our own desires and ideals (Torrance 1992:141-142).

Some theologians have stated that classical Christian theism enshrines androcentric conceptions in the Divine attributes in that they project the ideal of a distant, detached, and omniscient male. This conception is problematic and needs to be replaced or amplified by one in which female attributes of relationality or engagement come more to the fore. Proposals such as this go beyond the field of linguistic practice and actually articulate a theological agenda (DiNoia 1992:166-167).

When one wants to liberate women, the first task seems to be the "feminization" of God, which implies the introduction of female language use and female images for God (Zeigler 1992:326).

The Bible does contain similes that compare God to a comforting mother (Isaiah 66.13) and a woman in childbirth (Isaiah 42.14). God is furthermore compared to a

mother eagle (Deut 32.11) and a mother bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13.8) (Zeigler 1992:328). Professor Mayer I Gruber of Ben Gurion University in Israel states that the only purely feminine references for God in the Bible are the four in Second Isaiah (42.14; 45.10; 49.15; 66.13) (Frye 1992:29). It may still seem a very "male" wisdom in action and speech. Despite this, the Bible never addresses God as "Mother" in either of the Testaments (Frye 1992:29).

The female similes can be used in Church life, and awareness can be created. But how to go about this task while refraining from changing similes into metaphors? How would language about these similes sound? It would be acceptable to say that God may *act* like a mother bear robbed of her cubs. This usage would make the text meaningful (Zeigler 1992:328). To say that God *is* a mother bear robbed of her cubs is rather bizarre.

In this section, attention must also be given to the work of Phyllis Tribble in this regard since she did some influential work on this topic. Phyllis Tribble writes on a feminine YHWH in the supplementary volume to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1976:368) and uses for her argument the word "womb" (*rehem*). She comes to the conclusion that the usage signifies a feminine YHWH in the Old Testament. She makes two mistakes in her assumptions, the first being that the oldest semantic value of a word is that word's real meaning. This is not necessarily true. Her second mistake is to assume that womb-compassion is necessarily a womanly trait. Theodor Nöldeke showed in 1885 that this refers to brotherly love by comparing the Greek term *adelphos*. *Adelphos* means "he of the same womb". One must be careful to jump too easily to conclusions based on the faintest evidence. The term for womblike compassion of YHWH, is then rather a brotherly than motherly compassion.

Tribble also makes a statement that the description of YHWH as compassionate, is distinctive to Mosaic religion. This is not correct, since fifty-two other divine names were identified with the same bearing, of which only five designated female deities. Tribble goes on to state that "uterine speech" functions as a major symbol throughout the history of Israel. Divine mercy is made analogous to a mother's womb. Her arguments prove to be mistake-ridden when challenged (Mankowski 1992:160-165).

What are the consequences of female god-language? Why is it such a controversial topic? When God is imaged as Mother, the result is the breaking of the faith. The relationship of God to the world as creator is replaced by the birthing image. The

consequence of a female deity birthing the world, is that all things participate in the life/substance/divinity of such a god. The creator becomes bound up with the creation (Zeigler 1992:329).

The historical scholar Samuel Terrien has stated that the change to the metaphor of mother will not solve the problem which (for some women today) arises from the metaphor of "father" (Frye 1992:24).

It is precisely the transcendent God that feminists want to replace. According to them, such a god is the heart of the dualism of domination/subordination that feminists regard as a false view of reality. The perfect replacement would be a model that enables humans to share in Divinity. For writers standing on the other side of the argument, the feminist "slogan" of *I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely*, is criticized as the ultimate idolatry where human beings have taken the place of the Creator, destroyed the otherness of God from creation, and denied the Trinity (Zeigler 1992:329).

There is also a movement which strives to make the name of God not into a name as such, but into a verb. It has been offered as a solution to the inability to agree about the language used for the Deity. Mary Daly questions whether God needs to be a noun — why not a verb? Elizabeth Gray describes this verb as rhythmic, radiant and swirling. Ruether suggests a primal, neutral source of energy which infuses life with peace and harmony, while Carol Christ invokes the goddess to empower and value women. Sallie McFague uses metaphors that speak of trust, confidence and fidelity. Dorothee Sölle chooses an anti-authoritarian disposition of mysticism, and Fiorenza emphasizes the liberation of the oppressed in her term used of God (Fraser 2002:205). In the choices made, feminists should be very wary of using feminine metaphors for God. In an eagerness to balance the scales as far as language goes, there exists the danger of stereotyping women's experience of the only female terminology that we use for God as that of a caring, nurturing and self-giving mother (Fraser 2002:205).

Feminist writers are not agreed on the idea of God as Father being replaced by a Goddess figure outside of Christianity. Not all are willing to leave the faith as Mary Daly, or to actively embrace the Goddess, as Carol Christ. Ruether assesses Goddess theology as "historically inaccurate and ideologically distorted". It inappropriately denies the possibility of positive resources in the Biblical tradition for

God that resonates with women's experience. To promote the reversal of a masculinized God in an absolutized feminine Goddess, promotes women (mostly well-educated Europeans and Euro-Americans) to be the gender and social group that normatively possess the image of God and represents God on earth. This makes Goddess theology worthy of being critiqued as idolatry every bit as much as an absolutized masculine God is (Clifford 2001:95).

While most people have few problems with inclusive language for humans (horizontal language), such language becomes very problematic to most audiences when transferred to God (vertical language) (Fraser 2002:202).

In response to the trend to popularize Mother-Father language for God, Mushat Frye states that these terms should be exposed not to be formal equivalents of Biblical language used. They are also not theological equivalents. "God the Mother" or "God the Mother and Father" are not acceptable Christian alternatives for Father and Son. One should also keep in mind the difference between catholic, orthodox Christianity and heretical or schismatic sects. One test of catholic faith is quoted in the Vincentian Canon as "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all". A threefold test such as this should be very helpful when distinguishing between faithful and unfaithful doctrine (Mushat Frye 1992:225).

Using these criteria, one has to evaluate many doctrines within feminist theology. Rejection of Father and Son language for God is definitely not something occurring universally in the Church around the world. It is rather propagated by only a small minority of middle class, largely professional people, and then largely in the United States and Europe. When it comes to substituting Father language with Mother language or even Goddess language, this movement does not date back much more than thirty years. On taking a closer look at the consensual praxis of the Church, opponents of Father and Son language have always only been made up by a very small but extremely vocal group of activists (with a political agenda?) This group does not demonstrate a penchant to staying true to Scripture or doctrine and tradition. They rather show a deep concern for changing the Church to fit their own scheme, and even changing the Biblical text to legitimize their imposition upon the traditions and praxes of the Church (Mushat Frye 1992:226).

Feminist theorists strive for neutral, neutered language in all its levels of usage. All language that does not reflect this neutral gender, is labeled as sexist/androcentric.

In feminist theology, the argument is that women cannot share in an intimate relationship with a male perceived God in the same way as a male can, and that language about God should be changed in order to reflect the female side of God as well. This will enable women to have a more intimate relationship with God, and will probably result in a higher status for women in religion and social life. Some Churches have, under feminist pressure, changed the religious language used in the praxis of the faith. Hymns and prayers have been changed to reflect a neutral language that would not be offensive to women and which would not make them feel excluded.

Feminism uses the term "sexist" to refer to all language *perceived* to exclude women. This term is often left unexamined, and can take the form of a slogan. On closer scrutiny, this term is exclusive in its own right. The only perception seen to be right, is the one defining others as sexist. Under the sexist category would then fall all language users who feel they still have the right to use language as it has always been used. Under the banner of a sexist slogan, people with different sensibilities may feel that the contents of what they try to convey, and their own sense of language use, are violated in order to accommodate those offended by "sexist" language. Reasons given for advocating that all people change their language to fit the "sexist" view of language are based mainly on the effect such language has on some women, and the assumption that such language denigrates women (Sheets in Hitchcock 1992:50).

John R Sheets brings an interesting point to the fore when he mentions that, when it comes to the "offensiveness" of "sexist language", it belongs to the category of what is *objectively inoffensive* but is *perceived as offensive* because of the conditioning which has taken place over the last couple of decades (Sheets in Hitchcock 1992:51).

It seems that the only problem created by ordinary language, is that feminists do not like it. Substituting the generic "man" with "person" seems to be done simply because feminists demand it. Even when modern clergy refer to "Our Father and Mother who art in Heaven", or "The God of Abraham and Sarah", or when modern reworkings of the New Testament refer to "Son of God" as "The Human One", attention is shifted in an awkward way from religion, to the struggle against sexism. A demand for feminist linguistic reform tends to be an attempt to make all thought whatsoever concern feminism to the exclusion of everything else (Levin 1992:121).

Is feminism not maybe the oppressor? Linguistic change legislated to conform to a worldview makes people self-conscious about their own language, a state of mind so uncomfortable that it may be properly called oppressive (Levin 1992:121-122).

It has also been stated previously that not all languages share the (androcentric) language characteristic of the use of the "generic man". In Afrikaans no such a term exists, and yet women are not better or worse off than their English speaking counterparts.

Enforced ideological linguistic reform has been tried before, and has failed. The use of terms such as "comrade" or "citizen" did not give people political equality. When looking at the problem from this angle, the question of cause and effect comes into play. According to the Whorf hypothesis, a speaker's language defines his/her conception of the world, and the social world in particular. But does language really shape reality, or is it merely a reflection of such reality? By using "comrade" and "citizen", people's lives were not changed as far as social standing was concerned. Attempts to alter biased thinking by altering language that reflects this thinking, is a reversal of cause and effect (Levin 1992:123). The speakers of a language mark a distinction in words linguistically when such a distinction becomes important. Things do not become important because they have been given words. The reverse is true.

George Orwell stated that tinkering with language disrupts thought, but he was incorrect in assuming that this is due to the fact that language determines thought (Levin 1992:124).

Levin makes the remark that the real issue feminists have with language, is that natural language recognizes sex differences by mirroring reality. It is unclear whether feminists want a neutered language to change the reality behind it, or whether the avoidance of acknowledgement of this reality will be satisfactory (Levin 1992:126-127).

If a hermeneutic of suspicion is to be practiced on the Biblical text and traditions in the Christian faith, it should seem only fair that the same hermeneutic should be made to bear on the complainant's sense of isolation and anguish at noninclusive language. If one also wants to help in the spiritual well-being of the individual, one has to keep an eye on the role of sin in the lives of every individual, whatever side of



the fence they be. In English, there is *per se* no such thing as inclusive or noninclusive, or sexist or non-sexist words. There can only be sexist usage of a language. Keeping this in mind, the issue might resolve more around "ordinary English usage" and "feminist usage" of language (Quay 1992:249-251).

Language changes to "correct" language are also unfair to the poor and uneducated in the Faith, who are not able to evaluate these changes and their implications to the Faith. People like this are not able to defend their faith against ideological changes, though they are the people most affected by it. This category would today include the recent two generations who have not been intensively trained in their religion (Hull Hitchcock 1992:340-341).

When the light of the argument for inclusive language falls on the terms used for and of God, it must be stated that the language of the Trinitarian confession utter an understanding of the profoundness of God's revealing Himself to us in language we can utter. Names that apply specifically only to the inner life of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — names that belong only on the lips of the Trinity when speaking to each other, are given to be spoken by creatures. To call God by names such as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, is to identify our reception of said benefits. Using the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to enjoy the benefits. Nothing can justify a preference of using terms that announce the effects of Divine agency, rather than the names that identify the Divine relations themselves (DiNoia 1992:173).

Names such as God, Christ and Spirit also fail as substitutes for the names of the Trinity. Using terms such as "Spirit" and "Word" are unobjectionable. But to use simply a term such as "God", is to fail to specify anything about the first person of the Trinity. The term "Christ" does identify the second person, but fails to name the Son in relation to the Father and Spirit (DiNoia 1992:172).

It is the claim of the Church that the Bible speaks truth despite its historical and cultural differences between text and believer. It does not mean that the text cannot be subjected to our questions and objections. It does, however, mean that the text must not be lost or distorted by ideology. It does not seem as though feminist theology can find it possible to live with the Biblical story. The Biblical story cannot stand the control that the theory demands. It seems that keeping it all together in feminist terms becomes quite messy business (Jenson 1992:287).



**SOJOURN**  
JANET MCKENZIE

In as much as Schüssler Fiorenza, among others, make statements about texts that do not speak of the liberation and upliftment of women as not being the Word of God and authoritative part of the Biblical texts, such statements serve as theory demands made on the text. The argument is explained that such texts should not be hailed as part of the Word of God for women. This results in women not being confronted with any problematic texts where they are being raped, undervalued, sold, ignored, etc. As long as feminist theology is controlled by feminist theory, the Biblical narrative will be controlled and women will be hearing "nice" stories and "safe" stories. Do these stories really reflect and speak reality? Jenson asks the question of whether the feared oppressor of feminist theology might really be the Biblical God? (Jenson 1992:287).

The question arises about the practice and usage of inclusive language in particular reference to religion and day-to-day Church life. How can inclusive language be utilized without offending orthodox believers, while being sensitive to changing times and social focus points?

Leanne Payne replies to the fact that there does not seem to be any way out of the problem of sexist language: *It is a problem that can be transcended only by faith. It cannot be solved by rejecting a patriarchal ideology while being caught at the same time in its opposite, a feminist ideology* (Payne in Hitchcock 1992:56).

In today's time, a call is going up for more translations that are sensitive to "sexist" language, and translations of the Biblical text that do away with androcentric language altogether. Such a call is an oversimplification of the problem, since the problem has been identified as not just being one of faulty translation or insensitive translation. But would such a solution be true to Christian tradition? What should the ideal of good translation be? Is a good translation to be characterized by its neutral modern language, or something else? In this regard, Hilaire Belloc, in his Oxford University lecture, lays down a rule that he styles an "epigrammatic counsel" and that surely must constitute something of an absolute rule where translation is concerned. The rule is this: *"Never embellish"*, Belloc flatly declares.

*You may indeed embellish if you are desiring to produce a work of art of your own, careless of what happens to the vile body which you are adapting...But if your object be sincere translation, never yield to the sometimes considerable temptation of making the new thing (in your eyes) better than the old* (Whitehead in Hitchcock 1992:75-76).

The end result of what is produced by translators who do succumb to the temptation to embellish "is not translation", in Belloc's opinion.

Belloc has stated something very basic here: a translator does not have the right to embellish — or add to — the text being translated; the translator is strictly bound by what the source says, and cannot arbitrarily decide how it might perhaps have been said better and then put *that* down as the translation (Whitehead in Hitchcock 1992:75-76). There may always be an "add to" element in translation, while at the same time there is also always an element of "loss" in the same. Whitehead calls readers of texts to criticism when stating that we no longer live in times where scholars and experts are to be simply trusted. Too many attempts are being made to implement other agendas than simply aiming to translate the original's content (Whitehead in Hitchcock 1992:92).

The central issue remains a divide between radical transformative feminist theology and the Christian tradition's decree that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. God proclaims Himself as different from His creation and rejects the mother images of nearby Near Eastern cultures that would have linked Him with fertility goddesses. Removing sexist language from the Bible could be merely the first step in altering its meaning. The change in language shows more similarities to a change in faith than anything else. The challenge to feminist theology, is not to allow its ideologies to distort the Bible (De Marco 1992:295).

Is everything then taboo? Can no inclusive language be practiced at all? Should women just keep quiet and accept the status quo? Arguments against inclusive language for God do not negate inclusive language for people. Inclusive language for people would fall under a different heading of adiaphora, questions not central to the faith (Frye 1992:17). In some new translations of the Bible there has already been a move towards more inclusive language.

Feminist inclusive language has come a long way. Where there was an initial emphasis to add "sistren" to the "brethren" in the letters of Paul, a full circle has come to end with the revelation of the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Rachel. Implicit to such pairs is a choice between the many wives, as to which one should be included in the Divine title (Brennan in Hitchcock 1992:27).

Some Churches use variants such as God, Christ and Spirit, to correct the modalist implications of Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier (DiNoia 1992:170), although the problematics of such practice have been discussed earlier in this chapter.

The Church would do well to consider liturgical innovations more modest than the changes proposed by feminist liturgies. It may be the judgment of the faithful in time, that God not be addressed as Mother etc, but that God can take the pronoun *her* from time to time as use of wisdom literature enters regular liturgy. Sonderegger sees the case of the pronoun as important. Nominative, vocative and objective cases in Scripture and tradition belong to *he* and *him*, but the minority tradition and mystical devotion might be honored and preserved by use of the female genitive case. Sonderegger uses the following phrase to illustrate her point:

*Our Wisdom from on high, who in her mercy teaches us all truth: He is the source of grace in which we stand* (Sonderegger 2001:396).

Such a slight transformation of liturgy might in time find sufficient warrant in the believer's life of prayer, study and worship (Sonderegger 2001:396) without changing the heart of the Faith to such a degree that one actively offers an alternative religion.

Is it not possible to occasionally call God as the God of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel? Why not, if not? The Bible is rife with female images used as comparisons for God. Isaiah compared God's intervention in history with a woman crying out in labor (42.14). He goes on to insist that the Divine love for Israel surpasses even that of a mother for her child (49.15). God comforts the people in a way that a mother comforts her child (Isa 66.9; Ps 22.9-10). Psalm 123 uses both masculine and feminine imagery: *as the eyes of the servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hands of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God* (Fraser 2002:204).

Such images can be used more often and with great clarification, while still asserting that God is not called a Mother or a Mother Goddess.

After focusing on language, attention is given to the connection between women's status in society, their status in religion, and the ways in which religion might have justified their societal subjugation.

### 3.9. THE VIEW HELD OF WOMEN IN RELIGION

Feminist theory has pointed out that the low view held of women, and the subjugation of women in all walks of life, is not a modern phenomenon. Throughout history, and in this case, especially throughout the history of Christian religiosity, were women identified with sin, lust, nature, and all the lower aspects of a dualism that does not have any mandate in the Bible itself. Feminism has taken as its great task the unmasking of connections of thought and praxis which bind minds and bodies in subjection, and which shape the way society views the weaker and the female.

Katherine Rogers identified that:

*Since most writers have not felt free to express misogyny directly — it is an unnatural attitude, considered shocking in most periods — they have found it necessary to conceal it in some way, both from others and from themselves. Misogyny, therefore, is more apt than not to appear in disguised form. Sometimes the hostility is displaced, so that the hostile feelings for wife or mother, about which a man usually feels guilty, are transferred to the whore, who should be vilified (Rogers 1966:xii)*

In Greek spiritualism, the true self is the reason or soul, which exists before the body. It originates in a transcendent world from whence it falls into the lower world of bodily existence. Salvation rests with the lifelong separation of body and emotions in order to free the soul. Aristotle held that all fetuses start development as males. They only become female through some deformity, and may even become monsters. Boys were the norm, and girls were seen to be deviant boys (Rogers 1966:36). This dualism was deepened even further in Gnosticism, which saw the visible universe as demonic. Jesus in the Gnostic gospels declares that He has come to destroy the works of the female (Ruether 1975:16-17). Though this view was never accepted into a classic Christian cosmology, it did come to govern the thoughts surrounding its exercise of spirituality (Ruether 1975:17).

Philo of Alexandria and the Church Fathers treated femaleness and maleness as part of the body-soul split. Women were seen as the body and their relation to men was painted as the body to the mind: the body can be obediently subjugated (wife), or rebel against the rule of reason (harlot). Women were also assimilated into the definition of sin, since the bodily principle was seen as demonic. To be saved meant to aspire to the virgin state (Ruether 1975:17). The Patristic writers not only denigrated women's sexual functions, but at the same time also reduced women to

being exclusively sexual beings whose sole purpose of existence was to fulfill these functions. The Fathers generally assumed that a man cannot look at a woman except lustfully, and they saw every woman as a seductress. This extreme preoccupation with sex was probably an indirect effect of their attempt to repress their own physical natures, and their extreme sexual guilt caused them to project these forbidden sexual desires onto women. This projection in its turn reinforced their belief even more that women were particularly sexual, and thus also particularly sinful, and served to intensify their constant warnings against all association with women. Femininity equated with sexuality and sexuality with sin, which led to the view of woman being a naturally degraded being whose only hope of salvation was to suppress herself as much as her frailty permitted (Rogers 1966:22).

Almost all the patristic writers of the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century insisted that virginity was a state greatly superior to marriage and emphasized the propriety of keeping women in subjection; most of these writers also repeatedly expressed a dread of women's seductiveness as well as contempt for their mental or moral frailty. The argument referred time and again to the Fall, and managed to interpret many other Biblical texts as divine condemnations of the female sex (Rogers 1966:14).

Spiritual equality could exist between men and women only in the virginal state. The female virgin had to undertake a double repression of bodily feelings and also of her female nature. She had to transcend her nature and be transformed into a male. Ascetism for the male meant a restoration to his natural spiritual virginity (Ruether 1975:17).

The female body was especially reviled. When a man named Helvidius dared to take literally the Biblical reference to Jesus' siblings, concluding that Mary must have had a normal sexual relationship with her husband after the birth of Jesus, St Jerome was moved to fury by the obscene blasphemy: *How inexpressibly disgusting to think of Mary behaving like an ordinary wife...* Jerome saw nothing attractive in motherhood, and considered pregnant women a revolting sight (Rogers 1966:19).

In 1 Timothy women are called to submit to their husbands. There is a clear prohibition of women teaching or having authority over men in the Church. The commands are justified through a theology of Creation and Fall that sets up a doubly enforced hierarchy of men over women. Women were created second and sinned first, and therefore must keep silent in view of their secondary place in creation and

their punishment due to their primacy in sin. This text has shaped gender hierarchy in Christian theology and practice into the current era (Ruether 1998:27). The text of 1 Timothy further rejects celibacy. The marital ordinances of Genesis are still in place, and women atone for their sin through child bearing. The model for the patriarchal family is also the model for the Church. 1 Timothy assumes a sphere of female ministry, but seeks to limit it and confine it to elderly widows over 60 years of age. The book seeks to limit the independence of women (Ruether 1998:27).

Not just the writings of Church writers led to women's undervalued status in society and Church. The different interpretation strategies used for generic language furthermore contributed to the perception that women did not have a high status or did not hold key positions in the early Church. Scholars understand and interpret androcentric language in the Bible in a twofold way: as generic and as gender specific. Grammatically masculine language with respect to community membership is understood in a generic way. But when leadership titles are discussed, scholars assume that these terms apply to men only (gender specific) (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:45). This fallacy has proven fatal to the respect, positions and status women are due in the faith communities.

The passages that mention women in the New Testament do so because the women they mention are exceptional, or because the women have become problematic (their actions became problems). These texts cannot serve as illustrations of praxis in the Church, and must not be taken to be all the information on women in early Christianity (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:45). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza pointed out that, for information about the life and status of women in early Christianity, the Biblical text gives a small view, which needs to be broadened by archeology and historical reconstruction, among other things. To use the few Biblical texts as only guideline to chart the status women should enjoy, is to limit the Church and half of its members severely.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries the Marcionites and Valentinians insisted on a continuity of creation with redemption. The God who created the world is the same one who is redeeming it in Christ. The hierarchy of male over female was mandated through a combination of the order of creation and Eve's greater guilt for the Fall. Women, though redeemed by Christ, should not throw off these ordinances of submission. Her means for atonement *is* her submission (Ruether 1998:30-31). One Church Father of this time, Tertullian, accepted women's gifts of prophesy, but



insisted that women should practice this gift only in private. His writings show the clear guideline that women's subjugation should be more strictly observed for Christian women especially (Ruether 1998:31). Tertullian (160-230) wrote "on the Apparel of Women", in which his misogyny is clear:

*You are the devil's gateway...you are the first deserter of the divine law, you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die (Tertullian in Rogers 1966:15).*

While not all Church Fathers were Tertullians, most of them not only enthusiastically followed Paul's teachings on man's fall and the consequent subjection of women, but accentuated and elaborated the Biblical material on their own. Every one of the major Christian writers from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century assumed the mental and moral frailty of women, wrote about the vexations of marriage, and reviled the body and sexual desire. This attitude pervaded the medieval Church and persists to this day (Rogers 1966:21). Under the guidance of the Fathers, Christian literature became misogynistic to a degree unequalled in the Western world before or since. It had reached the point where Christ's association with women had to be explained away on the ground that otherwise the sin-laden female sex could not even hope for redemption (Rogers 1966:21)

Another Church Father, Origen, was vehement in his rejection of women's ministry. Female virgins may not claim public roles in Christian assembly. Origen reiterated Paul's command to women to keep silent in the Churches (1 Cor 14.34-36). He admitted that prophetic gifts were also bestowed on women, but they were exercised in private and only publicly submitted when accredited by male authorities (Ruether 1998:32).

Augustine (late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century) formulated the anthropology of women's subordination in creation redoubled by sin and still continuing in the Church. In his early writings on Genesis, he followed a Platonic view of seeing humans as created first in incorporeal unity. Augustine shifted this view to one in which Adam and Eve were created with real physical and sexually differentiated bodies. In the production of the human, the male was created first and the female from his side, which indicated the relation of superiority and subordination by which the genders must relate in their physical and social roles. Augustine saw gender hierarchy not only as the fruit of sin, but as an integral part of God's original plan for creation, even though

he had to concede that this would have no place in heaven (Ruether 1998:32). For Augustine, women were inferior to men, both physically and morally. He stated that: *I fail to see what use women can be to man if one excludes the function of bearing children* (Augustine in Amt 1993). Female bodiliness was seen as weakness, and women were seen as frail. A problematic link was made between female bodies and sin.

The manuscripts of the Church Fathers reveal an attitude of ambivalence towards women. Their writings indeed speak of women having weak wills and leading humanity into sin. John Chrysostom writes that the women taught once and ruined all. Yet there are passages that praise women and tell of their superior talents at teaching the gospel. Gregory of Nazianzen stated that his own father learned his virtue from his wife. Jerome says that he often praise women because people should not be judged by sex but by character (Belonick 1992:303-304).

There were also instances when the Church was fairer to women than the surrounding culture. Gregory of Nyzianzen berated men for accepting adultery for men but severely punishing women caught to commit the act. He never approved of this custom and called it *made by men...and hard on women...* (Belonick 1992:304).

Did early Church writers, given their low view of women, accede that women were created in the image of God? Patristic writers did not deny that women were created in the image of God, or that femininity had some relationship to God. Many texts carry the idea that women are closely associated with the Holy Spirit and the mode of the Spirit. The procession of the Spirit from the Father was compared with the "procession" of Eve from Adam (Belonick 1992:305).

Anastasius of Sinai wrote in the 7<sup>th</sup> century that Eve did not need the breath of life to be breathed into her, because she was already the type of the breathing and life of the Holy Spirit. The link between femininity and the Spirit was further amplified in the Syriac hymnody (Belonick 1992:305).

Early Patristic writers struggled with the question of the image of God, since it was believed that this image was male. The solution was to state that women could be created in the image of God in a spiritual sense in as far as they manifested and exercised spiritual qualities.

Aristotle held that women were subordinate even in paradise, with a worsening of her situation in life on earth. Aristotle drew the conclusion that the differences between men and women went as far back as the type of semen from which their lives sprang. According to him, women developed out of "bad" semen. His overall view of women was incorporated into a mindset that held that women were also subordinate in Eden, and that their situation grew worse after the Fall. Even Christian women who adopted a virginal life anticipating the heavenly order, were not free of this subjugation. Gender hierarchy will disappear in heaven, but on earth women must submit to men and have no leadership roles in public (Ruether 1998:33).

The Augustinian view informed by Aristotelean philosophy was passed on to Thomas Aquinas. He deepened the dogma of woman's natural subordination by teaching that women are biologically defective, and that they lack full human nature in mental, physical and moral aspects. They needed government by men and were incapable of public leadership. Only males possess full and normal humanness. Christ had to be male in order to possess full human nature and only males could represent Christ in the priesthood (Ruether 1998:33).

Elizabeth Morelli criticizes the long-standing tradition or bias that attributed rationality exclusively to men. When one argues that all A's are B's, it does not logically follow that all non-A's are also automatically non-B's. This faulty argument has served as the reasoning that lies behind centuries of misogyny. Because man is defined as rational, and woman is clearly not man, then woman must be non-rational (Morelli 1992:224-225). Woman's lesser value in Church and society has a broader base than just the centuries-old perception that women are not as rational as men. Women were defined as more passive, more given to emotional outbursts, less trustworthy and morally less stable, among other things. All these qualities ascribed to women made part and parcel of their misogynistic oppression in not just society, but also the Church.

To ascribe rationality exclusively to men has grave consequences for epistemological, metaphysical and ethical accounts of woman. The assumption of woman's passive, non-rational nature is clearly to be seen in the writings of thinkers such as Freud, Max Scheler, Edmund Beecher Wilson, Lawrence Kohlberg etc. It is interesting to note that some feminists critical to the patriarchal tradition of male domination have adopted this presupposition of female non-rationality, from the time of Mary Wollstonecraft in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, until the present. In 1792,

Wollstonecraft celebrated the manly virtues in her *"Vindication of the Rights of Woman"*, and urged women to become more masculine every day (Morelli 1992:226). But these views go back into history, until the time of the earliest writings of the Church. Even in Protestant tradition does one find a undervaluing of women in the Christian faith.

Thomas Aquinas declared in the *Summa Theologica* that *Woman was made to be a help to man. But she was not fitted to be a help to man except in generation, because another man would prove a more effective help in anything else* (Collins 1972:33).

Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian view held that women's inferiority was not just the result of divine law, but resided in their biological defectiveness. The alternative view was that celibacy and the vocation to the spiritual life overcame gender subordination, and this view lingered specifically in female monasticism (Ruether 1998:12). Aquinas had to overcome serious stumbling blocks in adapting Aristotle's biology to Christian theology: Aristotle had said that the father provides a child's soul while the mother supplied only formal matter. Since Christians believed that the soul came from God, the superior father was left making no contribution at all. Aquinas's solution was to state that while the soul comes from God, the father supplies the formative power without which the female matter could not receive it. For this reason, a child should love his father more than his mother, since the father principle of his origin is more excellent than the mother principle, because the father principle is active and the mother principle is passive (Rogers 1966:66-67).

Leading mystics in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries introduced sophiological images of God and Christ. Women mystics like Hildegard von Bingen and Julian of Norwich brought the female Wisdom symbol into the definition of God and Christ. In this way they began to undermine the androcentric theology that made women incapable of being theomorphic and Christomorphic (Ruether 1998:12-13). The nonsexual monism of the Divine pertains to the soul redeemed from the duality of bodily sexuality. The soul is equal and of the same essence in man and woman. Man and woman are equal in Divine likeness because on the level of the soul there is neither male nor female. Women, however, must be subordinated to men on the historical-creational level. The "virgin" or single one, represents the original "spiritual angelic" human being created in the image of God. Having progressed to the "perfect man" this woman can cease being a woman and can be called a man (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:277).

Women found a solid sense of their religious authority through reading Christian theology. Weakness as woman was acknowledged in terms of physical frailty and lack of learning when compared to male theologians. These women saw their inner nature as image of God. Femaleness was unimportant. They spoke for themselves as human beings, as souls or spiritual selves with no less capacity for spiritual life and holiness than another who might be male (Ruether 1998:39).

In Christian ascetism women annulled their female weakness through celibacy and ascetism which restored the essential non-gendered humanness as *imago Dei*. One Christian mystic that deserves mentioning is Saint Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510). Although a nun, Protestants in later ages were right in detecting a kinship between her perfectionism and that of John Wesley. Her influence as mystic extended far. She was an example to individuals like Phoebe Palmer, an early leader in both the Perfectionist Movement and in Women's Rights. Catherine was a laywoman, not a nun, and this may explain Protestant receptivity towards her (Nugent 1987:68). Catherine's mystical theology was that of "the way of negation". It was premised on the idea that God is incomparable. The result is that the way to God is through the denial of all created being, including oneself, and definitely one's ideas and images of God. She herself is said to have stated that "All that can be said about God is not God". Hers is a nothing mysticism, but this nothing becomes everything. Her most compelling statement sums this up most aptly: "My *Me* is God" (Nugent 1987:69).

A second way of reconciling femaleness and godliness also comes to the fore: positive female symbolism expressed in female imagery in the spiritual life of the soul and nature of the work of God. Mystical Judaism and some lines of Christianity developed the Wisdom theme of the female personification of God manifested in the creation and sustaining of nature and in revelation. The soul in relation to God, and the Church as married to God have been symbolized as female. Christ imaged himself as a mother hen with her chicks. The early Church spoke of baptism and Eucharist in terms of the womb, birth and feeding from the mother's breast (Ruether 1998:39-40).

Like Philo and Aristotle, the early Church Fathers saw the man as the paradigmatic human being and maleness as symbolic of the Divine. The natural inferiority of women was assumed and the feminine was seen as earthly, bodily, carnal reality. Logic did demand that all that were baptized were equal. This gave rise to the theological problem: how could a Christian woman, inferior in all aspects, achieve in

her life the equality that belongs to her as disciple of Christ? The answer was that as a Christian, a woman was no longer a *woman*. The female non-believer is defined by her sex, but the believing woman progresses to the "perfect man" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:277).

The culmination of medieval hostility to women can be seen in the outbreak of the witch hunts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ruether 1975:18). Most of the persecution was done to old women who had no other option but to make a living of midwifery and herbal medicine. Puritan witch trial reports held that old age and self-sufficiency could be counted as proof of demonic associations (Ruether 1975:19). It is estimated that over one million women died in the witch hunts of this period. This was in fact nothing other than an outbreak of mass paranoia against a helpless group, and Norman Cohn compares it to the Holocaust (Ruether 1975:19). The religious writings of this time show the same harsh antifeminism reminiscent of the Middle Ages, although in this era it is tempered by a high regard for marriage. Neither secular nor religious writers of this era felt any need to moderate their criticism of women by consideration for the supposed fragility of the female sex (Rogers 1966:134). Preachers in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries delighted in giving the Bible the most antifeminist possible interpretation, and used Biblical texts as justification for their contempt for and distrust of women. They confined themselves to misogyny which was sanctioned by the Bible, but they demonstrated that virulence could be extracted from it even without the aid of early Christian asceticism. Extreme condemnations of the female sex remained morally and socially acceptable well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as is demonstrated by its appearance in sermons as well as the *Religio Medici* (Rogers 1966:159)

The Reformation brought the emergence of the patriarchal and egalitarian paradigms of redemption. Luther as well as Calvin affirmed the patriarchal paradigm by which marriage was emphasized as the normative style for all Christians. Celibacy and monastic life were dismissed, and reformers eliminated alternative vocations to subordinate wifedom for women. They also dismissed the idea that women rose from subordination to equality through celibacy (Ruether 1998:13).

Martin Luther reverted to the original patriarchal view. His "priesthood of all believers" challenged the hierarchy of the Roman Church, but he did nothing to reform the hierarchical relationship between men and women. He actually declared:

*Women are on earth to bear children. If they die in child-bearing, it matters not; that is all they are here to do* (Collins 1972:33).

Even in the modern age the heralded theologian Karl Barth holds to the same revelatory religion which has always excluded the existential experience of women. Statements like *Women are ontologically inferior to men* does nothing for lifting up the status of women, be it in society or Church (Collins 1972:33).

Puritan writers who reacted to the Catholic Church showed a great zealousness for the subordination of women. The Puritans themselves reverted back to the patriarchy of the Old Testament, specifically as it was expounded by Paul. They extolled marriage (they almost never extolled Paul's asceticism) while they condemned the romantic notion of this era whereby courtly lovers worshipped women as disgusting effeminacy (Rogers 1966:135).

One of the central themes of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the ability of the laity as well as the clergy to interpret and preach the gospel message of salvation. In 1553, Marie Dentière wrote Queen Marguerite de Navarre to defend Reformers who have been exiled from Geneva (among them Calvin), and in her letter her radical understanding of the universality of this central theme of the Reformation is clear:

*I ask, didn't Jesus die as much for the poor illiterates and the idiots as for the shaven, tonsured and mitred lords? Did he only say, "Go, preach my Gospel to the wise lords and grand doctors?" Did he not say, "To all?" Do we have two Gospels, one for men and the other for women? One for the educated and the other for the multitude? Are we not all one in our Saviour? In whose name are we baptized, in that of Paul or Apollo, in that of the Pope or Luther? Is it not in the name of Christ?* (Dentière in Head 1987:260).

Marie Dentière was a strong advocate for the fact that the priesthood of all believers clearly included women. She admitted that women were not admitted to preach in assemblies and public churches, but asserted that women were not prohibited from writing and giving advice in all charity to one another. Dentière left her position as abbess of the convent of Augustinians in Tournai in the 1520s and came at length to Geneva during the early days of the reform led by Guillaume Farel (Head 1987:260). The right of women to preach remained a lifelong concern of Dentière, and in her second work she pushed for the acceptance of the right of women to preach and interpret Scripture (Head 1987:263).

Her arguments are noteworthy since she attacks the traditional claims of the inherent weakness of women with a host of Biblical examples, taken mostly from the Old Testament. She implicitly counters the argument that Eve's treachery permanently sullied her sex with the observation that Judas, the New Testament equivalent, was male. Her work in this way exhibit an impressive grasp of the theological purposes that Scripture served (Head 1987:264).

Marie Dentière fought for the place of women in the evangelical movement. One of the attractions that evangelical reform held for marginal people of that time was the message of universal access to religious truth. Dentière's work was met with resistance from various sides. Jane Douglas remarks that the only women's liberation of interest to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation was the elimination of the monastic view of women, sex and marriage which was prevalent among monasteries and laymen. The convent system was overthrown, but the right of Dentière and women like her to preach, write and interpret Scripture, exercised during the period of reform struggle itself, was sharply curtailed as the Reformation consolidated its power (Head 1987:266).

Even the return of Calvin to Geneva in the 1540s did not free the strictures on female religious discourse. Despite's Calvin's sympathy towards certain forms of female spirituality, he held a view of the "qualified but definite subordination of women to men". The victory of the Reformation led only to limited changes in the religious life and status of women (Head 1987:266).

Alternative reform movements saw the light, particularly in the humanist and radical reformation traditions. Here the emphasis was once more on the New Testament egalitarian paradigm of redemption. The Quakers claimed an egalitarian view of creation in which subordination was an expression of sin and the Fall (not the will of God). Redemption was seen as the restoration of this equality. Classic subordination theology was seen as a betrayal of the good news of redemption (Ruether 1998:13).

In the Shaker movement the views are found that God is female and male (Wisdom and Power) and that women and men overcome subordination and enter into equality through celibacy. The Shakers added the appearance of a female Christ, representing the female side of God (Ruether 1998:13). Quaker theology was merged with liberal political theory ("all men are created equal") by feminist abolitionist leaders like the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott.



Margaret More Roper was not a Shaker, but her philosophy shows the influence of humanist thought in the effort to liberate women. Her father, Thomas More, argued that the two sexes were equal in their rational capacity and their ability to learn and exercise "right reason", which was seen as both an ethical and intellectual operation of the mind (McCutcheon 1987:452). More wrote:

*Nor do I think that the harvest is much affected whether it is a man or a woman who does the sowing. They both have the same human being whose nature reason differentiates from that of beasts; both, I say, are equally suited for the knowledge of learning by which reason is cultivated, and, like plowed land, germinates a crop...*  
(More in McCutcheon 1987:452).

Except for Swift, most writers of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century held that the "fair sex" had to be treated with at least overt gentleness. Denunciations of women's lust, vindictiveness, or their particular propensity towards evil were largely replaced by paternal guidance or playful ridicule of female frivolity. Harshness was now reserved for the "unfeminine" woman who dominated her husband, studied Latin, or pursued a career (Rogers 1966:174). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century an image of women arose as more delicate, moral, spiritual and less sexual than men. This romantic notion was the fusion of Mariology and courtly love with the bourgeois Protestant idealization of marriage and the home. Protestantism rejected monasticism, and endorsed the patriarchal family above virginity. Although Mariology disappeared under Protestantism, feminine symbols continued to be used to describe the relation of the self and the Church to God (Ruether 1975:20). The Victorian ideal fused marriage with romantic love and the Mariological tradition of antisexual purity. The result was a model of the ideal wife and mother who is on the one hand a fruitful mother, and on the other a lifelong sexual innocent (Ruether 1975:21). The romantic myth of feminine purity made for new arguments against women's activity outside the home. The male world was the place of materialism, while the purity of the woman was precisely due to her "seclusion" in the "sanctuary" of the home. The Catholic Bishops in Massachusetts opposed women's suffrage in the 1920's by declaring that for a woman to enter the sphere of politics was to become a fallen woman (Ruether 1975:22). Women who aspired to shine in any intellectual field were ridiculed (Rogers 1966:180). This time was equally dangerous for women. Woman was supposed to be protected because she is by nature incapable of looking after herself, and her vocation is self-sacrifice and devotion of her life to ministering to men. If a woman is naturally weak, it clearly followed that any attempts she made to independence were doomed to failure, and woman should rather resign herself to a

dependent and subordinate role which is her mission in any case. Many writers of this era insisted as strongly on female subjection as the Puritans had, although they tactfully attributed Paul's restrictions on women to his concern for their welfare rather than for their punishment and needful restraint (Rogers 1966:189-190). In this era, old maids were the focus of hostility towards women, since they were neither wives nor mothers. The second female to share this hostility was the blue stocking, who pursued a career and studied (Rogers 1966:201-204).

During this time, the move was to privatize religion and morality. This sentimentality lost all its public power. Morality and religion became the aspects of home life and women. In the Protestantism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jesus himself became a type of Mariological figure by exhibiting the passive, self-abnegating role in relation to the Father. The Church now finds itself enclosed in the sphere where it sought for so long to confine women. The clergy function in the sphere of women and are out of place in the man's world of power and business. The ironic twist is to see that the clergy who have been so misogynistic towards women, now share their sphere, together with art, humanities and higher culture. Society becomes dehumanized when women are alienated (Ruether 1975:23).

In the 20th century, increasing global movements of feminist theology in North America, Western Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa, claim original and restored equality of the genders. Feminist theologians articulate this equality as a struggle for redemptive transformation in their societies. It is assumed that redemption means overcoming patriarchal subordination (Ruether 1998:14).

What influence did the above mentioned misogyny have on the view of women's bodies and bodiliness in general?

### **3.9.1. Bodies in Religion (Symbolism)**

In medieval Catholicism, we find a religiosity where religious meaning was often found *through* the body, and not in spite of it. Medieval self-identities were about a form of embodiment in which the fleshly body and its senses were experienced as integral to the gaining of knowledge of the self and the world. Popular activities were based on participation. The focus was more on experiencing an event than on learning or understanding a message. In Durkheim's terms the Church promoted an effervescent form of sociality. It bound individuals through ritual incorporation of

Doing theology in Africa today has to take into account the rural non-literate women. This is a question of method not content. Many women on our continent cannot read and write but they sing, they dance and they speak. However, when it comes to the written Scriptures as the basis for belief, they will always depend on other people interpreting the Scriptures for them. Thus, the image of who they are in the story of faith largely depends on the teaching they receive.

Musimbi RA Kanyoro 2001:51

bodies to transcendent moral orders. Medieval believers believed the truth of God not just as a message, but as a particular experience of embodiment: the Church was the incarnation of Christ in sacramental form, and individuals were united with this incarnate God through their incorporation into this religious body (Mellor & Shilling 1997:65).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) recognizes the homo duplex as the fact that humans are both spiritual and corporeal, and that the body is a good that must be honoured since it is only through the union of body and soul that human nature comes into being. Sexuality involves all the aspects of this union of body and soul because individuals become "one flesh" and manifest a transcendent spiritual and corporeal communion. This communion signifies the union of Christ and the Church (Mellor & Shilling 1997:67).

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel argues that the Protestant tradition has placed too much emphasis on word and preaching and has separated the truth of Christianity from the human body. She once again emphasizes the centrality of the embodied immanence of the sacred to the Christian story: *God is there in bodies and their energies, alive and active. Though the story may smack of magic to some enlightened people, it is a physical story, the story of our bodies* (Moltmann-Wendel in Mellor & Shilling 1997:69).

Theology that rejects the body and sexuality sees the material as inferior to the spiritual, and negatively associates woman, matter, earth, nature and sexuality. For women who lived in celibacy this lifestyle required two steps: first, that she denies her gender and acquires a spiritual virility, thus becoming a man for Christ. According to Jerome, she will be called a man once she ceases to be a woman and serves Christ more than the world (Gray 1997:146).

Religious celibacy is bound to the Gnostic and Manichean rejection of sex. These movements emphasized perfection as means of escape from the limitations of the human condition, with focus on the body. Saints Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux and Catherine of Siena, the Flagellants, Jansenists and Descartes were icons of this negativity and disbelief in the humanness of sex and sexuality. This view of celibacy denigrates all that is physical and of the senses because it only discerns Godlikeness as spiritual and other-worldly. But is God like that? (Gray 1997:145-146).

Nelson believes that people hunger for a more erotic spirituality. He goes on to call Eros a "passion for connection, the enemy of dichotomy and disconnection" (Nelson in Mellor & Shilling 1997:70).

The disparity between sexuality as encountered in secular society, and sexuality as preached in the Church, has given rise to body theology.

But can the body be the basis of a moral community? The body is a very fallible thing. Is it not possible that a community of everyone's bodies is likely to be a community of no one's body — except as objects of exploitation, abuse and disunion? (Davies 1997:29).

Naomi Goldenberg affirmed the importance of the body in human knowing. She represents a growing body of scholarship which takes women's bodily/embodyed experience seriously in order to expand epistemic sensibilities. The result of this movement is that abstract, "universal" "knowing in the head" is no longer seen as the only reliable way of knowing (Warne 2002:53).

A theology of the body should include the full participation of women. Any interpretation of revelation derived from the significance of women's bodies must be done primarily by women themselves (Beattie 1997:175).

The view that paints women as inferior, servile and carnal, creates a symbol system that is also used for the relations of masters to slaves, as well as ruling classes to subjugated classes and races. This view is as old as the thought process from antiquity. Aristotle developed the view of women as a type of natural servile person. Greek males represent the ruling "reason" which must subjugate the 'body people' (women, slaves and barbarians) (Ruether 1975:14).

It is commonly accepted that Western society is individualistic in nature. This affects the way we live, see ourselves and others, and even the way in which we practice and seek spirituality. The rise in alternative spiritualities gives affirmation to the fact that traditional hermeneutics, ignoring the body and its experiences, denying the bigger part of the population full(bodied) spirituality and self-aware hermeneutical power, might not be sufficient in answering the human need to articulate spiritual energy and incentive.

John Davies talks about the body's "effervescence" or its erotic energies. He brings this into play with the "sacred" and makes it an essential constitutive of society. He goes on to call confluent love (the flowing together and apart of separate bodies) appropriate to an individualistic society. In this individualistic society unions are increasingly subject to contract lest the autonomy of the individual be curbed. According to him, erotic effervescence leads to communion rather than confluence, a meeting of bodies that goes beyond the cognitive and entails a mutual inflowing of self and other (Davies 1997:10).

Mellor and Shilling on their part seek to retrieve a more sensual spirituality that will allow us to recognize the inherently social nature of our being and to ultimately resist the individualism that dominates our sexuality and lifestyle these days (Davies 1997:10).

Durkheim called religion "*le clef de voûte*", the keystone of society. He saw society as resting on an experience of effervescent stimulation of emotion and energy, which gives rise to an immanent-transcendent experience of solidarity. This collective effervescence and the accompanying sense of solidarity is the essence of the sacred and of society. Society would die along with the sacred. If this effervescent sociality is not experienced, individuals would succumb to an egoistic self-absorption (Mellor & Shilling 1997:53).

What hope does the Old Testament give us? Hebrew religion is not a religion of alienation that views nature as inferior and evil. It is a religion of socionatural renewal (Ruether 1975:187). The Old Testament has no instances of a spirit/nature split into class and sexist relations, where women, slaves and lower classes are seen as analogous to the "inferior" realm of body and nature while ruling-class males are identified with transcendent spirit (Ruether 1975:188-189).

For women in the Faith, Mary has been identified as a figure representing a female symbol of great influence. Women were urged to identify with Mary, while in Catholic tradition she is venerated. Can Mary be the symbol that completely satisfies the need for women to have a symbol of their own to identify with as women first, and as people of the Faith second?

Elizabeth Johnson writes that Mary has symbolic power because she is female. Without devotion to Mary, there would have been no female images in the Christian perception of the Divine. Mary revealed divine love and mercy which the masculine

God did not. Mary is revered as the compassionate mother, and presents the Divine with a female face (Clifford 2001:188).

Protestants do not share in the veneration of Mary. Protestant Reformers argued that Mary detracted from the attention due to Christ alone. Reformers stressed attention to Scripture alone as source of theology. Although criticism against Mary devotion was needed and valid, it also removed from Protestant prayer and spirituality all female symbolism (Clifford 2001:188).

On closer study, the figure of Mary as symbol for women is not as problem-free as one would have hoped. The problematic nature of Marian symbolism for non-theologians was articulated by Sally Cunneen, who wrote that Mary was very important to her during the first 25 years of her life, with gentleness presented as passivity, and her virginity being a distortion of humanness (Clifford 2001:190). Mary in such a reflection is an unattainable ideal and antithesis of female wholeness (Clifford 2001:190). In such a case, the liberative power of Mary as symbol turns into a restrictive power, placing women under the bondage of this ideal in comparison to which, all seem to fall short.

Is Mary completely lost as a symbol, or can her importance be reinterpreted? Is the only thing worthy of knowledge about her, her passivity, or are there other dimensions to this woman of faith that can be a beacon for women following centuries after her? The critique of Marian tradition and the proposal of a reinterpretation of Mary as a self-possessed woman of decision, who did not shrink from suffering, are important for the spiritual journey of women (Clifford 2001:193).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza draws attention to what she perceives to have been missing from Marian symbolism: women's equality and capacity to lead. Rosemary Radford Ruether also critiqued the traditional exaltation of Mary as a projection by males of the feminine ideal of a docile, submissive virgin par excellence, purified of any relation to sexual femaleness (Clifford 2001:190).

Besides Mary, other symbols have also been offered as symbols of faith which women can identify with more readily. Because feminism emphasizes equality, interrelatedness and mutuality as the basis of the world as it ought to be, feminist theology can be greatly enriched by the image of the Trinity as three equal persons dancing together in perfect harmony. This metaphor of enacted harmony is far more

appealing, inclusive and a revealing sign of the Divine than two seated white males and a dove (Clifford 2001:116).

Symbols that are truly sacred participate in the realities they signify. A sacred symbol, be it of God or Mary or a saint, must make present authentic characteristics of the sacred for women. Religious symbolism can function for women both life-diminishing and life-enhancing. Some religious symbols are regressive because they do not authentically represent the sacred. Regressive symbols must be abandoned if they denigrate the human dignity of women. From this, it flows that feminists must also apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to the symbols used for God. After applying the hermeneutics of suspicion, the next step is the hermeneutics of remembrance, which aids in recognizing a symbol with progressive potential for women. How is a symbol with progressive potential for women recognized? Such a symbol at least facilitates in the praxis of imagining wholeness for women. The bedrock of feminist spirituality for women is personal integration. Such a dynamic enables women to become women of "spirit" (Clifford 2001:182).

What does feminism on the African continent have in common with European and American feminism?

### **3.10. FEMINISM ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT**

The above gives a good indication of the effects of dualism in the Western mindset, and the way it has influenced Church Fathers and ultimately the Church itself to act towards women, as well as the beliefs held of femaleness. Where does feminist theology stand on the African continent? Has feminist critique gained some ground in Africa over the past 20 odd years? Women on the African continent do not share in the same Western heritage of dualism, but have their own cultural struggles to contend with as they fight their battles against oppression. In their context, the nuances and the topics addressed differ to respond to the unique view offered by African religion.

*Scholars of African religions stated categorically that there are no boundaries between the sacred and the secular in African cultural and religious life. It stated over and over again that for the African Religion, the "sacred" and the "profane" are on the same level of experience and far from being cut from one another (Kanyoro 2002:25).*



This stands in direct contrast to Western dualism, which so dominates the religious experience. The question still needs to be answered whether this major difference might be something that makes these variations of Christian experience irreconcilable. The unique challenge African women in South Africa face, is living in a Western-orientated society while at the same time living in an African-orientated community and oftentimes attending a Church that offers a blend of both of these, together with strong patriarchal and traditional values. Such a Church would offer an African faith experience blended with Western dualistic theology and as base the text of a Jewish document (Bible). White women in the same country do not experience the pressures of belonging to an African community life, but have their own challenges to face in such a diverse culture (11 official languages) while often being categorized as colonialists and racists.

For specifically Afrikaans women, the blame for keeping them in bondage within the Church and society must fall in large part on conservative Kuyperism, as imparted to South African Dutch-Afrikaans men who went to the Netherlands to study theology (Sprong 2002:81).

Women across the world share the problems of living in a male-centred culture, but the women of Africa are especially expected to support and participate in the struggle for liberation. Jean Zaru writes of this from the Palestinian perspective, and explains that women must struggle alongside men while they are often hurt and damaged. They are, despite their struggles, not allowed any participation in the community decision making structures. This may also be said of the African context. A patriarchal culture denies these women their responsibility for the future of their own community (Zaru 2002:86).

The danger for African women remains in finding their identity in motherhood. African culture places tremendous pressure on women to be mothers in order to prove their worth as women. The emphasis of marriage also falls strongly on procreation. In the extremities of such a patriarchal culture, a woman's value is linked directly to the amount of children she conceives and their gender.

Irigaray affirms the significance of mothering for women's identity, but holds that women need to find meaning outside the mothering role as well. In the same vein they must discover a language that allows them to articulate their identity beyond motherhood. If women are to find their own meaning, they will find it in what men rejected as inappropriate and superfluous to their social constructs (Beattie 1997:174).

Despite their challenges and difficulties, African women see their task in the bigger feminist wheel as prophetic. They recognize the practices of injustice in Church and society as a sinful betrayal of the vision of Jesus who emphasized a society characterized by equality, freedom and justice. African women are unmasking and challenging such sinful practices and structures of injustice, despite not all of them being conscious of their effort being "feminist" in nature. Some women see no contradiction in being both feminist and Christian (Hinga 1996:31), while others show a noticeable avoidance to label work "feminist" despite the fact that feminist theology has been flourishing under that label in the West for at least a decade.

Sister Anne Nasimiyu of Kenya outlines five tasks for African women's theology:

1. To conscientize the community so that people become aware of both their own dignity and that of others,
2. Unmasking the cultural bias against women and recovering the basic, communal, liberative thrust of the Scriptures,
3. Awakening people to critical reflection so that they do not accept tradition simply as given,
4. Critically undermining the established sinful order, and
5. Renouncing all that dehumanizes people in African culture.

She maintains that the Gospel must be a sharp cutting edge to African culture in order to transform and restore it to wholeness (Rakoczy 2004:22).

It is possible to conclude that one of the main concerns for African women is to voice their protest against sexism and its roots in religion and culture. This protest is directed at both African religion and culture, as well as Christianity (Hinga 1996:31). The problem of black women fighting for liberation is made more complex by the fact that the black movement does not focus on black feminism, but black masculinity. The whole black liberation movement has been mainly male oriented in both style and leadership, so that black women do not necessarily find their complete home in this movement (Ruether 1975:120-121). The past ten years in South Africa have seen the rise of some black female leaders, but they remain less influential than their male counterparts.

The specific symbols women in South Africa use in religion to find their own defined identity and a mandate of liberation need to be mined more. From one perspective as example, the cross can be seen as an extreme angle for the risk that is taken

when a struggle against oppression is taken on. It is not redeeming in itself, however. Jesus' suffering and death is not the redeeming factor, but rather His life, and His vision of right and justice and good relation restored. Jesus stands as model to women when He is seen in His role of resisting temptation toward unjust power in the wilderness, and when He spoke a word of life against unjust systems. In this ministry of healing and prophetic proclamation for life, women need to follow Jesus, despite the possibility of falling prey to oppressive powers by doing this (Ruether 1998:102).

### **3.11. IDENTIFYING THE SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN**

Feminist study has problematized the whole phenomenon of subordination and the subjugation of women as a group. Women's scholarship has resulted in the hearing of stories of women by women, and the awareness that women have worldwide been subordinated as a gender. This subordination has crossed boundaries of race, class, creed and nationality. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, affirmed this subjugation. It was stated that there was no state where women were safe from violence or treated as equals to men (Kanyoro 2002:27).

Women constitute an oppressed social group. The subordination of women is articulated through various public and private institutions, and has been legitimized throughout history in literature, art, and even folk stories. The socialization of all people has continued to propagate the myth that women are inferior and sometimes less than human (Kanyoro 2002:27).

Traditional views of femaleness see it as having less normative and full humanity, more prone to sin, and being more culpable for having caused sin to enter the world. Femaleness has been seen as being created subordinate. This resulted in a skewed message of equal redemption in Jesus. In writings such as 1 Timothy, women were defined as those who had been created second and sinned first. They should keep silent and accept their subordination to the male, and bear children to be "saved". From feminist perspective such an inferiorization is sin, and resultingly it follows that women not only need to be saved from sin by Christ, but also from such Christian definitions that re-enforce the sinful condition of violence against women (Ruether 1998:11).

In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II called upon women to promote a new feminism which rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination, in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation (Pope John Paul II in Beattie 1997:160).

Irigaray, the radical French philosopher of sexual difference, agrees that women's liberation entails more than a campaign for equal rights. She rightly asks: *What do women want to be equal to? Men? A wage? A public position? Equal to what? Why not to themselves?* She also stresses that no restructuring of the social order can be successful without addressing the issue of religion:

*God is being used by men to oppress women and... therefore, God must be questioned and not simply neutered in the current pseudoliberal way. Religion as social phenomenon cannot be ignored* (Irigaray in Beattie 1997:160).

Feminism also faces the danger of being taken up and assimilated into other topics of liberation, and is constantly pointing out that it has its own agenda as opposed to the broader liberation agenda of other movements. Friedrich Engels defined the subjugation of women as the first oppressor-oppressed relation in his work *The Origin and History of the Family*. This was the foundation of all other class and property relations. In modern liberation movements, the "woman question" is often sadly the last question to be raised, and ironically, those with otherwise "liberal" views seem to resist this question (Ruether 1975:3). Not all liberation movements have the liberation of women as a focus point.

### **3.11.1. Women's Cooperation in their own Subjugation**

Feminism, true to its critical nature, has pointed out that women are not only victims of external forces, but are also victims of their own volition. A world made of discourse, a symbolic order, an ideology exists only by consensus. If it cannot recruit new adherents it ceases to have reality (Newsom in Stratton 1995:233). Women must be made aware of the fact that their own ignorance about their struggles and achievements in history has been a major force in their own subordination (Lerner 1986:226). Gerda Lerner has the opinion that it is the relationship of women to history that explains the nature of female subordination. Their relationship to history also explains the causes why women cooperate in the processes of their own

subordination, the conditions for their opposition to it, and their specific rise in feminist consciousness (Lerner 1986:vii).

### 3.12. FEMINISM AND DIVERSITY AMONG WOMEN

Keeping in mind the inability to embrace a universal women's experience, feminist identified scholarship embraces an ambivalent, self-critical and internally suspicious perspective. This suspicious approach allows that no woman's experience can be presumed or fully represented by another (Pears 2001:14).

Black women do not easily find a home in the feminist struggle as it currently is shaped. They feel that the white middle-class dominated women's movement does not express their experiences. The black woman experiences the white woman as a sexual rival and at the same time a person whose existence has been exploited to oppress the black woman while attracting and terrorizing the black male. There seems no reason why black women would share feelings of solidarity with white women. White women seem like the oppressors of black women on an economic level, since they seem to be (from black point of view, at least) the pampered darlings who are freed from their womanly responsibilities by the labour of the black woman. This in turn freed them to cultivate the ornamental femininity so prized by white males. Black women are bitter towards white women, which make it even more difficult for them to discover each other as common victims of white patriarchy (Ruether 1975:130).

Is this analysis of Rosemary Ruether true for the South African context as well? Or is it just one way of looking at the same picture? Might another way to look at the picture entail that while it is definitely true that bitterness rules and that white women seem like the oppressors to black women, in a country where the supply for labour far exceeds the demand thereof, is the white woman not often an employer rather than an oppressor? Whence would the source of work for the majority of black women come from if there is no longer a "white household" (woman) to supply it? On the other hand, it is common knowledge that "domestic workers" are paid the bare minimum wage in South Africa. But the white woman does not get a salary that matches that of the white male, or, in the New South Africa, oftentimes of her black counterpart. The white middle class finds itself with less expenditure power every year in a country where the government is focused on the Redevelopment and

Advancement of previously disadvantaged groups, among which Black women count.

Currently in South Africa, there is a request on the table to remove white women from the list of previously disadvantaged groups.

The women's movement needs to be very sensitive to the interstructuring of race, sex and class in order to articulate the various experiences of the different groups of women (Ruether 1975:132).

When feminists fail to recognize differences, even in the constructive and synthetic act of remembrance, we inherit the racism of our white foremothers. Sharon Patricia Holland has stated that "divorcing black women's words from their bodies is a practice so commonplace in the abolitionist-feminist movement that even the bodily presence of Sojourner Truth failed to quell the use of black women as metaphors for white women's exploitation (Hughes 2002:12). On the other hand, a statement like the above implicitly shows the assumption that racism is always something coming from the "white side". Together with this runs another equally dangerous assumption that black people are never racist, and always victims of white people. In a country with a history such as ours, it has been becoming clear in the past ten years that racism is not just something perpetuated by white folk, but by all people in all conditions.

bell hooks has shown how white feminists have used black people as metaphors. The result of such a misappropriation is the hiding of the originality of the figure in order to enrich and spotlight that which it signifies (Hughes 2002:19). Audre Lorde wrote in *Sister Outsider* how her work is used across lines of difference. She wrote "An open letter to Mary Daly" and pointed out that there was a long history of white women who failed to hear black women's words or to maintain dialogue with them. She argued that black women's texts and voices were too often used for white women's purposes in a non-dialogical relationship. Lorde warned against two poles of non-response to difference:

1. Voluntary isolation of ignoring each other's work, and
2. False and treacherous connections made in using it (Hughes 2002:20).

The *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz stated that the way we deal with each other's work is also the way we deal with difference (Hughes 2002:21). How does

one read a text written by a writer of colour or a different culture without displacing her? As white readers, we might attempt to read "ex-static". One needs to stand outside of oneself, and try to come alongside the relatively disprivileged speaker or textual figure. One then has to proceed by taking up or sharing the position and vision of the other. The ex-static reader then becomes able to step out of, see and name, her own privileges. This exercise is easier with imaginative literature, since the texts always exceed the intention of the author (Hughes 2002:12). A good South African example might be the book "Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena" written by Elsa Joubert. This text explores the struggle of a black woman with great sensitivity, while the "white" writer practically disappears.

To identify thus with the text, does not imply the collapse of distinct positions, bodies or social locations, since it is also a disidentification with the reader's power over the other. To read in this way is to find that one is "beside oneself", open to transformation and reconstruction of the self from another site. A final step is the return to the position where the reader addresses the other's text. This requires the negotiation and re-deployment of those privileges that will undo the power differential that makes such ex-stasy so difficult (Hughes 2002:12).

It is the responsibility of those with more privilege and power to recognize difference and educate themselves, more than it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes (Hughes 2002:21-22). I would agree and at the same disagree with such a simplistic statement. Experience in South Africa has shown that people do not just have different agendas across racial lines, but across cultural lines as well. In this country we find that white people are not just English, but also Afrikaans, German, Jewish, etc. The black community itself comprises of numerous different cultures and languages — each with their own value systems, traditions and priorities towards its own people first and foremost. The education and recognition of difference can no longer be the sole responsibility of the traditionally seen upper white classes, but now becomes the responsibility of each and every citizen in a capitalist, post-Apartheid, multi-cultural society.

Ann Kirkus Wetherilt tackles the issues of the "women's experience" trajectory in her book *In That They May Be Many*. She acknowledges that the diversity of women's experience makes ideologically suspect all early works of feminist scholarship that showed images of women as universal (Schaeffer 2000:3).

Contention has arisen in feminist theology over the absence of recognition that women's experience is diverse. The emphasis on an experiential base of theological construction in theory assumes a view of theology as a multiform and social activity. But recognition of absence has not translated smoothly into inclusion. Pears writes that "the unrelenting hegemony of what has been understood by feminists as 'women's experience' has in fact been a source of exclusion and marginalization" (Pears 2001:13). After the importance of recovering women's experiences has been stated, we need to question whose experience we are referring to, and who decides on its value. Mary McClintock Fulkerson has pointed out that the same patterns of exclusion and marginalization that have been pointed out in traditional theology, have tainted the liberationist project of feminist theology (Pears 2001:13). Feminist theological discourse has in fact proven itself to also be exclusive in its universalist understandings of women's experience. The critiques of the same women marginalized by a discourse claiming to represent their interests, makes the importance of perspective and committed interest clear (Pears 2001:13-14).

The notion of a global sisterhood has also been critiqued from a postmodern perspective. Postmodernists hold that proponents of a global sisterhood speak of the Third World Woman as a composite and singular image. But this undifferentiated other has been constructed by Western feminists, and she does not exist. The image is presented of women uniformly poor, powerless and vulnerable. Their reference point is held to be modern, educated and sexually liberated Western women. bell hooks has argued against the notion of a global sisterhood, and states that, in order for the voices of the marginalized and displaced to be heard, their difference and otherness of experience should be explored (Haddad 1996:202).

The important implications for the South African context stemming from the aforementioned postmodern understanding of the importance of difference and otherness are:

1. There is no composite and singular image of the powerless, and especially the vulnerable black South African woman (or the white South African woman, for that matter).
2. Exploration of the meaning of the powerlessness and vulnerability of black women must not be done within parameters prescribed by white feminists, but rather from within the boundaries of the lived survival experience of black women (Haddad 1996:202-203).



In the light of this, can we speak across culture and racial lines at all? Is there something like the female voice? The answer may lie in the simple praxis of Rosemary Radford Ruether when she writes a book. For her, there is a specific community she keeps in mind. She gets involved with issues, but the people in their individual communities are the ones who ultimately have to give reality to thoughts and ideas in books. In her opinion, friendships with people from other groups can legitimate writing and activism, even though one does not belong to that specific group (Hinton 2002:31).

### 3.13. THE ULTIMATE AIM OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

The ultimate aim of feminist theology remains the liberation of women. Liberating women takes various shapes in various settings. It may be revolutionary or simply the raising of consciousness. Rosemary Ruether answers her question on what do women want? as follows: They seek the reconstruction of relationships for which there are no words or models: a reconstruction that gives people back the fullness of their being that was stolen from them by false polarizations. The term for this in the women's movement itself is **androgyny** (Ruether 1975:26). A new concept for relationships is needed between persons, groups and life systems. This relationship should not be competitive or hierarchical, but mutually enhancing (Ruether 1975:26).

The analysis of women's liberation has several different levels of problematics:

1. The first stage of liberation is subjective and psychoanalytical. This process involves raising consciousness and rejecting self-debasing images of self that is projected onto the oppressed and internalized.
2. The second stage is social praxis. Individualistic consciousness must enlarge to enable one to see the way women as a group are entrapped by the systemic structuring of male-female roles.
3. Women must become self-critical about their own contexts of class and race. Women are neither a class nor a race, and all women share some oppressions as women: sexual exploitation, dependency, domestic labour etc. At the same time, women are divided against each other by their own integration into different classes and races.
4. The ecological crisis must be confronted. The world consists of dwindling resources that are hoarded by the present powerholders. The way resources are allocated within the world community must be re-evaluated (Ruether 1975:29-31).

What does the first stage of liberation entail?

### 3.13.1. Liberation of the Mind

Gerda Lerner indicates that liberation begins with consciousness and experience. Revolutionary thought has always been based on the upgrading of the oppressed's experience. Simply becoming conscious is also in itself liberating. For women, a shift in consciousness will take at least the following two steps:

1. Being woman-centered for a time, and
2. Leaving patriarchal thought behind (Lerner 1986:227-228).

To be woman-centered, means answering the question: If women were central to this argument, how would it be defined? All marginality must be ignored. The starting assumption must be that nothing ever happened in the world without women being involved, except when they were prevented from participation by coercion or repression (Lerner 1986:228). When traditional thought systems and methods are used, they must be used from the vantage point of the centrality of women. By moving women to the centre of a system, it gets transformed (Lerner 1986:228).

Gerda Lerner then goes on to explain what it means to step outside patriarchal thought. In order to do this, one must be skeptical of every thought system, be critical of all assumptions, values and definitions. Statements must be tested against female experience. In the past this experience has been trivialized or outright ignored, and as women we must now make a concerted effort to overcome the deep resistance within ourselves to accepting ourselves and our own unique knowledge as valid. The great men in our heads must be substituted for our foremothers and sisters (Lerner 1986:228).

One must be critical towards own thought because this thought is trained along patriarchal lines. Intellectual courage to stand alone must also be developed. In reality this means that thinking women have to move from their desire to be approved, towards the unacceptable trait of intellectual arrogance (Lerner 1986:228).

Both Lerner and Ruether see the same end-result if feminist liberation can run its course: The possibility of a feminist world-view is that it could enable men and women to free their minds of patriarchal thought and practice, and to ultimately build a world that is free of dominance and hierarchy, and thus fully human (Lerner 1986:229).

The critical outward eye must always turn inward. Attention must be given to the tendency within the black- as well as the women's movement to ignore the structures of oppression within their own groups, and their attempt to reduce "oppression" to a single-factored analysis. Liberation movements are just as guilty of polarizing, but in reverse fashion: to acknowledge oppression within the own group, would be to lose ultimate righteousness and the projection of guilt onto the "others". Liberation movements must be forced to look upon themselves not just as the oppressed, but also as oppressors in their own right depending on the context. Such an analysis would lead to a more mature view of the capacity of the human being for good and evil, which will balance the angle of righteous anger with critical self-knowledge. Only such a knowledge will save liberation movements from the simple reversal of hatred and oppression (Ruether 1975:132).

What does liberation from societal oppression look like?

### **3.13.2. Liberation from Social Oppression**

Anne Bennett wrote about the liberation sought for women, and defined it as liberation from whatever limits self-fulfillment and a liberation from the barriers that prevent full exercise of freedom. For women it includes the liberation from economic, social, racist and sexist exploitation and oppression (Bennett 1989:33).

Any women's movement which is only concerned with sexism and nothing else, remains only a movement of the white upper class, since it is only this class whose only problem is sexism because they belong to the ruling class in every other way. But women who belong to minority groups must integrate her struggle as woman into the struggle for liberation from racial and economic oppression. It is necessary for the woman's movement to incorporate in its struggle the interstructuring of sexism with other kinds of oppression and recognize a pluralism of women's movements in the different contexts of the different groups of women. Unless it does this, it will remain a women's movement of the ruling upper class that can be used to further consolidate the power of that class against the poor and nonwhite people of both genders (Ruether 1975:125).

The liberation of women cannot be separated from the struggles of oppressed races, since half of every oppressed race consists of women. Feminist theology can thus



**THE SEARCH WITHIN**  
JANET MCKENZIE

never ignore the political dimension. All women and all oppressed groups share a common victimization. The aim of human liberation should be the overcoming of the division of humankind into superior and inferior peoples, which implies the redressing of rights and of power. It should seek the end of alienation within the individual's feminine and masculine attributes since they should both be nurtured for the benefit of the whole person. Human liberation should seek theology that will help people understand the wholeness of God and the oneness of humankind (Bennett 1989:41).

What problems accompany the relationship between liberation theology and feminist theology?

### 3.13.3. Feminist Liberation Theology

Tackling the relationship between liberation theology and feminist theology, it is imperative to note the remark of Rosado Nunes when she writes:

*...we protest against the fact that liberation theology has not dealt with the specific oppression of women to a significant extent; for this reason, we consider urgent the development of a feminist liberation theology (Schüssler Fiorenza & Shawn Copeland 1996:7).*

A feminist liberation theology of redemption should, according to Brown and Parker, start with the proposition that unjust suffering and death are never justified as a means of redemption. We are not redeemed through or because of someone's unjust torture and death. Redemption rather means a transformation that brings life (Ruether 1998:101).

The motif is found time and again that it is not just the cross, but more so the resurrection and life of Jesus, that is held as symbol and banner for women fighting for liberation. For Ruether herself, the cross does not atone for sin. The resurrection manifests the life that rises in the victimized who refuse to accept the power of the rulers to silence the prophets. Redemption takes place in the resurgence of power and hope for abundant life that sustains the struggle against the system of death (Ruether 1998:104). Feminist liberation critiques against the classical theology of the cross should force Christian theologians and liturgists to tell the story of Jesus in a different way (one that could be more authentic than the historical reality). Jesus did not come to suffer and die. He saw His mission as one of good news to the poor and the liberation of the captive. This liberation is seen as experiences of liberation

between those who had been on the underside of the dominant system of religion and state. Jesus shared these experiences of liberating life for the poor. He revealed a liberating God through exorcisms and healings as well as celebratory meals in which marginalized people shared food at a table together (Ruether 1998:104-105).

Black Theology in South Africa emerged in the context of the black consciousness movement of the late 60s and early 70s. It came into being as a cultural tool of struggle, with its immediate target being the Christian Church and Christian theology. The point of contention was the perceived acquiescence of the Christian Church and theology in the oppression and exploitation of black people. Black theologians argued that the white outlook of theology helped to reproduce the inequalities of an apartheid society. The result was that black activists emphasized the need for a black theology of liberation (West 1991:37-38).

Ruether finds a South African voice in Alan Boesak in their agreement that the prophetic content is the Word of God. Feminism also goes beyond the letter of the prophetic message to apply the prophetic-liberating principle to *women*. In doing this, feminist theology makes explicit what was overlooked in male advocacy of the poor and oppressed. Liberation must start with the most oppressed: namely women of the oppressed. Ruether stretches the vision further into the future: the point of reference for Biblical faith is not past texts, but the liberated future. The past is not appropriated in order to remain in its limits, but to point out new futures (West 1991:86-87).

The influence of local liberation theologians can never be ignored, since the focus of feminist theology is also liberational in nature. Alan Boesak and Itumeleng Mosala are two role players whose work needs mentioning despite their different methods of handling the Biblical text. Boesak is criticized by Mosala for reading texts without recognizing what he is doing. According to Mosala, he should show a critical consciousness in his work. Thus, once a theologian starts reading against the grain of the text, it should be with a stated critical consciousness (West 1991:111).

Biblical interpretation for liberation implies a constant reflection on Scripture in the light of experience, so that each sheds a light on the other, in dialectical tension. This process is most effective when analytical tools are used on both the Bible, as well as the social matrix of the experience of the reader. The Bible is not exempt

from the "hermeneutic of suspicion" to which society is subjected, otherwise readings will simply be determined by the received and accepted tradition, and new insights will be lost (Draper 1996:222-223).

What are the challenges feminist theology faces on the African continent?

### 3.13.4. Challenges in the African Context

In 4.10, I briefly sketched the position of feminist theology on the African continent. Here, I briefly discuss some of the unique challenges facing this theology in Africa. Rosemary Radford Ruether articulated her insight that black women would have to raise issues of gender within the black community (Hinton 2002:30). It would be impossible for a white, middle-class woman to conceive of all the dimensions of the gender issue within the black community.

It is also necessary to note the significance African women theologians give the term "African". In Africa we find a legacy of imperialism and paternalism that has characterized the relationship between Westerners and Africans. For a long time it has been assumed that Africans need to be guided, represented and spoken on behalf of, since they are either unwilling or unable to do so for themselves. African women are double victims — even when we listen to Africa, we still the voice of the woman in Africa. It is normally assumed that their voice is included in that of men. In this enforced silence can be found an implicit injustice (Hinga 1996:27-28).

African women find themselves struggling against the imperialism implicit in the efforts of others (especially Westerners) to represent them. They share this struggle with male theologians. For African women this critique includes Western women in so far as they presume to speak on African behalf. African women insist that the right to speak for themselves is a necessary condition for their emancipation and must be respected (Hinga 1996:28).

Women must take ownership of their personal religious experiences. Anne Bennett pointed out that none of us, nor all of us, can *do* theology *for* people's liberation. All people/s have to do their own theology. The doing *for* another person or group of people is patriarchal and paternalistic, and paternalism is not compatible with liberation. Women must work on liberation theology *with* oppressed peoples, and not *for* them (Bennett 1989:124).

In the African context, though most of the women theologians involved in theological discussion are Christians, their critical hermeneutics of religion and culture also involves them in an analysis of the ambiguous impact of Christianity in their lives. On the one hand these women state that Christianity has aided in the oppression of women since it legitimized colonialism, racism and sexism. On the other hand many African women took for themselves the gospel of liberation implicit in Christianity, and use this as strong motivating force in their struggle for liberation (Hinga 1996:31).

In my opinion a facet that is never addressed by feminist theologians, is the existence of racism in feminist theology, and also in African theology. Whether this is due to a misplaced sense of decency, or an unwillingness to offer a critique of racial relations within the field, is unclear. I do find an aggression towards white people in the works of many African (or non-white) theologians, and a complete lack of cognizance of this fact on the side of white theologians. Is it possible that, in order to just move forward, everybody is willing to keep silent about this not-so-nice-evidence-of-disharmony-that-is-more-serious-than-just-difference? One could, of course, let a lot of the remarks pass as possibly mere statements of fact or reflections of reality-that-is-named, but it is necessary to criticize theological works for this aspect. Just as white theologians need to tread carefully on sacred racial ground and always implement a respect for the diversity of races, the same ethos is and should be expected for all other players in the field.

I find traces of racism to be a very real problem in African theology. As I read around the works of African theologians, one prime example was the following racist (when seen in the whole context of the argument) and completely unrealistic paragraph by Tinyiko S Maluleke:

*A young white woman the same age as my mother would have been unlikely to meet her end the way mother did. She would not have had to carry kilograms of unground maize on her head for twenty kilometers. A white woman of my mother's age did not have to bear the heartache of a part-time, migrant-worker husband. A white woman would most probably have been rushed to a clinic or hospital in time to save her life. Perhaps it was a mild heart attack that my mother suffered. Maybe it was sheer fatigue mixed with heartache and loss of hope... (Maluleke 2001:241).*

Instead of answering this remark myself, since I am a young white woman in the middle class, I would like to place this remark in dialogue with two very different remarks. Anne Bennett, a lay woman in the Church in America wrote:



*It is an old trick of the dominant group within any class or race to turn the powerless on each other. All women and all oppressed groups share a common victimization; either there will be liberation for all of them or for none (Bennett 1989:137).*

The second text I want to place in direct dialogue with Maluleke's statement that smacks of racism, is in a column written by Barry Ronge for the South African Sunday Newspaper *The Sunday Times*. Ronge, a white male, is a film and television critic:

*"A Black man is always a Suspect" said the bumper sticker on the car in front of me...The moment I saw it I thought, "That's pretty offensive", and I craned my neck to see who was driving. When I saw an African man at the wheel my immediate reaction was, "Oh, that's alright then"...If the driver of the car had been white it would definitely not have been alright...When it is on a car driven by a black man... the meaning is subverted...I don't see that changing the direction of the offensiveness really solves the problem...I think that any black passer-by who sees a white person driving a car that bears a sticker that says, "A Black man is always a Suspect", has a right to be annoyed and offended. But...is that same sticker on a car driven by a black man not equally offensive to a white passer-by? Look at that statement again. It's literal meaning is obvious, but doesn't it also imply that "A White man is always a Racist"? Is it not making a generalized contemptuous inference based on skin colour? And is that not just racism headed in the opposite direction?... (Ronge 2004:10).*

To keep on hammering on the problematic white aspect of the problem of liberation and subjugation while ignoring the role the victim plays in their own subjugation, has repeatedly been identified as folly. Furthermore, to show aggressiveness towards white feminists if their methods are riddled with mistakes, serves only the purpose of dividing and conquering. We need to always remember that, as women, despite race, class and culture, we share the experience of being female. We might not share the exact same contours of oppression, but that is not to say that we do not all bear heavy burdens just for being female. A clear solution to this problem would be the transparency brought about by the sharing and creating of herstory as described in chapter 2. If Maluleke knew more about circumstances of white women, he may not have made his one-sided, misinformed remark. I am loathe to go into further detail on this topic, but felt it necessary to point it out as far as the history and development of feminist thought goes. My personal experience is that white women are encouraged to internalize white guilt for everything bothering everybody else, while nonwhite women are encouraged to internalize nonwhite outrage at everything

everybody else has. In a country with such a multi-cultural history as ours, one should always turn the critical eye inwards to scrutinize hidden personal agendas that might be lurking behind so-called liberationist or feminist ideals. It would be easy to mask personal bitterness as activism, and theologians should be more rigorously critiqued than anybody else in such a context.

### 3.13.5. Hermeneutics and Interpretation

The application of performative language theory to Biblical studies is in a stage of infancy. Few Biblical scholars know what it entails, and most are still too embedded in historical criticism. Since historical criticism cannot be discarded, a fuller exploration of the relationship between historical-critical approaches to other relevant interpretive strategies needs to be done. Also, the transition from an Enlightenment-dominated thought world to a postmodern intellectual environment asks for a rethinking of Biblical hermeneutics (Melugin 1999:264).

Musimbi Kanyoro explains "hermeneutics" as "interpretation". Biblical hermeneutics allows people to interpret texts of the Bible in their current times and cultures. Kanyoro notes that all interpretations bear the bias of the interpreters, since the context of a person influences the meaning given to any communication event, verbal or otherwise. Culture determines the semantic value of symbols and words. All readings represent the reality of a certain people located at a certain time and space. In Africa, culture is central to people's thought systems, and Kanyoro pleads that culture be analyzed alongside the Biblical text. She introduces the concept of cultural hermeneutics which refers to the analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a specific time and location (Kanyoro 2002:9).

Letty Russell articulates a key question of feminist interpretation as:

What would it mean for the Bible itself to be a liberated word? Keeping in mind that liberation from a patriarchal worldview is never a finished task, how can we hope for a liberated word?

She gives as clue that the Word of God is not identical with the Biblical texts. The story of these texts is experienced as the Word of God when it is heard in faith communities and when it witnesses God's love for the world.

Her second clue is that liberation is an ongoing process expressed in the already/not yet dynamic of God's action of New Creation. The word is already liberated as it

witnesses to God's liberating action in the stories of Israel and Jesus. It must always be liberated from its own historical limitations and that of its interpreters, but one day it will be fully liberated and lived out in the New Creation (Russell 1985:17).

Russell identifies four emphases in the liberation process:

1. Feminist and liberation interpreters struggle critically with the texts and use the best available resources to understand the meaning in light of the Biblical historical situation as well as contemporary history.
2. Close attention is given to the contexts out of which the message comes and the contexts where the word is to be heard. Interpretation is an imaginative construction of meaning (as is translation).
3. The meaning comes alive for feminists in the community for struggle which seeks to overcome the domination and dehumanization of half the human race.
4. Interpretation is understood as an act of commitment to the poor and the marginal. The good news is addressed to them as a way of understanding the hoped-for horizon of God's New Creation (Russell 1985:17-18).

When handling the Biblical text, it should be remembered that the text may claim to speak for the culture, but that it is not necessarily equivalent with the culture. Though the text gives a male perspective, women lived in the culture and had female experiences unmentioned in the text. This serves as reason why one should not let the text limit the questions that one can ask (Day 1989:5).

Nadar agrees with Okure in pointing out that Biblical scholars are now at last taking full cognizance of the influence that the social location of the interpreter plays on his or her search for meaning in the Bible to such a degree that a reading of the Bible that is not directly related to the social location of the reader is almost considered out of fashion (Nadar 2001:161). In this regard, the work of Gerald West of KwaZulu-Natal is important, and is mentioned in more detail in chapter 7.

Interpreters frame an entire discussion. They ultimately decide which of the components of the story to highlight, in what order to discuss aspects and how to characterize and evaluate those elements. The interpreter's rhetoric ultimately frames any discussion of a tale and its rhetoric (Stratton 1995:155).

Language offers possibilities. The dialogue between Eve and the serpent shows that even God's speech is subject to interpretation. God's command was a speech act, and made intention, knowledge, convention and relationship necessary for proper understanding and evaluation. The serpent's position offers an alternative in Genesis 3, but the credibility of any alternative depends on the rhetorical relationships among the speakers (Stratton 1995:156).

Even quotation unavoidably interferes, mediates and exploits, since it can never reproduce an original speech event because the context of the first speech and the quotation differs. Quotation involves a second level of narration that puts characters themselves in the position of narrator and engages them in rhetoric. Quotation thus involves a dual strategy: it represents original speech, but does so in terms of its own rhetorical purposes. Still, the rhetoric of the quoting insert is always subject to the rhetorical goals of the narrator's framing (Stratton 1995:156).

When the narrator of Genesis chooses to make God's words the topic of discussion, he reminds the reader that there are consequences for our interpretations, that we should pay attention to who is doing the persuading, and that God expects us to act and to interpret responsibly (Stratton 1995:156).

A mistake feminists must refrain from making, is to be unaware of androcentric assumptions dominating interpretations. This will result in reading the current sex/gender arrangements into the past (Lerner 1986:15).

The different historical contexts within which the Biblical texts have been interpreted in the past also deserve attention. A study of these contexts can contribute towards the description of the trajectories that certain Biblical themes followed through different historical periods until today. Locally African scholarship is in an ideal position to indicate how the colonial and racist past of our continent determined the interpretation of the Bible. The task of African scholars would be to uncover the often neglected histories of oppressed people by means of thorough historical studies, and to show how these histories impacted Biblical interpretation among those who were oppressed by these colonial and racist societies. There exists a need for a scientific study of the history of interpretation (Jonker 2001:81).

Should the Church discard pieces of the Biblical text that are problematic? Is the Biblical text studied in parts, or as a whole?

Had it abbreviated the Jewish canon, the Church would have been producing *an other* text, whose reading could no longer be an appropriation of meaning of the traditions of Israel. This was a decisive point, because the infant Church had no consciousness of a distinctive "founding"; it understood itself as the reinterpretation of *Israel*. For the first Christians, their rereading was *the interpretation* of Israel's traditions (Croatto 1987:59).

Christians are not neutral or objective towards our tradition. Since the Reformation there has been a widespread objection against the citing of Biblical verses outside of their larger setting. This misuse was called "proof-texting". Scripture must be read as a living whole, and the meaning of a text arises from its interconnected fabric of aims, connotations, referents and events. Specific texts cannot be highlighted without the background of the book as a whole which frames and grounds them. An appeal must also be made to the subjective state of the interpreter. We cannot gain access to meaning and function and proper use of a text from the tradition without seeing it as integrative to the whole. A section cannot be prized away from the canonical whole without it losing its claim to authenticity of text and tradition (Sonderregger 2001:391).

The psychological intention or interior motivation of the reader is irrelevant when the author's aims are violated. Holistic exegesis develops a feeling for the place into which texts fit naturally, the range of the background texts, their rarity or commonness, and how others in that world speak and hear in that idiom. Throughout the Church we can see holistic exegesis in praxis at various times and places, and we should rely upon it today as we seek to find the force, position and rank of the Bible's teaching on women, sexuality and family (Sonderregger 2001:391-392).

Rabbinical exegesis was more attached to short texts and individual words, while the semantic relevance to the whole was never in dispute. The whole of the Torah is a network of meaning, and a word, or even a part of a word, can show these relationships of meaning. Christian exegesis sought to harmonize the whole meaning of the Scriptures in a different way. It had taken a position within the intratextuality of these Scriptures, thereupon setting it in contiguity with new texts — gospels, letters and others — which were its rereading, and thus forming a new intertextuality. At our distance, our own rereading should take up the whole Bible

once more in its character as a new intratextuality, so that we may discover its new semantic axes, and be able to read it from within our own lives (Croatto 1987:60).

### 3.13.6. Reading the Text

After looking at the text that is studied, focus shifts to the act of reading itself and the person who is doing the reading. Reading is a creative activity. The reception of a text depends on the interpreting subject: background, assumptions, experience, cognitive capabilities and gender (Arzt 2002:32). The world is known only from the unique perspective of the knower. What is understood reflects not only the reality which is understood but the perspective from which it is understood (Lochhead 1993:131).

Feminism has highlighted the importance of the reader and the various factors that influence how the reader understands a text. It is no longer assumed that a text can be simply understood in one way, and no other. The reason why feminism gives great attention to this aspect which influences the meaning of texts, is because women have been on the oppressed side of meanings handed down to them since time immemorial. By giving readers the power to grasp meanings for themselves and sanctioning their meanings as "just as trustworthy as that of meanings drawn from patriarchal viewpoints", women are greatly empowered.

The study of the reception of Biblical texts is called **reader-response criticism** (Arzt 2002:32). It is now known that reception depends also on the reader's gender. Perception is coloured by gender. The cognition psychologist Sandra Bern speaks of a gender-scheme as an additional scheme of perception (Arzt 2002:33).

Various studies have shown that gender influences reception of a text. This becomes important when the question of inclusive language comes to the fore. Use of non-inclusive language makes it more difficult for women to understand and retain texts, since women produce fewer images and find it harder to identify with the text (Arzt 2002:33). Girls identify more with female characters, and boys with male characters. Girls show more empathy and relationship with characters, and experience the narrative more strongly as a "world". Girls deviate more from accounts of the narrative than boys, who recount narratives more as chains of information (Arzt 2002:33).

Hermeneutics have traditionally focused on understanding the ancient text, especially in linguistic and historical terms. Hermeneutics in the current context, however, begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: the modern interpreter, as much as the text, stands in a specific historical context and tradition (West 1991:43).

A great problem lies in the metaphoric conceptualization in the Old Testament. Metaphors enable people to speak about abstract realities in terms of the familiar experienced world. The problem arises when the modern reader reads/interprets without sharing the same experiential world as the text. The same meaning is now no longer attached to the same abstract realities, as pictured by the metaphors. The metaphors may be incomprehensible, or the wrong aspects of the metaphors may be highlighted. A typical example is that of the Shepherd metaphor in Scripture:

1. it carries the aspect of care and protection, but
2. it also carries an aspect of rulership and righteousness, which is no longer associated with the metaphor in our age.

Is reading to be a simple act of reading a text and immediately drawing meaning from it? Is more expected from the reader?

Mosala demands that interpreters recognize the ideological nature of a text, that readers develop the critical skills to analyze a text, and that any analysis should be theoretically well-grounded. In these concerns he agrees with Fiorenza, Tribble and other feminist interpreters whose modes of reading focus either in front of or behind the text (West 1991:112). But is this expectation at all realistic as far as it concerns ordinary readers and not academics? One should expect that Mosala, coming from an African context, should show more insight into the difficulty of making such training accessible to readers. I would rather say that people read, with the help of academics or without. The question as to how to come alongside the reader from an academic background, is far better answered by Croatto who also writes from a Third World background.

Croatto argues that understanding the Bible does not require expertise, but the grasping of the great lines of reasoning. For too long the Bible has been possessed, explained, controlled, and interpreted by representatives of a dominant stratum of society, Church hierarchy, professional theologians and exegetes, and the educated class. For too long have the knowers and the rulers mediated the reading of the Bible. In order for the Bible to return to the readings of the poor and subjugated, the

reading of the Bible as a single text is necessary, whose meaning is now simplified (a reading "on the text") (West 1991:136-137).

A reading "on the text" (as that of Desmond Tutu) focuses on the level of the narrative, while a reading "behind the text" (like that of Itumeleng Mosala) uncovers the struggles of the poor and oppressed communities which may be masked by the dominant classes who wrote the text. It is, however, possible for proponents of both reading strategies, to take as their fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation, the principle of liberation (Draper 1996:223).

The interaction between the text and hearers, readers and interpreters take place within the context that has been described above. The recent trend in hermeneutics to reflect on the role of the reader in Biblical interpretation has sensitized us to the creative input of African readers in Biblical interpretation. African Biblical scholars will not only do well to improve their competence in reception, theoretical and reader response methods, but would also contribute significantly to the development of these methods. Western scholarship has devoted limited attention to the reception of the Bible in non-literate interpretive communities. In this regard the contribution of African scholars would be valuable (Jonker 2001:81-82).

Readers of texts can be taught that the very act of reading implies hermeneutic, and that just by reading and drawing understanding, they are involved in this exercise. Readers become empowered when they are told that they can contribute to meaning grasped from texts. The ideal remains to empower people towards liberation, and this is accelerated when they become emboldened by their own reading abilities. Every reading is a hermeneutic act, whether it is a reading of the Bible or of any other sacred or nonsacred text (Croatto 1987:67). Gerald West focuses greatly on this empowerment of the people who are not academic readers, and Mogomme Alpheus Masoga calls these readers the ones in the peripheral positions, as opposed to the scholars in their central positions (Masoga 2001:133). Masoga writes that the time has come for the periphery to occupy its own space without the interference of the centre (Masoga 2001:139). Peripheral readers should be taken seriously for a variety of reasons:

- The peripheral readership brings popular critique into the centre scholarship. The issues raised are the ones that undergird the lives of the common people.
- The periphery points to the present. It is all about life in the here and now.



- Peripheral readings are honest.
- Peripheral readers are communal and co-operative in essence.
- Peripheral critique is open and honest, outspoken and brave (Masoga 2001:140-141).

A second step may be to teach readers to ask questions of the text and to become more critical than they have been in their reading until now.

*One does not "emerge" from a text (Ex-egesis) with a pure meaning, gathered from within. One must first "get into" the text — a matter of eis-egesis — with questions that are not always those of its author, from a different horizon of experience, which has significant repercussions on the production of meaning that constitutes a rereading. We have already seen that any reading can only be a rereading of the meaning of a text (Croatto 1987:66).*

When readers read texts, their context remains a great influence on how they handle the text and what meaning they glean from it. Kanyoro points out two dangers when lay readers encounter texts:

1. The culture may be too closely aligned with the text so as to make criticism difficult, and
2. The culture may be so removed from the text that it is seen as irrelevant.

Musimbi Kanyoro writes about the women of her rural village Bware and their view of the Bible. They take the Bible seriously. In her context, the culture itself mirrors the Bible closely, and creates the problem that behaviour is often justified because it parallels Biblical culture. The danger to cultures removed from the Bible, is to read the Bible as fiction. Kanyoro stresses the importance of cultural hermeneutics, which puts every culture under the microscope with the intention of testing its liberative potential for people at different times in history (Kanyoro 2002:10).

Third World feminists are concerned with how a better understanding of chosen Biblical passages will allow the Biblical word to influence their personal lives and the lives of their readers. They do not engage in theology to find erudite answers to intellectual queries, but to illustrate how the Bible helps women and men with the same origins to address the problems people face daily. In each case, their local particularities act as a preunderstanding that enables the Bible to be read as an expression of the deep yearnings for justice of their oppressed brothers and sisters (Clifford 2001:85).

### 3.13.7. Liberation and the Church

Although feminist theology advocates a religion permeating every facet of life to a degree where changes toward liberation are rung in for all structures of society, the mainstay of religion and the religious life of a Christian remains the local Church. The Church itself is prey to patriarchy and androcentric theology that diminishes women in various ways. In the spirit of prophetic critique, feminist theology addresses the shortcomings and sins of oppression and subjugation committed against women in their own Churches. A view develops of the ideal form of worship, and how to realize it in our times. The answer does not lie in a liberal movement changing long-held beliefs in the Church, for this only brings about moral permissiveness, as will be illustrated. What is rather needed is a change of priorities and focus points — the Church needs to ask itself what believers need from it, rather than what society demands of it.

If the teaching of Jesus that the greatest among us shall be the servant had been maintained, clericalist hierarchicalism would not have had room to grow. It would also have had implications for the understanding of the Fatherhood of God: It would not have been understood as establishing a male ruling-class power over subjugated groups in the Church, but as an equal fatherhood that makes all Christians equals as brothers and sisters (Ruether 1975:66).

In Jesus' use of the service model to overthrow the ruling class concept, no model is used of the servant as expressively female. He actually rebukes a woman for being too preoccupied with "serving" — Martha. It is clear from the ministry of Jesus that the Church is not to be modeled on hierarchies of lordship, but in the *diakonia* of women and servants where women are freed from the exclusive identification with the service role and where they are called to join the circle of disciples as equal members, as in the case of Mary (Luke 10.38-42) (Ruether 1975:66).

Feminist theology should be sensitive to the danger of becoming too familiar and comfortable with the sacred, for then it will become mundane and secular. This is a definite danger in current times that does not only affect those who speak, but also those who hear. The loss of a sense of awe is a very real threat to worship. Today, much of current society has no idea of what Rudolph Otto described as the "Wholly Other". The high and majestic has been leveled. Holy has become profane. Worship is impossible in such a setting (McMillion 1999:243).

In Judges 17-18, the Danites wanted to carve out a place in the land by their own power. In this a warning still stands relevant. Dependence on military power and power politics has brought the religious community to ruin. Perhaps the course of what happened to the Danites is an illustration of the dangers of such a path. Today, the temptation exists to rely on human resources and abilities. This happens even in communities of faith that claim to rely on God. The message of Scripture does not include an understanding that following the right recipes will bring success. Scripture warns that human tendencies often lead to death (McMillion 1999:243).

Judges 17-18 further warns of lack of commitment and wrong worship. By focusing on the negative, the narrative wants to point out a better way. True worship should flow out of right motives, and be selfless. Genuine worship has power that flows from the Lord who is worshipped (McMillion 1999:243).

Historical-critical studies often deal with the worship in Israel and the early Church. The problem is that too often these studies have not given attention to potential contributions of the Bible to worshipping communities of our own time (Melugin 1999:244). On the other hand it must be said that androcentric and patriarchally interpreted texts used as guideline for structuring the Church community can be just as dangerous. The Black Church itself, for instance, has traditionally been highly patriarchal and has served to integrate the black family symbolically into the Western patriarchal norm (Ruether 1975:127). The mainline Black Churches have typically functioned to validate black male identity (Ruether 1975:127) while keeping women in a servile state.

It is impossible to uncover at what historical point in the process of Psalm composition the imagery of dwelling in the "tent of the Lord" and on "God's holy hill" reached beyond a literal understanding of entering the Jerusalem temple or Mount Zion. The wider understanding of this imagery has made it lastingly meaningful and brings to mind images of a spiritual and even mystical nature. The archaic phrases are very important. It reflects awareness that entering a sanctuary was a privileged and solemn entry into a "different" world of wholeness and holiness. It required the worshipper to look deep into his or her heart and see whether the self was able to pass into the realm of God. The question given to the worshipper to speak in Psalm 15 is at the same time a cry of identity and a confession of unworthiness (Clements

1999:93). In the midst of arguing about the authority of the Bible and the language used for the God we worship, let us not lose sight of the experience of the Holy.

Not all the effects of patriarchy in the Church were purely negative. Despite the positions it limited women to, it also assured for women a place of value. The effect of Methodism, Evangelical piety and established Church practices, was to uphold and defend the position of women, and although Churches remained patriarchal in practice and structure, this was one strength. Women were given a sense of integrity before God, as well as a right to respect and love, and a right to marriage or a single life. The real issue in the past was the upholding of a good working-class marital and family life. This involved housing, male sexual faithfulness, good parenting, education, protection of children and a clear doctrine of marriage. Crucial to this change was the conversion of men and women into personal integrity before God through knowing Jesus as Savior (Storkey 1997:90).

The question we face is how the change came about from having intimate relationships of trust, care and love to a situation where sex is seen as the definition of "being intimate". It is impossible for us to distantiate our body acts from ourselves. The primary factor in this change is loss of respect for the other and the self. This process is fundamentally linked to secularization. The triumph of the sexological tradition is a deep loss to our culture (Storkey 1997:91).

Is there a danger in being overly sensitive when it comes to accommodating liberationist practices?

Christian communities who use Isaiah should employ the book primarily performatively, for the transformation of the community's life is the most important task in its use of Scripture. Interpretive paradigms used by the Enlightenment are insufficient for this task. Though historical criticism is of great value, there should be a reconceptualization of Biblical hermeneutics for the sake of better preparing the Church for the use of Scripture in a transformational way (Melugin 1999:264).

In Isaiah God pictures himself as finding public worship tedious and unbearable despite good attendance and offerings. The same can be said of modern worshippers. In Isaiah's time the people still showed up for worship, but God had opted out. The problem for religious leaders was not to get the people, but rather to get God to attend. Even today, worship should also be scrutinized from that

We have to make our hopes happen.

Denise M Ackermann 2001:116

perspective. We are perhaps spending too much energy trying to find ways to make worship interesting and attractive to disinterested communities. We should perhaps rather be spending time trying to attract and please a potentially disinterested and increasingly irritated God (Roberts 1999:269).

### 3.14. FEMINISM AND PIETY — A WORD OF WARNING

Are there any warnings one can point out to feminist theology in its search for the liberation of the oppressed/subjugated?

In order to make an argument about the use of the given names for God and their impact on the lives and status of women in religion, one needs to pause and take a look at the contours of the Liberation desired by feminists. Such a scrutiny shows that feminist theology offers very positive contributions, but that the Liberation fought for is more problematic than seems clear at the outset. Feminist theology has definitely made a valuable contribution: it cast a critical light on the traditional ways in which the metaphor of Divine Fatherhood has been misused to legitimate patriarchal institutions and practices. The appropriate response then, is not to act according to the suggestion of role-model theology by rejecting the metaphor, but rather to correct the distortions of male-centered misreadings. In this way feminism brought a critical contribution that allows us to reread the Biblical texts with new eyes and so see how patriarchal metaphors actually function in their Scriptural context (Green 1992:59).

Rosemary Ruether lists the five main questions on the agenda of religious feminism as follows:

1. *How can the elements of the religion be reinterpreted from a female perspective so that they help to make women subjects of their own history?*
2. *Can religion and spirituality function to enhance the liberationist transformation of history rather than the sacralization of male domination?*
3. *How can stories and symbols drawn from religious traditions be translated from their androcentric form into one defined by and for women?*
4. *Should we continue merely to translate from androcentric traditions or do we need to go beyond them and create new stories, new symbols etc?*
5. *Should women remain divided from each other and immured in androcentric traditions or should women unite across religious boundaries in some synthesis of the perspectives traditionally set against each other?"*

(Ruether in Hitchcock 1992:349).

The above arguments are positively in favour of religious liberation, but when one turns to the criticism of the liberation proposed by feminist theologians, the person in faith needs to be well aware of the philosophical foundations of feminist liberation in religion.

The term "liberation" is used frequently by Feminists, but should be problematized within the contours of a Christian Faith. "Liberation" can too easily become an expression of a belief that humans are no longer under the rule of authority, history, tradition or God. It appears as if everything in the universe is at the disposal of the human being, to be manipulated at will (Little in Hitchcock 1992:17).

One also needs to problematize the process of "sensitising" people. The whole goal of consciousness-raising techniques is to sensitize believers, but one finds that this actually makes spontaneous expression of religious beliefs recede into the background, thus inhibiting true worship (Hull Hitchcock 1992:341). If one has to pay such close attention to not offending another by the "wrong" use of terminology, where is the sense of unselfconscious piety to be found? This argument becomes important when the problematic language of faith comes into play. Feminists wants us to concede that androcentric language for God, and in general, is not only offensive to half of the Church, but also hampers this half's relationship with God. It is furthermore suggested and heavily argued that traditional names for God are to blame for women's inferior status in religion, and that the change in language will bring about better status and religious connectivity for women in faith.

CS Lewis said that worldviews are forms of enchantment which cast their spell over us and shape our consciousness and identity at their deepest levels, while rarely coming completely to rational, propositional expression (Smith 1992:258)

Naming shapes our perception of reality, and in the cultural conflict of our time, the right or authority to name becomes crucial. We find that different worldviews generate different names for the same thing, and these names determine whether the thing referred to is good or bad. Names express worldviews, and in turn, worldviews determine names (Smith 1992:259).

Two worldviews are relevant when the issue of naming comes to the fore: that of classical theism, and that of religious monism. Smith lists the following differences between these two views:

Classical Theism	Religious Monism
1. Affirms a transcendent Creator who is revealed in Jesus, the incarnate Son of God.	1. Holds the unity of the Creator with the creation. Nothing is outside of God (Reality).
2. Jesus died for sinners and rose again (reality).	2. Jesus is at most the most perfectly actualized human.
3. Humanity is fallen (Identity).	3. Humanity is not fallen but merely ignorant and unfulfilled (Identity).
4. There is a trans-cultural moral structure (Morality).	4. Morality is relativistic and experiential (Morality).
5. There is a hope of heaven and a danger of hell (Destiny).	5. There is a hope of self-actualization (Destiny).

The radical feminist renaming of God proceeds from the monistic worldview (Smith 1992:261), as does many of the religious actions and other changes in liturgy proposed by such radical feminists.

The feminist battle seems to be linked with the worldview battle: dualism versus monism, or classical theism with the distinction between Creator and creation, versus religious monism with its unity of Being-in-beings. In this way, the term dualism is not used in a Gnostic sense of affirming an evil creation, but rather refers to any worldview which affirms the difference between Creator and creation (Smith 1992:263).

The above forms a conceptual revolution, which is a revolution in worldview that redefines God, identity, morality and destiny (Smith 1992:264). It seems that (radical) feminist liberation in religion, when taken to its logical conclusion, wants to free its members from worshipping a Creator being outside and over them, to the worship of a being very much like themselves, understandable, namable, definable, and expressible in the language of their choice.

Feminist theologian Dorothy Soelle sees resurrection as victory over the cross, even though for her this does not mean that the cross was in itself redemptive. Redemption happens whenever we resist and reject collaboration with injustice. When life is lived in solidarity with others in mutual well-being, every act of sustaining life becomes a sacrament of God's presence, whether this is bread broken and shared, sexual pleasure between lovers, ground being tilled, making of a product or



giving birth to a baby. God calls us into abundance of life even in this life here on earth. This is the promise of God's kingdom when God's will is done on earth as in heaven (Soelle in Ruether 1998:103).

What do the contours of such a liberation look like for the believer? Religious monism rings in a new age of problems for the believer. It has concluded that we are divine while not being very clear about what that means. Religious monism places the theologian in the position of theological leader who has to do the religious naming. The theologian now no longer simply clarifies the faith given in the Bible and the creeds and apply it to the current age, but rather now gets the task of naming God and constructing visions of reality that aid people in their quest for "wholeness". Morality no longer hinders the individual, since the possibilities of self-construction are endless. The price of monism is that we put aside our concept of a transcendent God who names and reveals himself. This view is becoming more influential, and already has influential theologians among its proponents like Bishop JAH Robinson, John Macquarrie, and Episcopal Bishop John Spong, the last of whom has a clear understanding of his monist task of naming and defining God (Smith 1992:265).

Spong gives a clear example of monism at work in his book *Honest Prayer* when he redefines the Lord's prayer. To hallow God's name is to become our deepest and truest selves, and to affirm God's glory is to be fully alive. In this vein, the Lord's prayer becomes a soliloquy for self-actualization (Smith 1992:266).

In his book *Living in Sin?* Bishop Spong articulates what monism looks like when clothed as radical feminism applied to sexual ethics. The Bishop cuts to the bone when he remarks that *The debate in the Church is a battle over the authority of Scripture and the role of both Scripture and the Church* (Spong in Smith 1992:267). Spong further makes it clear that humans form their understanding of God out of their own values, needs and self-understanding. Ultimately he says that humans make God in their own image, and that we deify that which we perceive to be the source of security and awe. In this respect he agrees with Bishop Robinson who holds that classical Christian theism is but a projection. Spong goes further than Robinson in that he ties the argument to the cause of radical feminism. He sees the Bible as showing a "pervasive anti-female bias" on "every page". The Bible represents male reaction to the power of the more ancient Mother-Goddess. Yahweh puts himself as solitary male god against the nurturing mother-goddess of creation. This Yahweh is distinct

from and ruling over creation, and thus represents the male quest for legitimacy and dominance. As a result of this, the Bible is seen to be anti-woman (Smith 1992:268).

Behind all this negativity in the Bible, there stands the vague positive image of the Jesus who connects us with our original goodness, who gives us courage to be all we are created to be. The Bible is reduced to a historical relic that is without value and rather dangerous due to its ideology of patriarchal repression (Smith 1992:268-269).

When one works within a monist model, renaming the "Father" becomes necessary. "Mother" may be the most obvious new choice. One needs to keep in mind that naming is only the linguistic component of the theological task of constructing alternative worldviews and models (Smith 1992:269).

Sallie McFague goes so far as to say that classical theism becomes "idolatrous" and "opposed to life" (McFague in Smith 1992:270).

Language expresses worldview. When the worldview changes, the language follows. When the language is changed, a new worldview can enter the Church (Smith 1992:274). Is this the promised liberation we are headed for under the leadership of feminist theologians?

Decades ago the atheist AJ Ayer responded to the writings of Bishop Robinson and said that "You are finally coming around. Just a bit more and you'll be an atheist like me" (Ayer in Smith 1992:275).

In its rawest form, this liberation has to confront the central issue of salvation through grace, one of the main doctrines of Christian faith. The feminist theologian Sallie McFague also tackles the issue of salvation and holds that it is not so much something received as it is something performed. It does not happen to people, rather, they participate in it. Humans participate in their salvation (Anderson 1992:298). This would surely echo their struggle for liberation. I should suppose that, to carry this thought to its utmost, would be to imply that the state of liberation would ultimately echo the state of salvation of the individual.

Saving knowledge of God involves more than a passing and passive intellectual assent to traditional formulations of the faith. It rather means actively reinterpreting

the world, evaluating events, and ordering the own life according to what the traditions claim about God. This is made clear in Jeremiah when he speaks about knowing God. He complains that the people do not know God, God's way or God's judgment (Jer 2.8; 4.22; 5.4; 8.7). The prophet is not talking about a mere cognitive awareness of the content of God's law but is rather referring to a volitive acknowledgement of God's will expressed by obedience. Not knowing God equals rebellion (Jer 2.8), doing evil (Jer 4.22), breaking God's yoke (Jer 5.5) and rejecting God's word (Jer 8.9). Even the theological experts of the time were accused of ignorance (Jer 2.8). He claimed that theologians of the time used their knowledge of the Word to turn God's Word into a lie and thus rejecting God's Word (Jer 8.8-9) (Roberts 1999:273). In this text lies a warning for the hermeneutics of suspicion to remain self-critical of its own possible hidden agendas.

Isaiah has a similar understanding of what it means to know God. Knowledge is perceiving God's works in the events going on around oneself (Is 5.12-13). It involves sanctifying God and making God the only object of ultimate fear in one's life. No matter what the circumstances and the fears in life, one should fear God more and continue to live by the promises and the commandments of God (Isa 8.12-13). The covenant should be observed and other members of the covenant should be treated with justice and respect since they are also God's people (Isa 1.16-20; 3.15). When it comes to outsiders, oppressions should be rejected and deceit should be rooted out (Isa 30.12). People should rather trust God for security while pursuing justice and righteousness (Isa 28.12; 16-17; 30.15) (Roberts 1999:274).

Feminist theology claims to speak for women in religion. Do all women in religion accept this representation, and do women support the changes fought for on their behalf?

The experience one has when using the term "feminist" in any religious context is one of raised eyebrows and a guardedness on both sides of the expected argument. In my own person I find that using the term "feminist" or even "feminist theology" immediately puts people on guard, and instantly creates suspicion of itself. The term has an immediate negative connotation, and even among lay people is it regarded with suspicion as something to be resisted. The perception seems to exist that all women showing interest in the place of women in religion are active radical feminists. Is such an assumption correct? Not all women are equally smitten with radical feminism's actions in the theological field. In the Catholic magazine *30 Days*, it

seems that a coalition of non-feminist women is more representative of women in the Church. These women express a concern about the influence and destructive effects of radical feminism, and object to ideologically motivated liturgical and linguistic innovations (Chrysostom Castel 1992:192).

It seems that feminist theology itself has created a tension between women of more conservative orientation, and their more radical counterparts. A standard response to feminist critique has been to insist that Christians must choose between a male God of patriarchy or a genderless God of feminism (Green 1992:54). Are these the only choices women are to have?

Although some feminists advocate the practice of a goddess religion either on the periphery of Christianity or in communities that are post-Christian, others regard this suggestion as alien, especially if it involves the revival of extinct polytheistic religions with roots in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia or Greece (DiNoia 1992:182). Plenty of evidence proves that Israel deliberately avoided such connections with the surrounding religious conceptions in its formative period (DiNoia 1992:182).

Suzanne Scorsone writes that many feminist women refuse to allow other feminists to exclude them from the word "man", and that they do not want a misdirected political agenda to create in them a false sense of consciousness-raised "rage" every time they read the word "man" used in the generic sense (Scorsone 1992:235). Women are not leaving the Church in droves because they are offended by the use of (male) pronouns for God (Scorsone 1992:241).

Many women do not experience that God is painted as a male in the Bible, and neither do these women feel that they are painted as to be less in the image of God due to their female gender. The positive attributes from being female also originate with God. God made humans in His own image...male and female were they created. All attributes associated with masculine and feminine derive equally from God. Our relationships and attributes go far beyond biological gender anyway (Scorsone 1992:239).

Feminist language is not greatly desired by *all*, not even all *women*. One is increasingly finding the situation of the intimidated woman of faith, who does not align with the struggle against patriarchy in the faith, being marginalized and robbed of a

voice. Some feminists even tend to ridicule women who do not join their cause (Hull Hitchcock 1992:341).

As a whole, there seems to be still a lot of work to do, but what shows, is that feminist theology is as able to make mistakes and oppress others as it critiques traditional theology to do.

### **3.14.1. The New Church**

Feminist liberation theologies have responded to the misogynist bias in liberalism and socialism by adding women and gender issues into their visions of democratic political reform and revolutionary economic reconstruction. Patriarchy has been defined as the root problem of injustice. To have social justice, is to overcome it in all respects. Feminist theology has appropriated the symbol of the Kingdom of God to represent the fulfillment of hope for a good society that will come about when men and women live in complete mutuality (Ruether 1998:117).

How does this feminist view of the Church look? Such a Church as a community is called to teach one another, support one another, forgive one another, celebrate together and engage in theological self-reflection (Ruether 1975:80). Rosemary Ruether finds her community-centered view of ministry able to alter our model of the relationship of God to Church and creation. In such a Church-community, God is not seen as a domineering Father who reduces His creation to subjugation, but the Holy Spirit who is the Ground of Being of creation and the new creation. As the community of the new creation, the Church rises out of the activity of the Holy Spirit which renews the world. The Holy Spirit does not create a hierarchy through which God's power trickles down to the lowest level in the community. In Ruether's vision, the foundation of the local community is primary. Ministry in such a community becomes the self-articulation of their life together. Certain people are designated certain functions, and these people do not lose their powers, but simply express the aspects of their life (Ruether 1975:81).

Musimbi Kanyoro describes "doing theology" as the method of action-reflection out of which theological reflections arise, rather than simply applying existing theological insights to present situations. She sees this method as inviting communal theology. Action and reflection take place within a group, and within this context it happens that religious experience becomes communal experience (Kanyoro 2002:1).

Where should one begin to do theology? Tiffany and Ringe write in *Biblical Interpretation: A Road Map*, that the best place to start is right at home, where you are located. The interpreter is required to be sure of what "home" means to her/him (Kanyoro 2002:3).

Feminist modest and earthly hopes are represented in the Women's Creed which was written in preparation of the Fourth International Women's Conference in Beijing, China, in September 1995. The creed names future hope as:

*Bread. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman's singing voice somewhere.*

*The army disbanded. The harvest abundant. The wound healed.*

*The child wanted. The prisoner freed. The body's integrity honored.*

*The lover returned... Labour equal, fair and valued. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting.*

*Secure interiors — of heart, home and land — so firm as to make secure borders irrelevant at last* (Robin Morgan in Ruether 1998:120).

These are redemptive hopes for all of humanity (Ruether 1998:120).

### **3.15. CONCLUDING REMARK**

This chapter has given a theoretical study of feminist criticism, its development and positional stance. The main characteristic is feminist criticism's advocacy stance and one of its main contributions to the world of science has been its dismantling and exposure of the myth of objectivity and neutrality. Feminist criticism is committed to the critique of patriarchy in every level of society and has as aim the liberation of the subjugated part of humanity.

Feminist criticism sees the Bible as a patriarchal, androcentric text and takes a critical stance towards the authority of the Bible and the traditional interpretation thereof. As a result, language used of and for God necessarily comes into the spotlight and a new inclusive language becomes necessary.

Feminist criticism also turns a look inwards and becomes self-critical in the admittance of the female capacity to internalize subjugation which eventually makes external oppression unnecessary. The oppressed also has a capacity for further oppressing people from their own ranks. Feminist criticism should never lose its ability to be self-aware and self-critical.

Feminist criticism works towards the liberation of the mind of the oppressed, as well as the liberation from social oppression. The recognition is made that one cannot be free unless one's thoughts and consciousness has become aware and renewed.

A place where this new liberated humanity can find its spiritual home would be in the new Church. In the bringing about of this Church, the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is central. The next chapter researches in detail how her hermeneutics of suspicion is situated within the broader playing field of feminist criticism.

## CHAPTER 4

# DOMINANT READING STRATEGIES AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA

### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Why does this chapter start with an overview on reading strategies? Before one studies the way Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that the modern reader should read the text, one first needs to look at various aspects that play a role when one reads, and influences the way the text is understood. Focus should also fall on the ways in which feminist theologians read differently from each other, and how their different ways of reading influence the way they draw different conclusions about the text. The question is asked: How do feminist theologians and feminists in general handle and read the Biblical text? The approaches that feminist Biblical scholars take toward reading the Bible depend on the type of feminism to which they subscribe and on how they understand feminism intersecting with their discipline (Stratton 1995:71). In previous chapters it has been shown that feminism does not have a simple, uniform way of reading/thinking/dissecting. This chapter will situate Fiorenza, Tribble, Ruether and others within specific reading strategies so that the reader can now clearly see how they differ in their approach to the Biblical text. From this it will also become clear how their work complements each other, and where the places of agreement, disagreement and dialogue are.

Since this study focuses on the reading of narrative texts, one should take a brief note of the most influential theories surrounding what the narrative is telling and what is happening in the text. The three main approaches to narrative texts are narrative theory, performative language theory and historical criticism. This chapter describes these reading strategies and places Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in dialogue with them. Since a theologian's work cannot be separated from the subjective dogma (theological paradigm) of the person, a brief description of some main theological



paradigms is given, and how a shift occurred from one paradigm to another. The work of Fiorenza came to the fore with this shift in paradigm, and her work is situated within a paradigm of a hermeneutics of liberation. The chapter closes with a description of the main characteristics of Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion.

## 4.2. VARIOUS APPROACHES TO NARRATIVE TEXTS

### 4.2.1. Narrative Theory

**Speech act theory** analyses direct discourse and focuses on individual sentences. **Narrative theory** or **Narratology** is the study of narrative texts in larger units (Stratton 1995:128). These theories concentrate on what the narrative is telling and the interaction between the characters. Mieke Bal aligns with the work done by structuralists before her in referring to this as the "fabula". She agrees with their definitions that distinguish between the "fabula" and the "story" of a narrative. Both terms have to do with events that take place among the characters. The **fabula** is the reconstruction of events between characters in the order that these events must have occurred. Using an example from Genesis, readers assume that the woman and the serpent in Genesis 3 have somehow heard about the prohibition before their conversation begins. Their hearing is part of the fabula, though it is not reported to us in the story as we have it. The **story** is the way the events of the fabula are told to readers by the narrator (Stratton 1995:129).

Genette studied various aspects of the relationship between fabula and story time, and Bal's work amplifies it:

1. They firstly observed **order**, which signifies whether events in the story are told in the same order as they occur in the fabula. They noted anachronies (items that do not fit the time of the rest of the tale), analepses and prolepses when the orders differ (Stratton 1995:129).
2. Secondly, narratologists compare the relative **duration** of the telling in story time of fabula events. A fabula event may be inferred or left out of the story, indicating an ellipsis (how the woman in Genesis heard the prohibition). Fabulae may also be summarized or emphasized through slowed telling. Fabulae can be interrupted with descriptions (the description of the two rivers in Genesis) (Stratton 1995:130).
3. Thirdly, Bal and Genette noted the **frequency** of the tellings. Some events are told only once, while others are repeated.

Bal went on to explain Genette's distinction between focalization and voice (between the one who sees and the one who tells). **Focalization** is the angle of vision through which the story is shown in the text. Focalization does not confuse the person who sees and the person who speaks. Focalization may be done by a character (the woman in Genesis sees the fruit), while the story is still told by the narrator. The same character may also both see and tell. Bal shows three aspects of narration through this model:

Telling, seeing and doing. Focalization may also be done from within or without.

Narratology helps critics to analyze the rhetorical interests and strategies of a narrative text by

1. Carefully distinguishing fabula and story and their relationships of order, duration and frequency,
2. Separating focalization and voice, and
3. Studying plot, characterisation and the relationship of narration and direct discourse (Stratton 1995:131).

#### 4.2.2. Performative Language Theory

In some texts, the reader becomes aware that the writers of the text were less concerned with actual events. The shapers of Isaiah were not primarily interested in representing historical reality or original meanings of earlier traditions that they used. They rather used language *performatively* or *transformationally* to transform the life of the community of faith. Language was used more to *do* something than to explain reality. They could use statements about the Assyrian threat and reapply them with the Babylonian exile in mind without even explaining the differences (Melugin 1999:250). **Performative language theory** in modern philosophy taught that many utterances are primarily used to *do* something rather than to explain reality. Words like "*I pronounce you husband and wife*" create a marriage rather than explain it. The exhortation "*Defend the orphan, plead for the widow*" (Isa 1.17) seeks to transform behaviour instead of explanation (Melugin 1999:250).

In other cases, the balance must be kept in mind by remembering that it is true that Biblical language is representational in some sense. The story of Abraham is *about* something. Eventually, the story's purpose is more to shape the life of the community currently using it, than to represent reality exactly. When Abraham is

commanded to sacrifice Isaac, the purpose is not to lead us to ask "*Did this happen?*", but rather to shape the way Israel relates to God (Melugin 1999:251).

#### 4.2.3. Historical Criticism

A quick look at historical criticism is necessary since Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza herself makes use of this method in the exercise of recreating women's history in Biblical times. Historical criticism focuses on various aspects surrounding the make-up of the text, among which are the possibility of more than one author for a text, and the history behind the text.

Though historical criticism is not given the same attention as other forms of critique, there must be at least research into Hebrew Bible folklore in order to establish the value of other traditions within the Hebrew Bible. Hermann Gunkel, though sceptical about the presence of any original folklore, recognized the remnants of folkloric motifs and themes throughout the Hebrew Bible. Gunkel showed that Hebrew Bible **topoi** (themes in literature) have an ongoing history. They are created over time with various contexts and meanings, and bring with them the accumulation of all these associations. Stories like the one about the Tekoite woman ends up not being the work of a single writer, but rather are the property of the people, since so many hands have helped shape them over time (Gunkel in Lyke 1997:15). The suggestion is that the different writing types found in the Hebrew Bible are not always the products of just a single author, but rather the community as a whole (Lyke 1997:15). The reason why this is an important insight, is the possibilities this argument opens for female authors (or tellers of narratives, at least), and the criticism it makes possible for the texts that have survived. Were they the original form of the story, or were they changed over time to align with changing circumstances in society?

Historical criticism opens the door for feminist theology to construct a history of women, especially from Biblical times. Gerda Lerner states the necessity for women's history as indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women (Lerner 1986:3). When the question is asked as to what such a history is, one must distinguish between the recorded and interpreted past (History) and the unrecorded past of recollections by all people. Women have made out half of this history as half of humanity who has shared in preserving collective memory through poems and myth, folklore, art, ritual etc. Women have, however, been excluded in the process of interpretive and recorded history. This type of history was written by men and told of things that men have experienced and thought important. This History has been

claimed as being universal, even while it left the experiences and actions of women unrecorded (Lerner 1986:4).

The recorded past of the human race ends up being only a partial record which omits half of the history of humankind and which offers only one perspective: that of the male writer (Lerner 1986:4). In order for women to get a mandate from the Bible towards their role in religion and the Church, the reconstruction of their history is vital.

#### 4.2.3.1. Fiorenza's Reading Behind the Text

Both Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza find a situation of struggle that is potentially empowering for women in the Bible. The difference between them, is that Ruether finds it primarily in the text, while Schüssler Fiorenza finds it behind the text (West 1991:90).

Fiorenza insists that women must move behind the text to a historical reconstruction of the context from which the text emerged. Patriarchal texts do not mirror the social and historical context from which they came, but rather offer only a selective view of early Christian communities. Women can move beyond the silences about women to an appreciation of the leadership of women in the life of the early Christian communities. Only a movement behind the text, can enable women to retrieve their heritage (West 1991:88).

Fiorenza draws on the work of Johann Baptist Metz when she affirms that Christian feminists should not abandon the memory of their forefathers' sufferings and hopes, but should rather reclaim it through the subversive power of the "remembered past". This subversive or dangerous memory keeps alive the suffering and hope of Christian women of the past, while at the same time allowing a solidarity of sisterhood with all women of the past, present and future who follow the same vision (West 1991:101). Liberation hermeneutics cannot exist without the solidarity with and continuity of these dangerous memories (West 1991:101).

Scholars who agree with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza that reading behind the text is the appropriate method of reading for contexts of liberation, are Mosala and Gottwald. They argue that only behind the text does one find a well-grounded hermeneutics of liberation. In contrast to this view, stand scholars Phyllis Trible with

her method of close reading, and José Severino Croatto's in front of the text reading (West 1991:107).

#### 4.2.3.2. Fiorenza's Problems with Historical Criticism

Historical criticism is useful in its ability to help feminism recreate female history, but it is not without its own challenges and problems. Feminism has pointed out one of the great achilles heels of the method. Feminist studies maintain that established scholarship is not only *partial* (to the extent that it articulates male experience as human experience) but also *biased* (to the extent that its intellectual discourse and scholarly frameworks are determined only by male perspectives primarily of the dominant classes. This feminist claim runs counter to the assertion of traditional historical-critical Biblical scholarship that prides itself on being impartial, objective, and value-neutral. Recognizing its socio-political location and public commitment, a feminist Biblical interpretation must therefore utilize historical-critical methods for the sake of presenting an alternative interpretation of Biblical texts and history for public scholarly discussion and historical assessment. In order to do so, we must develop a hermeneutics of suspicion to be applied to both the contemporary scholarly historical discourse and to that of the Biblical writers. The feminist hermeneutics of suspicion understands androcentric texts as selective articulations of men often expressing as well as maintaining patriarchal historical conditions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:108).

The questions explored by historical-literary Biblical scholarship and those raised by believers and Churches today are often so disparate that it is sometimes impossible to "apply" a historical-critical interpretation addressing questions of scholarship to a pastoral situation. The proliferation of commentaries to the lectionary testifies to this predicament of Biblical scholarship and Biblical preaching. No wonder that readers of the Bible continue to adhere to a literalist reading promising "instant" pietism and that ministers skip historical-critical exegesis for the sake of actualizing rhetorics (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:119).

H Boers has stressed that the Reformation maintained that the Bible was not part of the contemporary life of the Church but belonged to the historical past, in order "to establish the Bible as the sole base and norm over and against the contemporary Church by means of which to judge and renew it". Yet in doing so the theologians of the Reformation "set a process in motion which made it increasingly questionable



**PASSAGE**  
JANET MCKENZIE

how a collection of documents from the past could be normative for the present" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:127).

By using the methods of historical criticism in its recreation of a female Biblical past, feminist theology wants to blow new life into the ways the Bible is used by the Church and the believers that make up its lay body. The hermeneutics of suspicion can be used by non-academic believers as well as sophisticated readers for the purpose of a new and dynamic interaction with the Biblical text.

#### **4.3. WOMEN'S NEED TO REDEFINE THEIR HISTORY**

The argument that the women mentioned in the Bible paint a satisfactory history of women in Bible times is unacceptable. The pages of the Bible leave the Israelite woman mainly unseen. It would be a methodological error to presume to find her in the pages of Biblical narrative. One cannot see nameless women in the activities of the named ones. To propose to do this, would equal the belief that one can see an entire structure when only a fragment is visible (Meyer 1987:5). It is necessary for the self-image of women in the Christian faith to find out as much as possible about their Biblical fore Sisters and their position within the faith. This will enable women to redefine their position within the Church, society, and all their various relationships.

When engaged in the enterprise of redefinition, one is faced with three challenges:

1. To correctly define
2. To deconstruct existing theory, and
3. To construct a new paradigm (Lerner 1986:231).

Problems that rear their heads are the difficulty of not having appropriate language, and also the unique problem of women that they must transcend their traditional training and deeply rooted and historically conditioned psychology (Lerner 1986:231). All systems of thought in which women have been trained, have traditionally marginalized women. This leads to the comparison of "women-as-a-group" with other oppressed groups, but the comparisons are not apt (Lerner 1986:232).

The mode of abstract thought and the language it uses perpetuates women's marginality. Women even have to use patriarchal language, where they are subsumed under the male pronoun and where the generic term for "human" is "male", when they want to speak about their own history. Women have had to describe their bodily experiences in terms of "dirty words" and "hidden words", proven

by the fact that the vilest insults in every language refers to parts of the female body and female sexuality (Lerner 1986:232).

#### 4.4. WOMEN'S PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP TO LANGUAGE

Women's problematic relationship to language and forms of expression dependent upon language needs to be highlighted, and women must be made aware of the dangers language as it currently exists, holds for them. The study of the influence of language on women and society in general, falls under the area of language theory. In this study, space discourages a detailed report of the field, but a short summary of the most important contributions made by feminism should suffice to explain to the reader the impact of this line of study.

In feminist language theory two main philosophical roads can be distinguished between the "American school" and the "French school". Though there are more nuanced differences between feminist linguistic theorists from all continents and affiliations, these two make up the broader side of the spectrum. American feminists focus on the different ways that language is used and the effects of language on life. They advocate use of nonsexist language, but tend to ignore the rich philosophical and psychoanalytic heritage that undergirds the French feminist theories about language. French critics focus on women's position inside and outside language, the status of woman as the Other of man inside language, and the relationship of language to bodies. American response is more practical and pragmatic in nature than French criticism. A major difference between the two "schools" is that the French tend to essentialize women. A result of this is the tendency by academics to ignore the material realities of women's lives while they create theories of women's speech and women's writing (Stratton 1995:131).

In previous sections it has been made clear that essentializing women is a major pitfall since "woman" is too diverse a category. Women differ according to culture, class, and a myriad of other factors. There is no "sisterhood" of women, and women do not share the same experiences.

After identifying the main difference between the French "school" and the American "school" in feminism to be the way they relate to the "essence of femaleness", another difference comes into play when focus moves to how language is used. American feminists are mostly focused on the way language is used every day, and its consequent effects. In general they accept a version of the Sapir-Whorf



hypothesis, which holds that language not only reflects but *shapes* reality. American feminism points out the asymmetrical gender in language and promotes the use of nonsexist language (Stratton 1995:112).

Living as a male or a female touches all aspects of life, not the least of these being the way we read, write or interpret and make texts mean things in our lives. **Gynocritics** is the term used for a new emphasis on analyzing the specificity of women's writing, while **gynesis** is the term for theorizing from women's perspectives. Gynesis developed out of French feminist theory, and focuses on the textual consequences and representations of gender difference, primarily in the realms of body and language. Gynocritical analyses of women writers and feminist criticism of gynocriticism suggest that interpretation itself may be gendered, since it is based at least partly on the different life experiences of women (Stratton 1995:76). Feminist literary scholarship is not one particular method. It rather uses many methods.

Though valuable contributions have been made by French theorists, the present study does not focus mainly on this school since it seeks to find more pragmatic realizations of feminist theory in religion. This ideal is more in line with the American way of critique, and thus is the method of choice.

#### 4.5. CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

Specific language usage leads to the creation of a specific ideology, which in turn influences written texts. After being made aware of the role language plays in the lives of women, it is necessary to focus on the way it manages to create ideology which shapes women's reality.

One of the main characteristics of feminist theory is the critique of ideology. There is general consensus that an "ideology-free" text is simply not possible, and that ideology invades all parts of the reading and interpretative process. What is asked for, is an openness to acknowledge ideology, as well as the acknowledgement that the Biblical text has a male ideology as base. Throughout Church history, male commentators have permeated (continued) this ideology and re-inscribed it into Church tradition and theological reflection.

Why is it important to take note of male ideology in the Biblical text, and why is it necessary to criticize this ideology? One example is the occurrence of pornographic ideology in some of the prophetic texts, and these have in the past been re-inscribed without any criticism whatsoever. The extent to which some male commentators re-

inscribe pornographic ideology of the prophetic texts comes as a shock to women. Their influence on Bible readers sometimes borders on the frightening, and many a feminist theological study tries to create an awareness of the harmful ideology these writers are perpetuating (Exum 1996:12).

To further illustrate the influence on women and society of the above mentioned male ideology, two scenes in the life of David are briefly discussed. The first to attention is the scene where Bathsheba is bathing herself and David is looking at her. Male interpreters throughout the ages have been quick to blame Bathsheba for being in a state of undress. No attention is given to the decision of the narrator (storyteller) who decided to depict her in this way. The narrator uses David's gaze to make Bathsheba the object of the male gaze. When Biblical commentators imply that Bathsheba desired the king's attentions, they let the narrator off the hook at the expense of the woman (Exum 1996:25).

Another instance of ideology in praxis is the fact that Bathsheba is remembered solely for the act of bathing and being seen. In spite of the fact that Bathsheba reappears later in the Biblical account, what most people remember about her is her bath as "seduction" of David. She is remembered for setting up the downfall of David's house, but not for the building of Solomon's (Exum 1996:27).

Male ideology is at work in all levels of Bathsheba's story. Even Biblical writing style suggests a causal connection by means of simple juxtaposition:

*...he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful. David sent and inquired about the woman. He said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" David sent messengers and took her.*

Because Bathsheba was seen bathing, she was sent for. It is the woman's fault that the man's desire is aroused. Bathsheba is guilty of being desired, but the text hints that she asked for it: she *allows* herself to be seen. Popular films go beyond the Biblical text to make Bathsheba even more guilty of planning the viewing. They suggest she planned it all or at least that she knew she was being watched. In popular thought, David may be a voyeur, but Bathsheba is an exhibitionist. Once again the (male) ideological effect is to lessen David's guilt at the woman's expense, because she *wants* to be seen (Exum 1996:48).

Another scene in the life of David depicts him dancing nearly naked before the ark. David exposes himself (2 Samuel 6) before the ark of the Lord wearing only a

loincloth. In this case as in Bathsheba's, the degree of exposure is ambiguous, but in both cases the reader is led to imagine at least partial nakedness. The difference between the two tales is that the sight of David's near nakedness arouses Michal's anger and not her desire, as is the case when David watches Bathsheba. When Michal, David's wife, criticizes him for his exhibitionism, he boasts of the attention he receives. Male display of sexuality is active: David is dancing. It is public. He is in control, and he is seen by women and men alike. From his response to Michal, the reader can infer that David is not ashamed of his nakedness. Female "display" of sexuality is passive and private in contrast. Bathsheba is observed while bathing (Exum 1996:49-50).

The (male) ideology of the narrative allows the reader to look on guiltlessly, and to blame the woman at the same time if needed. For the reader to resist such textual and visual claims upon her/him does not demand demonstrating for the removal of nudes from museums or the deletion of sex scenes from movies. It does not involve "cleaning up" the Bible. To resist, is to interrogate materials with the help of a strategy that sensitizes the reader to the gender politics of representation as well as interpretation. To resist is to become self-conscious about what we do when we see texts and images in certain ways, recognizing what is at stake personally and culturally, and taking responsibility for our interpretations (Exum 1996:53).

Reading is not devoid of ideology, and the reader, just in the act of reading, has some alliance towards aspects of the text. When we read texts in terms of our own interests, we reflect a high regard for the texts, as well as some kind of personal investment in them. It also needs to be said that we read as men and women in a certain social setting and with certain life experiences that help colour the reading experience. The influence of gender and sexual orientation on reading needs to be recognized in any kind of reader-response approach to literature and art (Exum 1996:174).

Can we escape ideology? Is it possible to find a text without ideology inscribed into it or to read without putting our own ideology into the text? According to Althusser, ideology makes up the institutional and cultural framework of any society. Ideology is situated in systems of ideas, beliefs, values and practices that are internalized and lived as true by the person. Ideology expresses the unspoken values of the dominant class, and is ultimately the distorted representation of real social relations. Jardine defines ideology as *the conceptual glue of culture, that which makes cultural seem*

*natural, that which holds any cultural system together, that which, in fact, makes any system of relationships appear natural* (Jardine in Stratton 1995:175). Althusser's understanding of ideology as having a naturalizing function is useful to feminists, who understand some ideologies as functioning to maintain sexism (Stratton 1995:175).

John Thompson has a helpful formulation:

*To study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination* (Thompson in Stratton 1995:176).

Antonio Gramsci defines hegemony (supreme rulership) as the process *through which ideological struggle forges reality through a process whereby a ruling group comes to dominate by establishing the cultural common sense, that is, those values and beliefs that go without saying*. If we agree with Gramsci that reality itself is constructed, then we will also observe "cracks" or "slips" in the logical flow of hegemonic argument that opens it to ideological critique (Stratton 1995:177).

Ideological criticism recognizes that all knowledge is political and interested, and that there are no "innocent" readings. The language of critique requires consciousness and aims at transformation: it recognizes that ideologies have consequences and that it is impossible to stand outside ideology. Gayatri Spivak explains that

*One cannot of course "choose" to step outside of ideology. The most responsible "choice" seems to be to know it as best one can, recognize it as best one can, and, through one's necessarily inadequate interpretation, to work to change it* (Spivak in Stratton 1995:177).

Ideological criticism is used to expose the following as far as texts are concerned:

1. The ways in which a text reflects the conditions within which it was produced
2. How the text brings about certain interests while it is read
3. How texts serve as agents of domination (Stratton 1995:177).

Not all aspects are given equal attention as far as criticism from feminist viewpoint is concerned. In the criticism of ideology within the text, little attention is given to text-historical matter. Cheryl Exum serves as such an example when she compares art history and historical criticism in Biblical studies. She finds that both ask questions about origins, the artist's situation and influences on him/her, and talks about composition and style. Yet, these two sciences do not seem interested in the "story" the picture/text has to tell (Berger calls this the "plane of lived experience"). Exum

comes to the conclusion that the mystification of art and the mystification of the Bible are quite alike. As far as critique of ideology as basis to the text is concerned, it is irrelevant whether a text was written by J, D or P (Exum 1996:30).

Bonino calls "ideological suspicion" a fundamental critical tool for interpretation. The first application of this ideology of suspicion, would be to the history of interpretation, since the Bible is always placed within a stream of interpretations. Meanings are modified, corrected, qualified and even reversed. It is crucial to ask about the ideological presuppositions and functions which such interpretations may have had (Bonino 1993:108).

All of the before mentioned aspects align perfectly with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. The suspicion with which the text is scrutinized, shows great similarities with a praxis of ideological critique and language theory.

#### **4.6. THE SHIFT IN THEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS**

Fiorenza proposes a paradigm shift in society along the lines of Kuhn's philosophy. According to Thomas Kuhn, a paradigm represents a coherent research tradition and creates a scientific community. Since paradigms define the ways in which scientists see the world, a shift in paradigm means a transformation of the scientific imagination and demands a basic conversion of the community of scientists (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:24).

Thomas S Kuhn has pointed out that a new scientific paradigm must create a new scientific community with common interests, journals, and channels of communication if it is to replace the preceding one.

The usefulness of this theory for theology is obvious. The theory shows the historically conditioned nature of all scientific investigation. It also maintains that a language of neutral observation is impossible, that all scientific investigation demands a commitment and a community of persons dedicated to a certain perspective. It also helps us to understand that all theological approaches are not falsified, but often replaced (as are other scientific theories), not because we find new "data", but because we find new ways of looking at old data (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:24).

Rather, Fiorenza makes a critical hermeneutical point: In order to study religion or any other subject matter, one always already has a pre-understanding of the subject matter that one seeks to understand. There is no value-neutral scholarship. Scholarship is always already localized — religiously, socially, culturally, and politically (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:72).

Robert K Merton (sociologist of science) identified the norms of good science as:

1. Universalism — knowledge claims that have to be subjected to pre-established, impersonal criteria,
2. Communalism — research is not a personal possession but must be made available to the community of scientists,
3. Disinterestedness — scientists must strive to achieve their self-interest only through serving the interests of the scientific community, and
4. Organized skepticism — scientists temporarily suspend judgment in order to scrutinize their materials critically against empirical and logical criteria of judgment (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:78).

Subsequent research has shown that there exists in science an alternative set of norms or a set of counter norms. They are:

1. Particularism — for instance ability and experience of the author rather than the technical merits of the research claims,
2. Individualism — scientists claim property rights to their own work,
3. Interestedness — conduct that serves scientist's special communities of interest,
4. Organized dogmatism — scholars assent fervently to their own interpretations while doubting the findings of colleagues.

Whereas universality, disinterestedness, communalism and skepticism are seen as implying emotional neutrality, particularism, interestedness, individualism, and organized dogmatism suggest that emotional commitment to one's ideas is a desirable ingredient in science (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:78). Feminist theology makes great use of this new insight and direction in science. It also empowers lay believers to claim back their right to reading and interpreting the Bible as their own, and for themselves in their unique contexts.

Post-modernism gave feminism various other important critical tools. A further central idea to critique was the idea of universals, whereby certain truths hold fast for all people at all times. Essential maleness, femaleness and humanness are being

questioned. Post-modernism threw out discussions of what holistic humanness would look like in a good society. All ideas of essential human self are declared social constructions that veil dominant Western thought. The move today is toward acceptance of infinite particularity. This also has profound influences on feminism, since, as a result of this thinking, there is no generic, essential "woman's experience" that can be used as a basis of feminist critique of patriarchy. There is also no sisterhood of women across all cultures and races (Ruether 1998:65-66).

A second critical toll was, among others, the need for self-criticism. This led to the insight that earlier work done by white female theologians tended to ignore their own ethnic and class contexts. Women from African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Latin American and African backgrounds challenged these tendencies. They are currently defining theology in their own cultural and historical contexts. It is interesting to note that these women are not generally very interested in the post-modern emphasis on endless difference. They rather wish to establish their own distinct contexts and experiences as women. Only after doing this can they construct more authentic ways to reach across differences towards solidarity in the struggle against systems of oppression (Ruether 1998:66).

In understanding and evaluating symbolic actions such as Biblical texts, to recognize what is absent is as important as what is present. Especially feminist historians and rhetoricians have pointed out that the "unsaid of a situation" or "what has been left out" is as important as the "said", because the "non-said" reinforces what is said. Meaning is relational. Terms marked positively means in relation to what is absent, unmarked, unspoken, or unsayable (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:80-81).

Interpretation is polysemic rather than monosemic. People who are differently located socially will activate the meaning of a text differently. A polysemic critique focuses on secondary or minority readings, which can contain the seeds of subversion of authority, whereas a primary or majority interpretation will tend to confirm the dominant cultural codes and religious norms (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:81). This polysemic critique ensures that minority voices are not lost amongst the voices of the majority.

A critical feminist rhetoric contributes four critical insights that are important for Biblical studies as rhetorical studies:

1. Grammatically androcentric language is not reflective or descriptive of reality, but is regulative and constructive. Androcentric or kyriocentric language claims to be generic language while at the same time marginalizing or obliterating elite and multiply oppressed women from hegemonic cultural-religious discourses altogether. Language is not reflective but performative. It creates and shapes the symbolic world it professes to evoke and describe (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:93).
2. Language is not just performative, it is also political. Language shapes and is being shaped by preconstructed notions of kyriarchal reality, or of how the world really is. Kyriocentric language serves kyriarchal interests and kyriarchal interests shape kyriocentric texts. Language and texts are always dependent on their rhetorical situation and sociopolitical location (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:93).
3. A critical intratextual analysis of the language and rhetoric of texts does not suffice. It must be complemented by a critical systemic analysis of sociopolitical and religious structures of domination and exclusion. The interpretation of rhetorical texts is determined by analytic frames of reference or theoretical lenses that presuppose but often do not articulate such a systemic analysis (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:93).
4. Language and knowledge of the world are rhetorical, articulated in specific situations, by particular people, for a certain audience, and with certain articulated or suppressed goals and interests in mind. If all texts and knowledges are both rhetorical and political, then cultural mindsets and sacred texts can be changed. It does not suffice to know the world as it is; what is crucial is to transform and change it (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:93).

For this reason feminist studies in religion in general and feminist Biblical studies in particular insist on a hermeneutics of suspicion with regard to Biblical texts understood as rhetorical texts, their persuasive narrative world, and their ideological functions for inculcating the Western kyriarchal order. Such a critical feminist rhetoric of inquiry pays special attention to the "preconstructed" frames of meaning determining its readings. By making conscious the dominant symbolic frames of reference, it can empower readers to participate as subjects in the construction of Biblical meanings while at the same time becoming conscious of such a construction. By showing how gender, race, class, or colonialism affect the way we read — or hear — a feminist rhetoric of inquiry underscores the importance of the speaker/hearer's particular sociopolitical location. Reading and thinking in a kyriocentric symbol system entices readers to identify not only with what is culturally-religious male but



with what is elite male. Thus reading/hearing grammatically androcentric Biblical texts intensifies one's internalization of a kyriarchal religious political system whose values and worlds of vision are misogynist, racist, and Western supremacist (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:93-94).

The following four intellectual turns are constitutive of a critical interdisciplinary rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm, and they also make possible a transformation in the ethos of Biblical scholarship. They therefore provide the intellectual means for a change in the understanding of Biblical scholars from the ethos of professionalized disinterested scientism, to rather seeing ourselves as critically engaged public intellectuals who are working in rhetorical-political practices (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:58).

#### THE HERMENEUTICAL TURN

The notion of hermeneutics derives from the Greek word *hermeneuein* and means to interpret, exegete, explain, or translate. It owes its name to Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who had the task to mediate the announcements, declarations, and messages of the gods to mere mortals. His proclamation, however, is not a mere communication and mediation but is always also an explication of divine commands in such a way that he translates them into human language so that they can be comprehended and obeyed (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:58).

According to Gadamer, hermeneutics has the task of translating meaning from one "world" into another. Like Hermes, the messenger of the gods, hermeneutics not only communicates knowledge but also instructs, directs, and enjoins. Hermeneutics thus has affinities to manticism and prophecy. It conveys revelation and interprets signs and oracles. It is a matter of practical understanding that involves the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis* — practical judgment and adjudication that is secured not by an a priori method but only by the process of understanding (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:58-59).

Philosophical hermeneutics has its roots in Biblical interpretation. It is best understood as a theory and practice of interpretation that explores the conditions and possibilities for understanding not just texts, but other practices as well. As such, hermeneutics is less a disciplined scientific method and technique than an epistemological perspective and approach. Since Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer, it stresses that understanding is not possible without preunderstandings or

prejudices, and therefore, that understanding is always contextually dependent (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:59).

Our very ability to understand becomes defined by our preunderstandings, which we cannot simply cast off as we would a coat or a hat. Human understanding can never take place without words and outside of time (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:59-60).

Feminist analyses have underscored that grammatically masculine, so-called generic language is a major cultural force in maintaining women's second-class status in culture and religion. A critical hermeneutics that is feminist and emancipatory, therefore, insists that we must analyze language as an instrument of power and ideology rather than as simply descriptive and communicative (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:60).

#### THE POLITICAL TURN

Politics has to do with the exercise of power in the act of interpretation. *Politics/political* is not here understood as partisan party politics. It is rather understood in the classical terms of the polis or in global contemporary terms of the *cosmopolis* (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:61).

The political encourages us to articulate Biblical studies as political criticism that puts concern with the values, texts and cultures of the "others" at its center. It calls for the articulation of a politics of interpretation that is conceptualized as a critical rhetorical activity practiced by citizens who in the *ekklesia* of the academy or the Church/synagogue/mosque deliberate and decide the well-being of the cosmopolis (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:61-62).

To recognize the kyriarchal deformations of notions such as citizenship, democracy, and justice, does not mean that one must reject the discourses wholesale. It only means that they need to be thoroughly deconstructed in terms of a critical ideology analysis before they can be deployed with a difference (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:63).

#### THE IDEOLOGY CRITICAL TURN

The ideology critical turn is closely connected and engendered by the political turn, but it does not focus just on the political (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:63).

Whereas the scientific study of the Bible is dedicated to analyzing the text as well as to describing its worlds, and hermeneutics is concerned with the surplus of meaning, critical theory focuses on the lack and distortion of meaning and method because of their determination by power relations of domination. Just as feminist analysis, so also critical theory stresses the distortion of language and tradition (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:63).

A feminist critical theory thus insists on and makes possible the concrete analysis of structures of power and domination. It engages in hermeneutics for the sake of ideology critique (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:64).

### THE ETHICAL TURN

To move from a position of uncommitted disinterest to a committedness towards the marginalized, requires an ethical turn. The ethical turn involves all facets of interpretation. It also includes the acknowledgement that science is not possible from a neutral viewpoint, but that the questions asked already presuppose certain assumptions before study even started.

Feminist theology has placed great emphasis on its commitment to the poor and subjugated, and walks in front, showing the way for other sciences to complete their own ethical turn.

The tensions and problems in the community of faith to the Bible are today occasioned by such a shift in theological paradigms. Whereas the Bible was traditionally perceived as Divine revelation and held canonical authority for the Church, it has been studied as a collection of historical writings since the Enlightenment. This new historical and value-neutral paradigm has developed in contrast to doctrinal-orthodox understandings of the Bible, and it did not completely win the alliance of the Christian community, who often still clings to the doctrinal paradigm. Since ministers are trained to study the Bible in terms of the historical-factual paradigm, but are committed to the service of the Church (who understand the Bible not as a historical work but as a proclamation of the Word of God for today), they are especially caught in this paradigm shift. A new theological paradigm is on the horizon, but has not yet replaced the historical-factual paradigm or the doctrinal paradigm, because its pastoral-theological implications are not yet sufficiently recognized by theologians and ministers alike. Currently, all three paradigms compete for the allegiance of the community of faith (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:24-25).

#### 4.6.1. The Doctrinal Paradigm

This paradigm is concerned with the authority and claims of the Bible. It sees the authority and truth claims of the Bible in a-historical, dogmatic terms. In its most consistent form it insists on the verbal inspiration and literal accuracy of the Biblical books. All the words of the Bible are inspired, and the Bible not only communicates the word of God, but *is* the Word of God. The Bible is not simply a record of revelation, but revelation itself. It is directly binding and has absolute authority: The Bible is a miraculous, Divine book (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:25).

The Church hierarchy and theologians as representatives of the institutionalized Church guard Scriptural revelation and protect it from error. In this paradigm, the danger exists to make Scripture an ideological justification for Church doctrine and practice on the one hand, or personal edification and legitimization on the other hand. The Reformation attempted to capture the critical potential of Scripture for the Church and personal piety, but Protestant orthodoxy has once again let Biblical exegesis become absorbed by dogmatics, providing proof texts for the doctrinal system (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:28).

#### 4.6.2. The Historical Paradigm

This approach intended to unearth the historical data of the Bible, and defines history as "what actually happened". In this paradigm, theological meaning and truth thus become identified with historical factualness. If an event cannot be proven, it cannot be true (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:29).

#### 4.6.3. The Pastoral-Theological Paradigm

This new paradigm takes seriously the methodological insights of historical-critical scholarship, but also radically questions whether neutral and uncommitted exegetical research is possible. Biblical interpretation cannot limit itself to working out what the author and the text *meant*; it must also critically elaborate what the theological significance of the text is for today. This new paradigm could be called pastoral-theological, for it holds the pastoral situation and the theological response to it (the historical and theological aspects / the past and the present) in creative tension. It understands the Bible not as a conglomeration of doctrinal propositions or proofs, not

as historical-factual transcripts, but as the model for the Christian faith and life (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:32).

When the Biblical writers re-interpreted their traditions, they did not follow the doctrinal or historical paradigms but rather the paradigm of pastoral or practical theology insofar as the pastoral situation of the community determines selection, transmission, and creation of the Biblical traditions. The NT authors rewrote their traditions in the form of letters, gospels, or apocalypses, because they felt theologically compelled to illuminate or censure the beliefs and praxis of their communities. The Biblical books are written with the intention of serving the needs of the community of faith and not of revealing timeless principles or transmitting historically accurate records. They do not locate revelation only in the past but also in their own present, thereby revealing a dialectical understanding between present and past. The past is significant because revelation happened decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, the NT writers can freely use the Jesus traditions because they believe that the Jesus who spoke then, speaks now to His followers through the Holy Spirit (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:35).

The doctrinal paradigm is represented by the teaching authority of the Church, and the historical paradigm is presented by the academy — the emerging pastoral-theological paradigm has not yet engendered its own communal structures (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:41).

Students of the Bible should be trained not only to correctly analyze historical texts and literary forms, but also to reflect methodologically on their own presuppositions or prejudices as well as on those of scholarly interpretations. It is obvious in this context how damaging it is that almost all Biblical scholars are middle-class, white males who are highly educated and belong to the clergy. It is essential to break the monopoly of this class if the Bible is to truly become again Scripture for the community of faith. It is absolutely mandatory that people of different life styles, social backgrounds, and personal experience become involved in the interpretation of Scripture. An involvement of people with different experiences and perceptions will generate new questions in Biblical interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:38).

#### 4.7. SITUATING ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is an example of a reconstructionist feminist theologian. She argues that although the Bible originated in a patriarchal culture in antiquity, it has elements that are potentially liberating not only for women but also for any person experiencing oppression in patriarchal systems today (Clifford 2001:54). The legacy of Elizabeth Schüssler has been that she not so much has reclaimed the Bible as a sacred text for women, but that she has exposed, unsettled and changed the power relations between the Bible and its women readers and subjects (Hughes 2002:8).

Her works *In Memory of Her* and *Bread not Stone* were clear articulations of feminist Biblical hermeneutics, but her recent works show a discomfort with the hermeneutical approach. She has now resituated her work as critical rhetoric in order to point out the context of textual production and the effects of textual reception. In her 1992 book *But She Said* she uses the figure of Miriam to lead the rhetorical movement, instead of the trickster god Hermes. She envisions the task of the feminist Biblical critic as *finding the words that make well* (Hughes 2002:8). It is in this respect that she finds amplification in the works of other feminist theologians who focus on aspects like the female voice, historical-critical reconstruction of female history, cultural hermeneutics, and even the partnership theology of local theologian Christina Landman. These varied strategies form, from different voices, one choir singing a single song of liberation for people in the Christian faith.

##### 4.7.1. ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

What distinguishes Fiorenza from other radical feminist theologians, is the fact that she maintains her conviction that the Bible cannot be discarded in the process for liberation. When one takes as hermeneutical criterion the authority of women's experience struggling for liberation, one must ask whether the Bible as the product of a patriarchal culture can also be the sacred Scripture for the Church of women. The Bible has been used to halt the emancipation of women, slaves and colonized peoples in the past. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, clergymen invoked the Bible to bar women from speaking in public, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was used to prevent the ordination of women. Women have pointed to other Biblical texts to legitimate their claim to

I recently read in a review of Jane Goodall's autobiography that the "hope" that inspires action should not be based in rational calculation that we will succeed but in the passionate conviction that what we care about is important.

Carol P Christ in interview with Ruth Martin 2002:117

public speaking and the ministry. While many feminists reject the Bible as completely repressive and patriarchal, there are others who have attempted to show that the Bible correctly interpreted, preaches the emancipation of women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:8-9).

Feminist criticism cannot simply focus on the world of culture without narrowing its gaze on the theological world. The world of religion may not be left unstudied. A Biblical theology that does not seriously consider the patriarchal stamp of the Bible and its religious-political legitimization of the patriarchal oppression of women is in danger of using a feminist perspective to rehabilitate the authority of the Bible, rather than rehabilitating women's Biblical history and theological heritage (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:21).

In this political-religious controversy, certain passages in Scripture are used to justify one's particular interests. By contrast to this, postbiblical feminists do not challenge only certain passages and statements of the Bible; they rather reject the Bible in its entirety as irredeemable for feminists (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:9). But the Bible cannot be ignored. It has served to legitimize societal and ecclesial patriarchy, and has been used as a key argument against women's emancipation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:7).

Christian apologists as well as postbiblical feminists tend to overlook the experiences of women in Biblical religion and assume that the Bible has authority independently of the community to which it belongs. If this apologetic debate seeks to salvage or to reject the religious authority of the Bible for women today, it understands the Bible as a mythical archetype rather than as a historical prototype open to feminist theological transformation. As mythical archetype, the Bible can be either accepted or rejected, but not critically evaluated. A mythical archetype takes historically limited experiences and texts and posits them as universals, which then become authoritative and normative for all times and cultures. An example is that many texts speak of God as a male ruler. It is therefore argued that feminists have to accept the patriarchal male language and God of the Bible, or they have to reject the Bible and leave behind Biblical religion (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:10).

Because the Bible is stamped with patriarchal oppression but claims to be the Word of God, it perpetuates an archetypal oppressive myth that must be rejected by feminists on the one hand and must be maintained over feminism by Biblical religion



on the other hand. The archetypal myth of the Bible as the Word of God has been challenged by historical-critical scholarship and has undergone significant modifications in the last centuries. Although Biblical and theological scholarship is well aware of the difficulties raised by such an archetypal understanding of the Bible, ecclesiastical authority and popular preaching has not quite accepted the challenge of historical-critical scholarship to the archetypal definition of Biblical inspiration (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:10).

A critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation seeks to develop a critical dialectical mode of Biblical interpretation that can do justice to women's experiences of the Bible as a thoroughly patriarchal book written in androcentric language as well as to women's experience of the Bible as a source of empowerment and vision in our struggles for liberation. Such a hermeneutics has to subject Biblical texts to a dialectical process of critical readings and feminist evaluations. In order to do so it insists that *the* litmus test for invoking Scripture as the Word of God must be whether or not Biblical texts and traditions seek to end relations of domination and exploitation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xiii).

A feminist theological interpretation of the Bible that has as its canon the liberation of women from oppressive sexist structures, institutions, and internalized values must maintain, therefore, that only the nonsexist and nonpatriarchal traditions of the Bible and the nonoppressive traditions of Biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible is not to continue as a tool for the oppression of women. The advocacy stance demands that oppressive and destructive Biblical traditions not be granted their claim to truth and authority today. Nor did they have a valid claim at any point in history. A critical hermeneutics must be applied to their subsequent history of interpretation in order to determine how these traditions and interpretations have contributed to the patriarchal oppression of women. In the same vein, a critical feminist hermeneutics must rediscover those Biblical traditions and interpretations that have transcended their oppressive cultural contexts even though they are embedded in patriarchal culture. These texts and traditions should not be understood as abstract theological ideas or norms, but as responses of faith to concrete historical situations of oppression. One example here is the fact that through the centuries Christian feminism has claimed as its Magna Charta Galatians 3.28, whereas the patriarchal Church has used 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 for the cultural and ecclesial oppression of women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:60-61).

Fiorenza's alignment with the pastoral-theological paradigm brings her to her re-evaluation of the Bible as canon, and her definition of canon itself.

There is not one way of formulating Christian proclamation and theology or of building Christian communities and living as a Christian. The pastoral-theological paradigm therefore demands a redefinition of what the canon means. The canon should not be viewed as it is in the doctrinal paradigm, in an exclusive fashion as a negative judgment on all other early Christian writings that were not included by the Church into the 66 books collection. The canon should rather be understood in an inclusive fashion as creating a multiform model of Christian Church and Christian life (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:36). To indicate the differences between the two usages, she uses the terms archetype and prototype.

A dictionary definition reveals the significant distinction between the words. While both archetype and prototype "denote original models", an archetype is usually construed as an ideal form that establishes an unchanging pattern. However, a prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity of its own transformation. Thinking in terms of prototypes historicizes myth (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:61).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza consistently and astutely draws attention to the importance of how a person views authority when addressing questions about the authority of the Bible. Patriarchy envisions authority as dominance. In this perspective, the Bible easily becomes a means for Church leadership to exert power over individuals in the community, promoting compliance to a certain position or rule. In contrast to this, in the feminist perspective, authentic authority is partnership. It is exercised in, and not over, community, especially "in service of building a community of human wholeness that is inclusive of women and men". The inclusive community of human wholeness is what she means by the "new creation" that is of Christ. Whatever denies this intention, which she believes is God's, does not compel assent (Clifford 2001:63).

Fiorenza is not alone in her plea for a rethinking of the meaning of canon. Letty Russell, a Protestant, also proposes a reconceptualization of the canon and Biblical authority. Together they argue that texts do not have authority independent of faith communities committed to and struggling for the full humanity of women and also of men subjugated by patriarchy (Clifford 2001:63).

As dominant as Fiorenza's model has become, it is still not accepted by all feminist theologians. The difficulties of a usable past, and the existence of difference between people, are also problems that have not been completely resolved.

Anne Clifford borrows from the work of Fiorenza after asserting that women's questions, concerns and lives have been rendered peripheral if not invisible. She argues that what is needed is both a hermeneutics of suspicion with regard to the received interpretation of the Christian tradition, and a hermeneutics of remembrance in an attempt to recover a usable past for women (Gentry-Akin in Procaro-Foley 2002:139). This assumption of a workable, retrievable past is in turn heavily criticized by Katherine Sonderegger, and I refer the reader to chapter 6 where the problems concerning language for God are discussed. The same arguments are relevant in that discussion.

#### **4.7.2. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's Position of Commitment to Liberation**

What has become clear, is that liberation is not something that happens in one quick move — people were not liberated before, and after hearing a certain message, they are. Doing liberation theology with people is a process that takes time and addresses various aspects of their lives.

1. This process begins with the liberation of feelings and the way of thinking, and language about God.
2. It then moves toward mutuality and community in feelings, thoughts and relationships with all people.

Anne Bennett has spent her life working on the practical side of teaching faithful believers liberative principles, and has found that a big step toward liberation of thinking is to call patriarchy by name. The naming of the pyramid of power and dominance as patriarchy is essential before any dialogue can start (Bennett 1989:130). A very important warning is issued for theologians from the Third World, who should be careful not to fall into the trap of too easily naming colonialism and capitalism as the only factors at play. Oppression of the "other" in any culture existed long before either capitalism or colonialism. If the structure of "patriarchy" were named, then a project could focus on the pervasive oppression of women (Bennett 1989:131).

Three questions should be asked:

1. What are the liberation struggles that are going on around the world?

2. Does the fact that we are Christian require us to participate in those struggles?

3. What can we do to participate in those struggles? (Bennett 1989:131).

The answer to these questions by every individual defines the way s/he participates in liberation praxis. Not every Christian is interested in liberation struggles in other parts of the world at the very beginning. It is often the case that liberation is a process that has to permeate the personal life of faith first, and only then can it circle out to other issues. Since liberation in the own life takes time due to the many aspects of life and dimensions of oppression addressed, a certain level of maturity first has to be reached individually before it can focus on the world outside.

The role that professional interpreters of the Bible have played in the justification of patriarchy should also be proclaimed in order for liberation to take place. Daniel Pane pointed out that all those involved in Biblical interpretation on the professional level must be rigorously self-conscious. The end goal is that Biblical interpretation should promote justice (Schaeffer 2000:10), and that for all people.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza understands patriarchy not just as an ideological dualism or androcentric world construction, but as a social, economic and political system of graded subjugations and oppressions. She speaks not simply of male oppressors and female oppressed, or see all men over against all women. Patriarchy is a male pyramid that specifies women's oppression in terms of class, race, country, religion etc of the men to whom they "belong" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:127). As long as societal and religious patriarchy exists, women are not "liberated" and must continue struggling for survival and self-determination. Fiorenza takes pains to point out that in these terms, there is no single feminist theory, religion or group that can claim to be fully liberated (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:127). Liberation continues to be a goal towards which we move. A major step forward is our active advocacy for the most obviously oppressed, and especially the poor. Believers need to make a choice for the poor and oppressed, but this choice should most aggressively be made by the people handling the Biblical text on a professional level.

Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that all theology is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historical world of exploitation and oppression. Fiorenza makes two points in this assertion:

1. Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific paradigms and heuristic interpretative models is useful for Biblical studies.
2. Interpreters and theologians in liberation theologies recognize the perspective nature of knowledge, and they embrace and advocate a certain perspective.

Kuhn's notion of scientific paradigms shows that no value neutral standpoints are possible. All scientific endeavours ask a commitment to a certain research approach. His notion also points out that theological paradigms are not falsified, but replaced, not because we find new data, but because we find new ways of looking at old data (West 1991:66-67). Liberation theologians not only know that value-neutral science is impossible, but they actively take sides or become engaged with a particular perspective, and in this case, the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. Paradigms define the way scholars see the world. A shift from an androcentric to a feminist paradigm implies a transformation of the scientific imagination. This conversion would entail a shift in commitment that would allow the scholar to see old data in a new light (West 1991:67).

Fiorenza draws from Kuhn when she argues that a transition from an androcentric to a feminist paradigm is only possible when the new paradigm has produced its own structures and support-systems. The feminist paradigm is creating and has created alternative support systems in the form of women's centers, academic institutes, and study programs (West 1991:67-68).

Are men welcome in the movement towards theological liberation, given the fact that they have benefited and sometimes (albeit unknowingly) perpetrated patriarchal oppression? Feminist theology takes an explicit advocacy position, but articulates this position differently for women and men. In a feminist conversion *men* must take the option for the oppressed and become women-identified, while *women* must seek to overcome our deepest self-alienation. All women are socialized to respect and identify with men, and this makes their position of advocacy not an option for the oppressed, but an option for self-respect and self-identification *as women* in a patriarchal society and religion. While feminist theology advocates for men a "theology of relinquishment", it articulates for women a theology of "self-affirmation" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xv). Men are able to identify with liberation, but their identification takes on a different form of commitment.

In contrast to hermeneutical theology, liberation theologies maintain that the goal of Biblical interpretation is not only understanding but also ultimately a new, different

praxis. Biblical interpretation must not aim solely at the understanding of Biblical texts and their meanings. It must not seek merely for a "hermeneutics of consent" but for a new liberation praxis in the community of believers. Thus "the meaning of the text" is disclosed not only in reflection upon it but also in concrete social action based on it (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:136). This leads, among other things, to Fiorenza's hermeneutics of creative actualization. New activities, meanings, songs, prayers and rituals, as well as new conduct towards the poor and oppressed need to flow from liberation. Transformation of Church and society remains the goal, and grounds the ideals of feminist theology in practical daily living.

As has been stated before, the basic methodological starting point of liberation theologies is the insight that all theology knowingly or unknowingly is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historical world of exploitation and oppression. If this is the case, then theology cannot talk about human existence in general, or about Biblical theology in particular, without identifying whose existence and whose God is meant. This "advocacy stance" of all liberation theologies is the major point of disagreement between liberation and academic theology (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:137). Scholarship claiming to be "objective" and "neutral" is no more value-free and less ideological because it hides its subjectivity and contemporary interests from itself (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:137).

Liberation theologians furthermore maintain that their pre-understanding (the option for the poor) is not *eisegesis* but *exegesis*, since this message is already found in the text: The God of the Bible is the God of the poor and oppressed. At this point it becomes apparent that the crucial hermeneutical task of feminist theology is more complicated, since it cannot state without qualification that the "God of the Bible is the God of women", because there is considerable evidence that the Bible not only was used against women's liberation but also had no clear "option" for women's liberation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:138-139).

Feminist Biblical hermeneutics stands in conflict with the dialogical-hermeneutical model developed by Bultmann, Gadamer and the New Hermeneutic, because it cannot respect the "rights" of the androcentric text and seek for a "fusion" with the patriarchal-Biblical horizon. Its goal is not identification with, or consent to, the androcentric text or process of Biblical reception, but rather faithful remembrance of and critical solidarity with women in Biblical history. It does not focus on TEXT as

revelatory word, but on the story of women as the people of God. Its "canonical" hermeneutics insists that the people of God are not restricted to Israel and the Christian Church, but include all of humanity, because the Bible begins with the creation and ends with the vision of a new creation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:140-141). Keeping in mind the main identification with women first and text second, a feminist critical theology of liberation must reject all religious texts and traditions that contribute to our "unfreedom" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xvi).

The insistence of liberation theology on an explicit "advocacy stance" brings into the open only what has always been at work in historical interpretation. A critical feminist liberation theology therefore does not obstruct but enhances the self-understandings of critical Biblical scholarship when it insists that all theological and Biblical scholarship begins with an analysis of its own historical-political situation and with an expression of its own "hermeneutical option" rather than with the deceptive posture of representing detached, neutral, scientific and unbiased scholarship (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:143).

#### **4.8. MOVING TOWARDS A CRITICAL FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION**

##### **4.8.1. The Hermeneutic "Dance"**

Because of the critical and future-oriented dimensions of Biblical scholarship as interpretation for the Church of women, a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation must have a fourfold dimension. It must include suspicion, remembrance, proclamation, and actualization.

1. Entering the Biblical worlds and the works of scholars to detect their ideological deformation makes up the task of suspicious reading.
2. The oppressed needs a past, and this past should be recreated, told and remembered.
3. Proclamation critically evaluates what can be proclaimed and taught today as an inspired vision for a more human life and future.
4. Actualization celebrates critical solidarity in story and song, in ritual and meditation, as a people of the "God with us" who was the God of Judith as well as of Jesus (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:148).

A critical ethical-political reading does not subscribe to one single reading strategy and interpretive method but employs a variety of exegetical and interpretive methods for understanding the Bible as a public discourse (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:47-48). Such an emancipatory process of Biblical interpretation has as its "doubled" reference point the contemporary present and the Biblical past, but whereas exegetical-historical methods often are restricted to the experts and not accessible to general readership, a critical, rhetorical, ethical-political analysis must be accessible to anyone. For that reason Fiorenza has developed a method of critical analysis and deliberation that engages seven interpretive strategies in the dance of interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:48).

Crucial moves in a critical process of interpretation and rhetorical analysis are:

1. Conscientization
2. Critical analysis of domination
3. Suspicion
4. Re-construction or remembering
5. Assessment and evaluation in terms of a scale of values
6. (re-) Imagination
7. Transformation or action for change.

These practices of an emancipatory ethics of interpretation are not to be construed as successive independent steps of inquiry or simply as discrete methodological rules or recipes. They must rather be understood as interpretive moves that interact with each other simultaneously in the process of reading a Biblical or cultural text in light of the globalization of inequality (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:48).

1. The hermeneutics of experience and social location does not simply ask for the experiences of women with a certain text as for example 1 Cor 14, but also asks to reflect on how women's social, cultural, and religious location has shaped their experience with and reaction to a particular Biblical text or story (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:49). A critical-ethical-political emancipatory rhetorical analysis does not simply begin with individualized and privatized experience. It rather begins with a critical reflection on how experience with the Biblical text is shaped by one's sociopolitical location. It will equally ask for the experiences of women and their cultural locations inscribed in the Biblical text (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:49).
2. The analytic of domination seeks to identify not only contemporary structures of domination, but also those inscribed in Biblical texts. It is justified to do so



because its analytic is formulated in light of modern political structures as well as in light of the kyriarchal structures of antiquity (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:50).

3. The hermeneutics of suspicion scrutinizes both the presuppositions and interests of interpreters and those of Biblical commentators as well as the androcentric strategies in the Biblical text itself. A hermeneutics of suspicion must not be misunderstood as uncovering a pre-given reality understood in essentialist terms. It is rather concerned with the distorted construction of the representations of women's actual presences and actions in and through kyriocentric language and media. This hermeneutic must also not be mistaken for a hermeneutics of "discovery assuming that there is some other in the world...that can be discovered". Truth is something discovered by employing a hermeneutics of suspicion, wherein one is suspicious of the various disguises one can use to cover up and distort reality (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:50). A hermeneutics of suspicion has the task to disentangle the ideological functions of kyriocentric text and commentary. *It does not assume a kyriarchal conspiracy of the classics and their contemporary interpreters, but insists that women do not know whether we are being addressed or not by the grammatically masculine generic texts* (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:51).
4. A critical feminist hermeneutics of evaluation seeks both to make conscious the cultural-religious internalizations and legitimizations of kyriarchy and to explore the values and visions that are inscribed as countercultural alternatives in Biblical texts (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:51). It also seeks to evaluate Biblical texts and interpretations in terms of a feminist scale of values that may be inspired by, but is not necessarily derived from, the Bible. Its criterion or standard of evaluation is the well-being of every woman (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:51).
5. A hermeneutic of remembrance and re-construction questions the historical "chasm" that historical positivism has constructed between contemporary readers and the Biblical text. It seeks to displace the kyriocentric dynamic of the Biblical text in its literary and historical contexts by recontextualising the text in a sociopolitical-religious model of reconstruction that aims at making the subordinated and marginalized "others" visible again and their repressed arguments and silences "audible". It thereby attempts to recover women's religious history and the memory of their victimization, struggle, and accomplishments as women's heritage (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:52).

6. A hermeneutics of imagination is necessary for all knowledge in Biblical texts and worlds. Imagination enables us to fill in the gaps, empty spaces, and silences, and thereby to make sense out of the text. Usually we see the power of imagination embodied in art, music, literature and dance, but not in science, since we generally assume that science works only with deductive, rational, logical arguments. Such an assumption is incorrect insofar as science always works with hypotheses that depend on informed imagination. Imagination mines the unconscious as a store of feelings and experiences as well as a depository of commonsense practices and codes. These unconscious assumptions determine scientific thought and decide how we read texts, reconstruct history, and imagine the past (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:52-53). A hermeneutics of imagination retells Biblical stories, reshapes religious vision, and celebrates those who have brought about change. To that end it utilizes not only historical, literary, and ideological critical methods, which focus on the rhetoric of religious texts and their historical contexts, but it also employs methods of storytelling, role-playing, Bibliodrama, pictorial arts, dance, and ritual for creating a "different" religious imagination (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:53).
7. A hermeneutics of transformation seeks to change relations of domination that are legitimated and inspired by kyriarchal Biblical religions. It explores avenues and possibilities for changing and transforming relations of domination inscribed in texts, traditions, and everyday life. It stands accountable to those women who struggle at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid of discriminations and dominations. It also seeks to articulate religious and Biblical studies as a site of social, political, and religious transformation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:53).

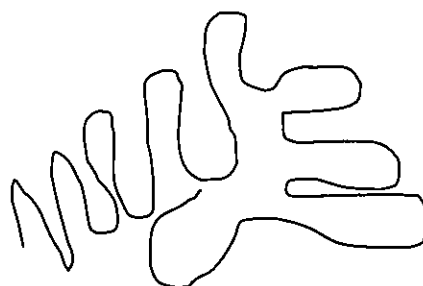
A critical rhetorical-emancipatory process of interpretation challenges practitioners of Biblical studies and readers of the Bible to become more theo-ethically sophisticated readers by problematizing both the modernist ethos of Biblical studies and their own socio-political locations and functions in global structures of domination. At the same time, it enables them to struggle for a more just and radical democratic *cosmopolitan* articulation of religion in the global polis (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:54).

The past is important and needs to be redeemed and remembered. But the main focus falls on the present, and the role the Bible has to play in today's life. Feminist theology opened discussion around current day application of Biblical texts. It wants

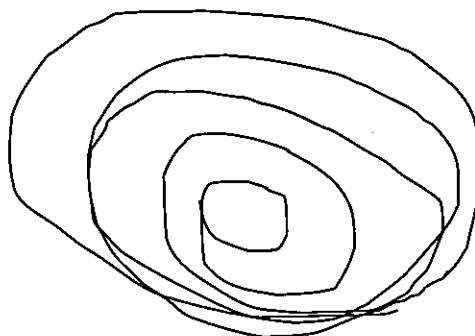
to see women live/experience the Bible in every day life. If Scripture is so important, it comes as an anomaly that much time and energy is spent reconstructing the past but very little in the application of it in present-day worshipping communities. Current society differs greatly from ancient society, but lack of application is due to an application that only centers meaning of Biblical texts in the ancient contexts within which they arose (Melugin 1999:245). The feminist demand for women who can pull Biblical texts into their experiences of the current day, and to broaden traditional application with art, dance, ritual etc, was a step into uncharted territory. Women are actively encouraged to find new rituals, songs, dances and various types of spiritual expression in this modern day. To many women in the Christian faith, especially women of Protestant orientation, this is a bold move, and their own resistance and suspicion of this new-found freedom and authority of religious expression must first be overcome. The Protestant tradition makes its followers especially wary of ritual and new symbols, and one finds a deep suspicion among women that such exercises are unbiblical and contrary to the faith.

Feminist theory did not wade into these waters without a mandate. The shapers of Isaiah readily reinterpreted earlier meanings to guide their own communities. It is strange that modern scholars are committed to a hermeneutic that is different from the one used by writers and early users of the book of Isaiah, for instance. Modern Biblical interpretation is different from what redactors of prophetic books did in their use of sacred texts (Melugin 1999:249). Keeping the usage of Isaiah in mind and teaching women that a Biblical mandate exists for creative expression of faith in new ways, opens the door for women to start on the road of the hermeneutics of creative actualization.

The process of hermeneutics has been compared to a dance with steps going backwards and forwards.



Another way to see it, is as circles in a pond, making ever-wider rings.



My personal view is one of spirals moving forward while growing bigger, but sometimes going back to previous points, and always touching the base of a line.



What I am trying to illustrate here, is that the process of hermeneutics does not follow rigid points on a scale from step one to step ten, for instance, but is rather a more fluid type of exercise, where the possibility of repetition of certain steps, and revisiting of certain ideas, occurs. It has been stated that the hermeneutical steps of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza follow the path of suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and actualization. But these steps can be integrated or revisited, and do not always follow the same rigid pattern. I have found that, as people grow in spiritual maturity and maturity to more sophisticated thought patterns or critical consciousness, some previous steps in the hermeneutic process need to be revisited in order to delve more deeply into an issue that has heretofore only been touched at surface level, or that the person has not been aware of until now. One such an example is the exercise of remembrance which precedes the act of proclamation, which in turn is followed by actualization. But it may form a part of the process of actualization of peace and reconciliation to actually once again proclaim institutions of oppression in order to complete the circle of actualization itself. This is illustrated by Zaru in her work on

reconciling the past. After it has been suspiciously analyzed, remembered, reconstructed, proclaimed and actualized, the process needs to once again stop at a point of proclamation.

Jean Zaru writes that she became involved in the struggle for justice on all fronts, and how she understood that this meant that she could not be selective. She could no longer reconcile herself to structures of domination and oppression that were simply glossed over with terms of peace and reconciliation. This may also be said for the current South African context, even though she speaks as a Palestinian in the Middle East. She points out that words of peace were being preached without any real change in the oppressive situation. The victimized is too often called upon to forgive and reconcile in a way that perpetuates the root causes of injustice, alienation and division (Zaru 2002:88).

Reconciliation does suggest a genuine change in relations, but it can also mean a collapse into acceptance of the status quo because of the belief that nothing can be done. Reconciliation involves a fundamental repair to human lives, and then especially to the lives of those who suffered. The dignity of victims must be restored. Reconciliation consists of the following four dimensions:

1. Political
2. Economic
3. Psycho-social
4. Spiritual

Jesus, for instance, did not only bring the good news, but actively healed and proclaimed the Kingdom of God. In Him, word and deed became inseparable. In this regard, we must see reconciliation as central to Biblical Christianity and theology, and we must become active partakers of reconciliation by repairing lives and proclaiming good news (Zaru 2002:88-89).

When the history of suffering is trivialized or ignored, the victims of said suffering are forgotten, and the causes of such suffering are never uncovered. Reconciliation cannot be a hasty peace that does not examine the cause of suffering. Causes must be addressed in order to stop suffering and violence (Zaru 2002:90).

#### 4.8.2. Revisiting the Activity of Reading and Interpretation

Before close scrutiny of Fiorenza's suspicious reading, a look at reading and interpretation is justified.

Reading does not take place without some form of interpretation. Even in the earliest reported speech of Genesis, we find traces of interpretation taking place. In Genesis 3.1-7, the woman and serpent are discussing what God's words about the fruit of the tree, mean. What we find here is "language about language". The dialogue between the woman and the serpent demonstrates that language is not transparent, but is rather always open to question and capable of a variety of interpretations. Interpretation is essential and inevitable. Language is never simply a message or a meaning, but always entails **rhetoric** (language designed to persuade or impress) (Stratton 1995:146).

Language can be talked about as in the above example, and the meaning of the utterance can be interpreted, whether it be a spoken or a written message. The hermeneutical discussion has pointed out that an objectivist, value-free historiography and exegesis is impossible since the interpreter (or reader/listener) always approaches the text with specific questions and a certain understanding of the issues with which the text is concerned. The interpreter's mind is not a *tabula rasa* (blank page). Before we attempt to understand how an author deals with a given subject and before we can get interested in a text, we must have a certain common interest, understanding, or life-relation, to the issues of which the text speaks (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:37). As readers we come to the interpretive experience with different life experiences. We hold several ideologies. The ethical assumptions and goals we bring to the task of interpretation, are shaped by the communities we belong to. Even the texts themselves show the markings of life (Stratton 1995:169).

Meaning remains a central issue when reading a text. Feminists pointed out the interaction between text and reader to create various meanings. Fish is one academic who shook the literary world by claiming that there are no determinate meanings and that the stability of a text is an illusion. For him, it is impossible to even think of a sentence independently from a context. Meaning and context cannot be separated. Fish makes the point that communication occurs within situations, and that meanings come already calculated since language is perceived within a structure of norms. In this area, feminist theory agrees in so far as writer, reader and

text are all tied up with circumstance. There are no objective readings/writings/meanings. Fish stated that his position does not inevitably lead to solipsism (one can only know the self and nothing else) and relativism (all knowledge is relative) since, while one can speak of relativism, one cannot really BE a relativist. Interpretation is already bound by those interpretive communities within which we do our interpreting (Stratton 1995:180-181).

To take Fish's ideas to their conclusion, is to hold that texts come into being only as they are interpreted. Fish differs with most scholars in that they want to treat a text separately from its interpretation, as if by existing prior to interpretation a text could provide as corrective or serve as the foundation for judging hermeneutical theories or individual interpretations. According to Fish, we can only appropriate a text through the lenses of the various interpretive communities to which we belong. A text has no separate existence from its communities of readers (Stratton 1995:181). Feminism agrees that interpretation is dependent on the community from which it comes. This thought has been amplified by MZ Rosaldo, who has pointed out that *What we know is constrained by interpretive frameworks which, of course, limit our thinking; what we can know will be determined by the kinds of questions we ask* (Rosaldo in Day 1989:3).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza identifies various models of Biblical interpretation:

1. The Doctrinal approach.

The Bible is understood in terms of divine revelation and canonical authority. Biblical revelation and authority are seen as a-historical and dogmatic. The Bible is verbally inspired and literally-historically inerrant. The Biblical text is revelation itself. It does not just communicate the word of God, but *is* the word of God. It functions as the first principle, and it gives through a proof-text the ultimate theological authority for a position already taken. The Bible functions as a timeless oracle that reveals timeless truth and definite answers (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:4-5).

2. The positivist historical exegesis model.

Exegesis and historiography is understood in positivist terms, seen to be factual, objective and value-free. The aim of reading is towards a purely objective reading of the texts and a scientific presentation of the "historical facts". Historical-critical scholarship still adheres to a value-neutral, detached interpretation. Such a scholarly detachment is theoretically impossible (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:5).

3. Dialogical-hermeneutical Interpretation.



**MOTHER MYSTERY**  
JANET MCKENZIE



The historical methods of model 2 are taken seriously while also minding the interconnection between text and community, or text and interpreter. Hermeneutical discussion is concerned with establishing the meaning of Biblical texts. The scholar must strive to be free from preconceived understanding of the texts, keeping in mind that complete detachment is impossible. The text itself and its subject matter should decide the interpretation, and not the presupposed situation. The point of departure is that what is handed down in Christian tradition is always meaningful and that this meaning has to be deciphered hermeneutically and made present and actual (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:5-6).

#### 4. Liberation Theology.

Various forms of liberation theology have challenged so-called objectivity and value-free neutrality of academic theology. The basic insight is that all theology is always engaged for or against the oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible. Theology must first identify whose human existence is meant and about whose God the Biblical text speaks (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:6).

How does a feminist consciousness function in the interpretation of Scripture? Principles of a feminist hermeneutic serve first as a negative limit. Whatever contradicts these deep-held convictions cannot be accepted as having the authority of an authentic revelation of truth (Farley 1985:49). Here Farley's ideas link with that of Fiorenza, who categorically states that nothing which supports the oppression of women can be seen as authoritative. For her, this statement is also true of the Biblical text.

The history of the *use* of Biblical materials must also become part of the interpretation. John Cobb has indicated that critical study recognizes and emphasizes the socio-historical context in which the text functioned in the early Church. Feminist interpretation has added to this the recognition of the patriarchal context of the text. But the text still functions, and the same patriarchal view that formed part of the formulation of the text is in turn supporting it and supported by the text. All of this history must become a part of a feminist interpretation of the Bible (Thistlethwaite 1985:98).

Women's suspicion of the Biblical interpretation of their situation springs from *both* the text as well as female life experience. In this method of interrogation between

text and experience, method emerges. Key to keep in mind is that this process of interrogation proceeds over time (Thistlethwaite 1985:98).

The idea that it is possible to "read as a woman" highlights the fact that reading is actually done by people rather than by the various types of hypothetical readers posited by some reader response critics. Walter Slatoff stated that experience is inevitably a factor in real reading (Stratton 1995:81). Feminist criticism brings experience as a factor in reading to the surface in an explicit fashion (Stratton 1995:81).

One of the main current trends is to choose alternative subjects for analysis, thus bringing forgotten women in the text to the fore. Feminist critics recognize that the implied reader of many texts is male. This leads to a process of deliberately resisting the "emasculating" effect of the text. The experiences and values of women are put into contrast to the way they are portrayed in the text. Only then are texts seen in new ways (Stratton 1995:75). This type of reading is called resisting reading. This may include a variety of perspectives and practices. As resisting readers we uncover what is hidden, expose biases and stereotypes, and explore power relations. We note how women are characterized differently than men and whether a text is addressed primarily to men. We aim to understand the dialogue of a text. Sometimes we aim to subvert the meaning of a text. We resist a text or its standard interpretations in order to disrupt the intended emasculation thereof. Acknowledgement is given to the political role and potential power of the written word. At the same time truths that were accepted as universal, are exposed for being only partial. Gender assumptions of a text and the own culture are considered and they are questioned (Stratton 1995:82).

Resisting reading by feminists grows out of the recognition that women have been trained to read as men. Reading practices encourage women to read as men, while this impact is further enforced by the male implied readers of the texts themselves. Women are emasculated when they read a text by adopting the role of the implied male reader. Women are seduced by male texts. In the Biblical tradition, it happens too often that the experiences of women have no influence on the literary expectation of the canonical texts nor the critical theories used to address them (Stratton 1995:79). To become an aware reader and to start reading with an attitude of resistance when texts make us feel uncomfortable as women, is a great step towards transforming the culture of interpretation.

In the words of Annette Kolodny:

*An acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance; the consequences of that encoding for women — as characters, as readers, and as writers; and, with that, a shared analytical concern for the implications of that encoding not only for better understanding of the past, but also for an improved reordering of the present and future as well (Kolodny in Stratton 1995:77).*

Too long have readers allowed themselves to be seen as ignorant and unsophisticated. Fiorenza insists on using terms such as hermeneutics when she talks to her audiences, and for this she has been criticized. David Hammond, for instance, says that Fiorenza continues to use the term "hermeneutics" even though (males) people point out that the word is too sophisticated for ordinary women to understand. Fiorenza's response is that the ordinary reader is far more capable of understanding and inferring than s/he is given credit for. To give the reader/listener the benefit of sophistication and mature reading/listening strategies, is a great step towards empowering him/her to become a critical and conscious reader/listener. Perhaps ordinary people should be credited with the capacity to understand God language metaphorically and non-literally. Christianity is beyond gender, as affirmed by Anne Clifford. Is this recognition restricted to experts, or might it be reasonably assumed that ordinary readers and believers share such recognition, despite the fact that they might not be able to articulate this? (Hammond in Procaro-Foley 2002:147).

In Exum's view of the text, gender, culture and theory come together as a cultural artifact that needs a reader to actualize it. In her work, Exum sees readers as present-day fe/male readers reading an ancient text, written by men for men. Her question is: "What happens when we actualize it?" (Exum 1996:11). She points out the fact that modern readers have different responses to the text when compared to the people who read it at the time of writing. Using the tale of Bathsheba for example, we have different reactions to the textual image of a woman bathing, and this may differ from what an ancient author may have meant to suggest (Exum 1996:11).

When readers read, they naturalize textual events, often reducing them to the lowest common denominator in order to make them conform to their own understanding of the way things "happen". This can imply their notions of chronology (the order in which things happen), causality (cause and effect) and coherence (logical argument),

as well as their stereotypes and gender biases. Naturalization is a readerly response whereby readers appropriate (take possession of) texts as they see fit, and appropriation is a process whereby (Biblical) stories enter into the popular culture with new meanings attached to them (Exum 1996:12). The naturalization and appropriation of Biblical texts is a two-way process. On one side Biblical blockbusters/art/fiction shape the viewer's/reader's ideas about Biblical women and how they lived (just think of movies like *Prince of Egypt*, *David and Bathsheba*, *Ben Hur*, *Passion of the Christ* etc). On the other side, viewers and readers take the impressions gained from Biblical epics back with them when they read the Biblical text (Exum 1996:13). As readers and viewers, we need to become sensitive to the way this process of naturalization works in our own lives, and the way it influences our handling of the Bible. I would add to this the phenomenon of religious artworks and Bibles for children. The pictures found in children's Bibles often shape the view readers have of the Biblical world for life. One such an example is the way a woman such as Ruth is portrayed, or even Eve. Often shapely, with long dark hair, and holding an apple, she is depicted talking to a snake. Another picture that shapes understanding for the rest of life, and which is only overcome with great effort, is the picture of Jesus as a white male with blue eyes, holding children (even Chinese!) on His lap under the shade of a tree. Children's Bibles have also kept images of Bathsheba through the "male gaze". The importance of such visual images, and their ideological effect, can never be overstated.

A different process is at work when the audience cannot read or write, and when their own culture shows marked similarities with Biblical culture. This is more often found in rural settings than urban settings. Musimbi Kanyoro studied the Ruth texts with a group of rural women, many of whom were illiterate. The women of Bware village hold the Bible as the Word of God written directly to them. When reading the Bible, they experience the message to be written specifically for them. They are not distanced from the text, and do not read or hear it as written for and by somebody else. To them, the purpose of the text is to provide them with a framework to look at their own lives. The text is immediately appropriated, and they are situated inside it while trying to understand what is expected of them in that particular text (Kanyoro 2002:7). To discuss the text, is to discuss their own lives, with no distinction being made between method and content. For these women, reality merges with the text, while also being blended with the strong influence of culture (Kanyoro 2002:7-8). This is also applicable to women in my own culture and economic group. Although there is not such a marked alignment between Biblical and modern life, the idea

exists that the text is the Word of God, written to the situation of each and every woman in her own personal life. Christina Landman has also found this to be true. The degree to which this belief is held varies according to economic status, academic history etc, but it is still a prevalent view among women of faith in the South African context.

It is generally accepted today that gender, race, ethnicity, social location and other factors all influence the way we read. Readers can read as they please, and find meanings they want in texts. The aware reader becomes sensitive to the interaction between her/him and the text which is being read. It should still be noted that the text does play a role in the reading process, and is not entirely just at the mercy of the reader. Texts need readers to actualize them, but readers need texts to actualize. "Reading" implies reading something. Apart from reading as a female or as a male per se, or reading within a specific social or economic context, reading can also evoke emotions when sexual matters enter the picture (as in the case of Ruth or Bathsheba) (Exum 1996:137).

Itumeleng Mosala suggests a few questions to ask a text. He brings it to bear specifically on Genesis 4. He suggests that the category of social struggle as a Biblical hermeneutical tool necessitates a historical-critical starting point for an exegesis of Genesis 4 (Cain and Abel). Questions that emanate from such an approach are:

- What historical point is reflected by the discursive practice these texts represent?
- What are the social, cultural, class, gender and racial issues at work in this text?
- What is the ideological-spiritual agenda of the text — how does the text seek to be understood? (Mosala 1993:66).

The suspicion of Mosala is complemented by the insight of David Lochhead that the politics of understanding is inescapable. Relations of dominance and submission arise at every stage in the method of Biblical reflection. To stay sensitive to this, groups need to keep questions like the following in mind as well:

- Who selects the text?
- Why is this text chosen?
- What interests are reflected in the resources which the group is using?
- In whose interest is it to read a text the way we do?

- Why do we analyze our contemporary reality the way we do?
- Why do we apply the text in one way rather than another?
- All steps should include the most important question: whose interest is being served? (Lochhead 1993:135).

The power relations relevant to Biblical reflection exist on two levels:

1. There are the external power relationships; the relationships which order society as a whole. We live our lives in the context of these relationships and we bring to Biblical reflection a type of thinking which is molded by the world we live in. We resultingly have to ask, in relation to any specific text, the question of class interest. Who stands to benefit if we read the text one way rather than another?
2. We have to deal with the internal relationships within the study group. Who is dominating the discussion? How is this person doing it? Why is he/she doing it?

On both levels, a liberated reading of the Bible must be accompanied by a healthy exercise of suspicion (Lochhead 1993:136).

#### **4.8.3. Becoming a Conscious, Suspicious Reader**

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza works from the starting point that feminist theology begins with the experiences of women and women-Church in the struggle for self-identity, survival and liberation in a patriarchal society and Church. Christians have found that the Bible has been used against them as a weapon, but at the same time they can attest to experiences of using the Bible as resource for courage, hope and commitment to the struggle for liberation. Fiorenza states that the task of feminist interpretation can never be to defend the Bible against its feminist critics. The task is rather to interpret and understand it in such a way that its oppressive as well as liberating power is clearly recognized (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:x).

All members of the Church need to become subjects of Biblical interpretation. Biblical interpretation should no longer be restricted to academics, clergy, historians of religions, or preachers, because the Bible is entrusted to all of us for the "sake of our salvation" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xxi).

A new paradigm seems to be evolving, which Fiorenza calls the ethical-political, public-rhetorical, or feminist-postcolonial emancipatory paradigm. In order to elaborate this emerging paradigm theoretically, Fiorenza explores the questions, methods and strategies involved in Biblical interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:32).

Biblical studies must be refashioned in such a way that it constitutes a public and not just an academic or theological-religious discourse. Refashioning its exegetical, historical and hermeneutic inquiry, Biblical studies must engage in critical readings and evaluations of Biblical discourses in terms of a public, radical and democratic ethos. It must ask:

- How has this text been used and how is it used today to defy corroborate hegemonic political systems, laws, science, medicine or public policy?
- How has Biblical interpretation been used and how is the Bible still used either to challenge or to protect powerful interests and to engender sociocultural, political, and religious change?
- How is the Bible used to define public discourse and groups of people?
- What is the vision of society that is articulated in and through Biblical texts?
- Is, and how is, Scripture used to marginalize certain people, to legitimate racism and other languages of hate, or is it used to intervene in discourses of injustice?

Such questions must become as central as exegetical-historical and literary-anthropological questions still are and have been (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:33).

To commit Biblical research to asking such questions, would engender a transformation in the self-understanding of Biblical studies. It would effectively change Biblical studies into a rhetorical-ethical public discourse. To do so, one needs to carefully analyze what stands in the way of such a paradigm shift. Fiorenza has repeatedly pointed out that the scientific-positivist ethos that is still virulent in religious and Biblical studies is the main obstacle to a paradigm shift from a scientific-hermeneutical to a rhetorical-political, from a kyriarchal Eurocentric to a radical egalitarian cosmopolitan model of interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:33).

Reading becomes far more complex to the person who has been trained to read in a suspicious way. The reader realizes that reading is not simply an act of taking in

what the author meant, but becomes aware that simply by reading from the own perspective, some ideology also plays a role. How readers hear, understand, and interpret texts depends in part on the presuppositions they hold, the methodologies in which they have been trained, and the ways they choose to focus their attention. Interpretations depend on what and how we know (Stratton 1995:108).

I will illustrate the above through the work of Cheryl Exum, who looks at women from the perspective of the object of the male gaze. When looking at a woman in the Bible, Bathsheba for example, there is more to her than meets the eye. Exum invites the reader to look at his/her own gaze, their own collusion (a secret understanding), complicity (partnership in a crime) or resistance when faced with the exposure of female flesh for our literary or visual consumption. Female and male readers and viewers will react differently to different visual and textual images. Exum identifies the female reader/spectator with the body that is being observed. To the degree that we view naked women as objects, female readers/viewers are co-opted to make objects of their own bodies and to read texts or pictures against their own interests (Exum 1996:19-20).

Readers need to become sensitive to the fact that the act of reading sometimes places them in positions which they did not choose for themselves. The reader becomes involved in the narrator's pretense. In the tale of Bathsheba, we are seeing Bathsheba through the eyes of David, and this makes us voyeurs against our own will (2 Samuel 11.2) (Exum 1996:25). The narrator controls the gaze of the reader. The reader cannot look away from Bathsheba. We presume her at least partly undressed and thus invade her privacy by undressing her mentally. The mentioning of her washing after her menstrual cycle, serves to further accentuate her body's vulnerability to David's and the reader's gaze. A woman is touching herself and a man is watching. The viewing is one-sided and gives the man the advantage: David sees her but she does not see him. Readers are watching a man watching a woman touch herself. It is impossible for male and female readers to react to the narrative in the same way (Exum 1996:26). The further violation of privacy is seen in verse 3. Here the reader encounters a question: "Is this not Bathsheba..." suggests that someone else is looking too.

The whole story of Bathsheba bathing herself and consequent events raises the question of the relationship between looking, desiring and acting on the basis of desire. Not every voyeur acts on lustful impulses like David did. The text condemns



David for doing so, but only because the woman is another man's property (Exum 1996:27).

The story of Bathsheba is a powerful illustration of the power of the author in controlling the reader. As readers or spectators, we are implicated in the gaze on the naked woman, but as gendered subjects, men and women are implicated differently. According to Exum, the Biblical story was written for men by men. In this story, as in many others, female readers are forced to read against their own interests in as far as the female readers assume the male perspective of the story. Women are forced to accept the concept of woman as temptress who can bring about the downfall of a powerful king (Exum 1996:27).

For the male, the picture looks entirely different. Male viewers of paintings and films, like the male reader of the Biblical story, is invited to take David's position. In reference to the story of Bathsheba, the woman is naked for his pleasure. The female spectator's involvement is more complicated. The female position is that of both surveyor and surveyed — women are both the image and the bearer of the look. The male spectator is invited to look at the female image, yet the female viewer is identified with that image itself as well. Identification and desire are separate operations for the male viewer, but are collapsed for female viewers (Exum 1996:29).

The problem of the liberation of the Bible is not ideology itself. The problem is the *dominance* of our ideology over the text. The struggle of *explicatio* is the struggle against the ways in which we allow our ideologies to *control* our reading of the text. The danger when an expert enters a group discussion, for instance, is that the group surrenders their reading to the expert's point of view. By dispensing with the expert, it would seem that a group surrenders control of their reading to the prejudices they share with their peers. To solve the problem illustrated here, *explicatio* must aim to approach the world of the text as consciously and as critical as possible of the reader's own prejudices. The truth or falsity of prejudices is not now at issue. What is at issue, is that these prejudices should not dominate the text, but that the reader should allow the text to illumine the prejudices we bring to it as readers. The experience in entering the world of the text should in itself be a form of consciousness raising (Lochhead 1993:134).

A feminist hermeneutics cannot trust or accept the Bible and tradition simply as Divine revelation. It must rather critically evaluate both the Bible and tradition as patriarchal articulations. This insight stems from the foregoing work of women like Sarah Grimké, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who stated that the Biblical text is not the word of God but the words of men (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:x-xi).

Yet not all readers are equally at home with Fiorenza's suggested practice of reading with suspicion and all that such a reading entails as far as the authority of the text is concerned. Musimbi Kanyoro writes with profound theological honesty when she states that whether it be in the pew or among theologically trained women, few are comfortable with challenging the text of the Bible by applying the hermeneutics of suspicion to it as theologian Fiorenza has suggested (Kanyoro 2001:38) — in fact, she herself could only find a handful in count (Kanyoro 2002:84-85).

#### 4.8.4. Feminism and Intertextuality

Fiorenza also reasons from a Catholic background with a greater tolerance of extra-Biblical revelation. Her suggestion that the religious experience should be expanded to a field that encompasses more texts than just the Bible, leads to the issue of intertextuality. Feminism introduced the reader to intertextuality by broadening the scope of especially the Bible, to also include study of extra-Biblical stories and art forms like films, paintings, performative arts etc. Intertextuality does not depend on authorial intent (Stratton 1995:183). Kristeva defines **intertextuality** as the sum of knowledge that makes it possible for texts to have meaning. Michael Riffaterre defines intertextuality as the perception, by the reader, of relationships between one work and others, which have historically preceded or followed it (Stratton 1995:184).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is an advocate for the use of extra-canonical texts when reading the Biblical text. Since Mary Daly's work *Beyond God the Father*, feminist theologians have been turning to women's literature for prophetic resources. If women's literature is representative of women's historical realities and subjectivity, then novels, short stories, poems, plays, and songs may offer textual evidence of this category of "women's experience". A second gain from women's literature is that, insofar as feminist theological methods are creative and constructive, such literature would provide rhetorical models for the imaginative task (Hughes 2002:1). Theologians find works by lesbians and straight women of colour, who are classic

examples of “outsiders-within” religion and society, as uniquely prophetic in vision (Hughes 2002:2).

Feminist theologians use the work of twentieth century female writers for its critical and visionary qualities. In these works they find descriptions of “women’s experience” that is named in such ways as to empower both writer and reader (Hughes 2002:3). White feminists do not just use the works of white female writers, but oftentimes turn to works of women with different racial, ethnic and social locations (Hughes 2002:4). Carol Christ is another feminist theologian who looks for “women’s experience” and words that heal (Hughes 2002:6). When the focus turns to local authors and local works, the book *Mother to Mother* by Sindiwe Magona, and *Slagoffers* by Dine van Zyl, to name but two, are valuable resources from a secular perspective but with an unmistakable prophetic voice.

Fiorenza herself shows characteristics of a critical method while incorporating women’s poetry. On the one hand her practice can be criticized because her use of Black Women’s poetry needs a more contextual reading of their work in order to do justice to the integrity of the poet’s visions and to truly challenge the feminist theological project (Hughes 2002:3). When Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza simply starts her chapters with poems by black women, she risks implications more sinister than her intentions (Hughes 2002:12) — she may be guilty of recontextualizing another woman’s entirely different struggle to suit the contours of her own. I refer to the argument set forth by Sheila Hassell Hughes, where she indicates the danger of such an exercise. But on the other hand it must be stated that it is not so entirely wrong to reappropriate the words of others from different contexts. Is it not the nature of the written word to get a life and personality of its own, and to be used for new, entirely unthought of, purposes? In this regard, the nature of written language itself lends it to such a practice of reappropriation.

Theologians like Fiorenza call for a broader spectrum of texts from whence to draw material for religious experience. In a South African context, one such an example exists in the argument that the Bible was used to formulate apartheid ideology. This, coupled with the patriarchal nature of African culture, makes the Bible as well as culture inadequate for creating a liberating framework for the Black woman. Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie identifies the post-apartheid constitution as an authoritative and sacred text – which is a claim that again calls African women theologians to engage in conversation on what constitutes a canon and sacred text (Njoroge 2001:229).

#### 4.8.5. Using Female Experience as Measure of Authority

Feminism serves to affirm the reality and importance of female experience. Feminist theologians affirm this in their work by stating that the Biblical text does not have authority as Word of God in cases where the text itself or interpretation thereof falsifies or denies women's experience. This application is especially appropriate to theological reflection (Day 1989:2). This stance holds that the Bible text as well as later interpretations are products of patriarchal societies where men dominated or monopolized public discourse, resulting in an interpretation that mainly reflects male experience. Feminist theologians only agree to theological truth in a text when male experience does not contradict or deny female experience (Day 1989:2).

When feminist theologians reshape Biblical traditions and retell Biblical stories that give dignity to female characters, they are doing what theological tradition has always done, which is to read the text and retell the story in light of current experience that affirm world-view. Female experience also becomes the measurement for theological truth (Day 1989:2). Feminist theology does not have a single view on the authority of the text, and the canonicity thereof. Most theologians, however, hold that the authority of the text is not canonical.

Rosemary Ruether mirrors to a great extent the view of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza when she states that:

*The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption (Ruether in Fraser 2002:196).*

Authority is also linked to the question of the language used in the text, and this connection is made by Fiorenza when she makes two very definitive points for the discussion of language and authority:

1. A good translation of the (Biblical) text is not a literal transcription but a perceptive interpretation transferring meaning from one language context to another. As such, androcentric translations cannot be justified simply with

reference to literal translation requirements because one must consider the need for interpretation as well (Fraser 2002:198).

2. The translation of male metaphors and androcentric language is a difficult task, and is important for contemporary translations while it also has ramifications for the understanding of Biblical texts as historical sources. Androcentric language functioned as inclusive language in a patriarchal culture. The result is that women are only mentioned when they are exceptional or a problem, but never in "normal" situations. Androcentric language no longer functions this way, and we must as a result of this change be sensitive to the exclusion of women in Biblical texts (Fraser 2002:198).

Cady Stanton would agree that the scholarly interpretations of the Bible are male inspired and need to be "depatriarchalized". Her most valuable insight for critical feminist hermeneutics, was the insight that the Bible cannot only be used and misunderstood by people of a patriarchal mindset, but that the Bible can be used to such ends because it *is* patriarchal and androcentric. She positioned herself against the view of verbal inspiration and stressed that the Bible is written by men and reflects the male interests of its authors (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:12).

Trible, Ruether and Russell in their turn argue against Cady Stanton that the Bible is not totally androcentric but that it contains some absolute ethical principles and feminist liberating traditions. In order to do this, they adopt a feminist neo-orthodox model that is in danger of reducing the ambiguity of historical struggle to theological essences and abstract, timeless principles (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:27).

For Fiorenza, the canon lies not in the text of the Bible, but is to be found in the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchal texts, structures, institutions and values. Such a canon maintains that only those traditions and texts that break through patriarchal culture have the theological authority of being revelation. In this statement she indicates that the advocacy stance of liberation theologies cannot accord revelatory authority to oppressive and destructive Biblical texts, and that these texts never had such authority at any time. She emphasizes that this critical measure must be applied to *all* Biblical texts, their historical contexts, and theological interpretations, and not just to the texts speaking about women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:33).

The difference between Fiorenza and her colleagues is that she reasons from a Catholic background, which probably makes it easier to see the Bible as prototype, since Catholicism holds that the Church itself is the mediator of salvation. Protestantism, on the other hand, holds the tenet of *Sola Scriptura*, which means that the Biblical text has exclusive authority, and serves as measurement against all other truths claims.

Feminist theology challenges Biblical theological scholarship to develop a paradigm for Biblical revelation that does not understand the Bible as archetype but as prototype. Both archetype and prototype indicate original models. An archetype is an ideal form that establishes an unchanging timeless pattern, while a prototype is not a binding timeless pattern or principle. A prototype is open to the possibility of its own transformation. When the Bible is understood as prototype, it has room for and requires the transformation of its own models of Christian faith and community. It demands a critical exploration of the historical-social-theological dynamics operative in the formulation and canonization of its books, as well as an integration of Biblical history and theology (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:33-34).

For Fiorenza, the locus of Divine revelation is not the Bible or the tradition of a patriarchal Church, but the *ekklēsia* of women and the lives of women who live out the "option for our women selves". Experience that counts is not just experience of women *per se*, but experience of women struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression. For Fiorenza, women are united firstly in their unfreedom, and this is a key element of critical consciousness (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:128).

Feminist Biblical interpretation must challenge the scriptural authority of patriarchal texts and explore how the Bible is used as a weapon against women in their struggles for liberation. Can the Bible become a resource in the struggle for liberation? To answer the above question, feminist Biblical interpretation is foremost a political task, made mandatory by the fact that the Bible and its authority has been and is again today used as a weapon against women struggling for liberation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:129).

Scripture has been interpreted by a long line of men and proclaimed in patriarchal Churches. It was also authored by men, written in androcentric language, reflects male experience, and was selected and transmitted by male religious leadership (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:130).

As far as the Biblical text goes, it must be strongly stated that not all Biblical stories, traditions and texts reflect the experience of men in power or were written in order to legitimate the patriarchal status quo (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:131).

Fiorenza has argued that the authority to evoke consent should come from "the experience of women (and all the oppressed) who struggles for liberation from patriarchal oppression". Fiorenza herself rejects the correlation of a Biblical critical principle with a feminist critical principle that is key to the understanding of Biblical authority for both Rosemary Ruether and Letty Russell (Russell 1985:145).

Fiorenza's position is very important because she calls for a critical perspective that is based in the concrete life experience of women and expressed in advocacy and liberating praxis. Fiorenza states that she is no longer willing to play the authority game where feminist norms are submitted to "higher" Biblical authority and androcentric perceptions. For her, the canon and rules about authority that came out of a patriarchal mind-set of domination must no longer decide the basis for a feminist interpretation. Yet, in her community paradigm of authority, it is no longer necessary to argue that one feminist principle must exclude or dominate another in a hierarchy of authority. All our various insights come out of our particular life experience and expertise (Russell 1985:145).

The question of authenticity/authority is not separable from the question of content/meaning. If the question of the authority of the witness is made contingent upon our recognition of the "truth" of its message or the "justice" of its aims, this would make the Bible a secondary source for our knowledge, subject to another more fundamental source. Is this not tantamount to bringing to Scripture a test of one's own, a criterion of truth, rather than approaching Scripture as a revelatory word, a test of all other claims of truth? (Farley 1985:42).

The Bible claims to present a truth that will heal, make whole, and free. Paul Ricoeur describes the appeal of the Bible as a non-violent appeal. As a revelation of truth it asks for something less like a submission of will and more like an opening of the imagination, with the whole mind and heart too. It cannot be believed true unless it speaks to our deepest capacity for truth and goodness. If it contradicts or falsifies this, it cannot be believed true (Farley 1985:43).

It might be argued that Scripture itself provides a basis for feminist consciousness. True discernment of the Biblical witness yields feminist insights, which in turn become principles of interpretation for the rest of Scripture. Convictions regarding the full humanity of women emerge from the bringing of women's experience to the address of Scripture (Farley 1985:48).

Fiorenza criticizes Tribble for sharing with Russell and Ruether an understanding of the hermeneutic process that is rooted in neo-orthodox theology. Fiorenza is worried that Tribble sees the voice of God as identical with the Biblical text, and that, in order to find out what God intended, the exegete must "listen" to the text and interpret it as accurately as possible. Fiorenza is concerned that Tribble is using a feminist perspective to rehabilitate the authority of the Bible, rather than to rehabilitate women's Biblical history and theological heritage (West 1991:112).

Phyllis Tribble is not interested in authorial intention and she never mentions the intention of God. Tribble's interest lies with the text itself, with the Bible as literature. She wants to explore the literature to discover its vitality. This pursuit is not isolated from or opposed to religious interest. For Tribble, the Bible as literature is the Bible as Scripture, regardless of one's attitude towards its authority. The Bible as Scripture is also the Bible as literature, regardless of one's evaluation of its quality (West 1991:112).

It seems that the problem of the authority of the Bible is more Fiorenza's problem than Tribble's (West 1991:113).

The Bible is not just a religious, but also a political book, and it continues to form the self-understanding even of "secularized" societies and cultures. Feminist Biblical interpretations are not simply important for women in Biblical religion, but for all women in Western societies (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xi). The Bible is furthermore not just the written words of men, but also serve to legitimize patriarchal power and oppression in as far as it "renders God" male and determine ultimate reality in male terms, which results in making women marginalized and invisible (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xi). If language determines the limits of our world, then sacred androcentric (grammatically masculine) language symbolizes and determines our perception of ultimate human and Divine reality (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xii). The identification of Divinity with maleness influences even women outside of faith, and



....Be a Woman, and Africa will be strong...

Mercy Amba Oduyoye 1988:35

for this reason not even post-Christian or post-Biblical feminism can ignore the religious ramifications of patriarchy.

Fiorenza's notion of the Bible as formative root-model of women-Church allows us to explore models and traditions of emancipatory praxis as well as of patriarchal oppression. It allows us to reclaim the whole Bible, not as a normative immutable archetype, but as an experiential authority that can "render God" although it is written in the language of men (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xvii). Through a process of critical evaluation as well as structural and creative transformation, the Bible can become Holy Scripture for women-Church. Fiorenza's model does not identify Biblical revelation with androcentric texts and patriarchal structures, but maintains that such a revelation is found in the discipleship community of equals in the present and the past. Revelation is located in the experience of God's grace and presence among women struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression and dehumanization (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xvii).

Biblical interpretation and theology are caught in the same Cartesian anxiety and either/or of objectivism and relativism. Fiorenza argues rather for the "revealed" Archimedean point in the shifting sand of Biblical-historical relativity (be it a liberating tradition, text, or principle in the Bible). A feminist critical hermeneutics has to explore and assess whether and how Scripture can become an enabling, motivating resource and empowering authority in women's struggle for justice, liberation and solidarity (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xxiii).

Fiorenza indicates the need for an Archimedean point. She simply does not identify it as the Biblical text itself. In Protestant tradition with its motto of *Sola Scriptura*, the Bible itself is this Archimedean point outside the self, to which all is held to be measured. Fiorenza articulates her point to be in womēn-Church and the praxis of liberation. In Calvinism, all reasoning about humanity has as foundation the basic depravity of human beings, which makes any human institution or practice too sinful to function as such an outside measure. When one reasons from a standpoint of the basic good residing in humanity, however, it is possible to conceive of an Archimedean point as being something that exists in the fellowship between people or a human endeavor.

Feminist Biblical interpretation makes it explicit that Divine truth and revelatory presence are to be found amongst women, who are the invisible members of the

people of God. The receivers and proclaimers of revelation are not solely men but also women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:1).

In the dominant paradigm of Biblical interpretation three hermeneutical models are interrelated but can be distinguished:

1. The **doctrinal model** centers around the teachings and creeds of the Church and refers to the Bible in order to prove and substantiate patriarchal teachings and symbolic structures. The model subscribes fully to the archetypal understanding of the Bible, especially in literal interpretations, and conceives of Biblical revelation as verbal inspiration. Although evangelical feminism modifies this doctrinal model, it seeks to remain faithful to Biblical revelation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:10-11). For centuries the prevalent paradigm of Christian Biblical interpretation has been the dogmatic or doctrinal paradigm, which understands the Biblical record as sacred Scripture that is Divinely revealed (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:39). Thus it promulgates philological, historical, or theological literalism that stresses verbal inspiration that understands the Bible as the direct, inerrant Word of God to be accepted by Christians without question. This emphasis on verbal inerrancy asserts that the Bible and its interpretation transcend ideology and particularity. It obscures the interests at work in Biblical texts and interpretations, and reduces faith to intellectual assent rather than to a way of life. Such revelatory positivism promotes belief in the Bible rather than faith in God (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:40-41).
2. The **historical-factual model** was developed in reaction to the doctrinal model and often identifies Biblical truth and authority with historical or textual factualness. The Bible is understood as a collection of historical writings that are more or less true (historically reliable). The canonical collection is not extensive, which necessitates the study of all extant early Christian writings. Truth resides in the traditions and texts which are historically reliable (what actually happened). This model establishes an archetypal significance of the Bible through historical verification (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:11).
3. The **dialogical-pluralistic model** of form and redaction criticism seeks to recover *all* canonical texts and traditions and to understand them as theological responses to their historical-communal situations. The Bible then becomes a kaleidoscope that mirrors the various facets of life and faith of Biblical communities and their circumstances (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:11). Though this dialogical-pluralistic model moves away from the archetypal

paradigm in its historical-critical interpretations, it resorts to the archetypal paradigm in its theological evaluations and normative claims in its efforts to distinguish the voice of God from the plurality of Biblical voices (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:12).

A feminist critical interpretation of the Bible cannot take as its point of departure the normative authority of the Biblical archetype, but must begin with women's experience in their struggle for liberation. In doing that, this mode of interpretation subjects the Bible to a critical feminist scrutiny and to the theological authority of the Church of women, an authority that seeks to assess the oppressive or liberating dynamics of all Biblical texts (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:13).

It derives this canon *not* from the Biblical writings, but from the contemporary struggle of women against racism, sexism, and poverty as oppressive systems of patriarchy and from its systematic explorations in feminist theory. It can do so because it does not understand the Bible as timeless archetype but as historical and open-ended prototype or as a formative root-model of Biblical faith and life whose application remains negotiable. Its vision of liberation and salvation is informed by the Biblical prototype but is not derived from it. It places Biblical texts under the authority of feminist experience insofar as it maintains that revelation is ongoing and takes place "for the sake of our salvation". It does not seek identification with certain Biblical texts and traditions, but rather solidarity with women in Biblical religion (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:14; Thompson 2001:250). There is no single feminist agenda for Biblical interpretation. Fiorenza particularly rejects a "canonical feminist hermeneutics". Theological authority for her then derives not from the Bible *per se* but from the experience of God's liberating presence in today's struggles to end patriarchal domination (Thompson 2001:250).

Since all Biblical texts are formulated in androcentric language and reflect patriarchal social structures, a feminist critical interpretation begins with a *hermeneutics of suspicion* rather than with a hermeneutics of consent and affirmation. It develops a *hermeneutics of proclamation* rather than a hermeneutics of historical factualness, because the Bible still functions as Holy Scripture in Christian communities today. Rather than reducing the liberating impulse of the Bible to a feminist principle or one feminist Biblical tradition, it develops a *hermeneutics of remembrance* that moves from Biblical texts about women to the reconstruction of women's history. Finally, this model moves from a hermeneutics of disinterested distance to a *hermeneutics of*

*creative actualization* that involves the Church of women in the imaginative articulation of women's Biblical story and its ongoing history and community (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:15).

Fiorenza writes from a middle-class, Western perspective. How do people in the African context view the Bible? Would it be as easy for them to see the Bible as a prototype, or do they see and use it along the lines of the archetypical model? African Christians regard the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. It contains words that are supposed to have come directly from God, and is held in high esteem. The Bible provides the basis for the Christian faith, while remaining the uniting factor of the various denominations and sectarian divides that are a major characteristic of African Christianity (Getui 2001:181-182). Many Africans, be they Christian or not, are familiar with the Bible since it is one of the most widely translated and read texts in Africa (Getui 2001:182). The Bible is viewed as containing messages that are relevant and applicable to the African context, messages that touch all aspects life: the cultural, the social and the spiritual. The Bible serves as a manual of life (Getui 2001:182). These observations by Getui mirror the remarks of Musimbi Kanyoro, and give a picture of a broad base of believers that have no problem with using the Bible as archetype, and who do not perceive this model as oppressive in any way.

It seems that one is offered various alternatives by feminist theology: There are feminist theologians who use the Bible as prototype and who have no difficulty in viewing it as unauthoritative in cases when it does not speak to the liberation of women. There are also other feminist theologians who see the Bible as an authoritative text and who does not deny it permission to speak to our lives. Then one has the broad base of believers who believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. Feminist theology should never lose sight of its audience and the beliefs of the group it wants to liberate.

Despite this, there are some foundational principles that can never be discarded, which give to feminist theology its main identity. Anything denying these basic tenets should be challenged. Feminist theology resultingly has the task of keeping in creative tension some principles that are often put into opposing contrast by society and the Church.

Farley writes that feminist consciousness contain some fundamental convictions that are so basic that any contradictory assertion must be denied. These convictions serve as a negative test for any revelation in knowledge, and function in a feminist

interpretation of Scripture to help discern the meaning of the text and whether it is to be believed. These convictions furthermore serve as principles for selective and interpretive judgments in relation to *all* potential sources for feminist theology and ethics (not just Scripture, but also the history of theology, philosophy, experience etc) (Farley 1985:44).

She goes on to identify two basic convictions that are shared by most feminists:

1. Women are fully human and are to be valued as such.
2. Women's own experiences are important as a way of understanding (Farley 1985:44).

These tenets are so basic that they should not even have to be motivated, explained or defended. As such, they form the basis for assumptions about the position of women in feminist theology. They also explain where the first allegiance of feminist theology lies: with women in the faith, whoever they are. The first option is not for the poor, as in liberation theology. Liberation theologians emphasize that the God of the Bible is on the side of the oppressed and impoverished, and are able to cite many texts to support their stance. Feminist theologians, on the other hand, do not find an explicit feminist-critical principle or tradition in the Bible. We are instead faced with the fact that the Bible is written in male language, which mirrors and perpetuates patriarchal culture and religion (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xxi). Feminist theologies introduce a radical shift into all forms of traditional theology, for they insist that the central commitment and accountability for feminist theologians is *not* the Church as a male institution but to women in the Churches, not to *the* tradition as such but to a feminist transformation of Christian traditions, not to *the* Bible as a whole but to the Liberating Word of God finding expression in the Biblical Writing (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:3).

#### **4.8.6. Moving Beyond the Text to Social-Historical Context**

Feminist criticism has also brought challenges to religion. Fiorenza writes in 1999 that the field of Biblical studies should return to its scholarly roots and remember that it began as Biblical criticism. By critical she means that the terms be used in their original, and not their modern negative connotation. The Greek word *krinein/krisis* means judging/judgment, evaluation and assessment. A critical approach would be interested in weighing, evaluating, and judging texts and their contexts, in exploring crisis situations and seeking their adjudications. Its goals and functions are the

opposite of those in a positivist approach of so-called "pure" science (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:9).

If Biblical studies give up its claim to value neutrality and claims of scientific status, it will be able to turn into full critical rhetoric study. If it moves out of its academic "ivory tower" and becomes a publicly responsible discourse, Biblical scholarship will be able to recognize the voices from the margins and those submerged by the kyriocentric records of Biblical and contemporary hegemonic "texts" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:12).

Fiorenza's critical stance enables her to look at the world behind the text in order to find clues to the historical circumstances for women in Biblical times. The world behind the text is also crucial for her hermeneutics of reconstruction. She furthermore looks beyond the text in the present day to focus on the needs of women in the current era, and to be able to criticize religion for its oppression of women. In this capacity, she has often been painted as standing in opposition to Phyllis Trible, who focuses not behind the text, but on the text. To simply put these two theologians' views into opposition, is a distortion of their work, because Trible and Fiorenza do find harmonious views in their view of the past. Both could be classified as naturalists: they both find elements of a feminist struggle in the Biblical tradition which is worth recovering. They do, however, differ in their location of this struggle. Trible locates the struggle primarily in the text, while Fiorenza locates it behind the text. Fiorenza's main critique against the method Trible uses, lies in the fact that Trible divorces the language and text of the Bible from its socio-cultural patriarchal conditions, and thus cannot provide a model for the reconstruction of women's history as members of Biblical religion (West 1991:113).

Fiorenza finds fault with Trible's disinterest in what lies behind the text, while she ought to be interested. Fiorenza states that she ought to be interested for two reasons:

1. The text bears a permanent patriarchal stamp. Accordingly, Fiorenza argues that the text does not bear any authentic feminist countervoices in the text. There are only patriarchally encoded remnants of the patriarchal repression of the goddess' and women's religious powers.
2. By focusing on the text, Trible is unable to reconstruct and rehabilitate women's Biblical history and theological heritage (West 1991:113-114).

Fiorenza uses as her starting point Elizabeth Cady Stanton's insight that Biblical interpretations as well as Biblical texts themselves are androcentric (West 1991:114). Schüssler Fiorenza listed a number of methodological rules for a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion when interpreting texts speaking about women in the Bible:

1. Texts and historical sources must be read as androcentric texts.  
They are reflective of the opinions, control and experience of the male writer but not of women's historical reality and experience.
2. The glorification, denigration or marginalization of women in the Biblical texts must be understood as a social construction of reality in patriarchal terms or as a projection of male reality.
3. The formal canons of codified patriarchal law are generally more restrictive than the actual interaction and relationship of women and men and the social reality which they govern.
4. Women's actual social-religious status must be determined by the degree of their economic autonomy and social roles rather than by ideological or prescriptive statements (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:108-109).

Fiorenza points out that androcentric texts and linguistic reality constructions should not be mistaken for trustworthy evidence of human history, culture or religion. The text *may* be the message, but the message *is* not coterminal with human reality and history. Fiorenza's critical hermeneutics must then necessarily move beyond the androcentric text to the social-historical context (West 1991:114). It is necessary for Fiorenza to focus behind the text, because of the Biblical text itself. Biblical language is androcentric, while Christian authors have reformulated and redacted their sources according to their androcentric interests and perspectives. Textual and historical marginalization of women is also a by-product of the patristic selection and canonization process of the Bible (West 1991:114). Focus behind the text is furthermore necessary because the androcentric text misrepresents the life and ministry of Jesus and the discipleship community called forth by Him, and because a feminist reconstruction of history recovers the early Christian movements as a discipleship of equals and the reality of women's engagement and leadership in these movements (West 1991:114).

The silence of the text must be broken. Rather than using androcentric texts as carriers of informative data, their silences should be read as evidence and indication of that reality about which they do not speak (West 1991:115). In order to do this, a



feminist hermeneutics must develop models that can integrate the heretical, egalitarian and countercultural traditions and texts into its reconstruction of Scriptural theology and history. The canon preserves only remnants of a nonpatriarchal early Christian ethos, but these remnants indicate that patriarchalization was a process not inherent in Christian revelation and community. Feminist Biblical hermeneutics can reclaim early Christian theology and history as women's own history and theology. Women had the power and authority of the Christian gospel, and were central to leading individuals in the early Christian movement (West 1991:115).

Fiorenza locates the clear analogy of struggle behind the text, as does Mosala and Gottwald. She yet holds that the Biblical text remains a crucial source for feminist reconstructions. In this regard, her ambivalence towards the Biblical text echoes that of Mosala and Mofokeng. Mofokeng sums it up when he says that "the Bible is the source of our power and also the source of our oppression" (West 1991:116).

Not all theologians would agree with this stance. Croatto emphasizes the text as text, and this brings him into dialogue with Mosala, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Gottwald. Croatto emphasizes specifically the *Bible* as text. He insists that rereadings flow from the text, and not the referent. It is also, according to him, not historical persons, authors or events, but the canonical text itself which has been handed down by tradition and held to be the Word of God. Hence, he emphasizes reading as the *reading of a text* (West 1991:131). His lack of focus behind the text may be explained by the fact that he is not so interested in historical reconstruction of female faith origins. Since Croatto also works with a different social setting, and shows work more sensitive to liberation motivations, it is possible that his feminist focus, and resultingly the need for a focus that falls behind the text, is less.

Despite the fact that Fiorenza works with the Biblical text to enable her reconstructions, her focus is clearly behind the text. This is so for two reasons:

1. Her interpretive interests are historical and sociological. That is why she has such a concern to reconstruct and rehabilitate women's Biblical history, and why she cannot understand other theologians' lack of such interest (Trible's work comes to mind).
2. She argues that the feminist struggle requires such interpretive interests. She rejects the approaches of Ruether, Trible, and others, because they are *selective* — attempts to isolate the liberating tradition from the androcentric text of the Bible. For her, such views are in danger of reducing the ambiguity

of historical struggle to theological essences and abstract, timeless principles (West 1991:116-117).

Fiorenza has a problem with the text because even the inconsistencies and critiques within the text are thoroughly patriarchal. The text is just a clue, and a patriarchal clue at that. Only behind the text can be found the theological heritage and history of women in the Bible. Can a mode of reading that focuses *on* the text and not *behind* the text, respond to the above concerns at all? Gerald West formulates such a response from Phyllis Trible's work in conjunction with the work of Alan Boesak (West 1991:117).

Trible holds (as reconstructed from her work):

1. The text yields multiple interpretations of itself.
2. The interests and experiences of the interpreter guide and shape interpretation.
3. Within the Bible there are countervoices, tales of terror, and neglected themes.
4. This counterliterature can be recovered via a rhetorical-critical method that informs a feminist perspective (West 1991:120).

Trible claims that there is a depatriarchalizing principle at work in the Bible itself. This principle operates through themes which disavow sexism and through careful exegesis of passages specifically concerned with male and female. We need to perceive the depatriarchalizing principle for our day, recover it in those texts where it is present, and accent it in our translations. She further claims that feminist interests and questions can appropriate the Bible in new ways because the meaning and function of Biblical materials is fluid (West 1991:121).

Trible's method of reading shares similarities with Alan Boesak, a South African liberation theologian. Trible finds an analogy of struggle in the text. She accepts the dominant form of the text to be patriarchal, but still finds remnants of the struggle in the text itself. Her concern is to recover this struggle for the feminist struggle today. Her own personal situation of struggle brings her feminist experiences, interests, and questions to the text. The interpretive method she uses to bring her context of struggle into contact with the struggle context of the Biblical text, is a close reading of the surface structure of the text (West 1991:122).

But does the above answer the concerns of Fiorenza, Mosala and Gottwald? Trible acknowledges the patriarchal nature of the text. She does find a counterliterature within this text. She does not identify this counterliterature to be non-patriarchal, but argues that *within* patriarchal literature, there are counter-discourses to be found. Trible is deconstructing the Biblical text in the view of Gerald West (West 1991:122).

Deconstruction in this sense means the study of a system, from a perspective of what it must exclude in order to maintain itself as a system, and then to demonstrate its failure to achieve this exclusion. Deconstruction is an insistent *problematization* of human constructions from within (West 1991:122). Tribles' counterliterature deconstructs the dominant patriarchal tradition. She does not claim that the perspective given in her work dominates the Bible, but rather gives prominence to what she considers neglected themes and counterliterature. By doing this, she enables marginalized discourses and marginalized groups to become counter-discourses and counter-movements. Trible's selectivity is not a search for non-patriarchal essences, but an uncovering of those texts which deconstruct, and so render unstable, the patriarchal system. She practices a "*restructuring of consciousness with respect to both the past text and present society*". Trible's reading method is not, as Fiorenza would have it, an unstructured understanding of the Bible or the present. Her literary-feminist reading of the text is a theoretically well-grounded hermeneutic of liberation which challenges the reader and the dominant methods in the same way as the readings of Fiorenza (West 1991:124).

Fiorenza's work also focuses more on New Testament texts, where she uses Habermas' critical hermeneutics. This hermeneutics could throw some light when applied to New Testament texts. Previously, hermeneutics could not explain lies, censorship, the manipulation and oppression of thought and the force of people's minds exercised by ideological structures in the formation of false consciousness. Habermas went beyond Gadamer's fusion of horizons to analyze pseudo-communication in order to retrieve the meanings that are concealed in the language of texts (Field-Bibb 1996:87).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza took up this hermeneutical perspective in her feminist reconstruction of Christian origins. Her reconstruction of the Jesus movement centred on the *basileia* rather than other symbols. She sees the locus of God's action away from cult towards all-inclusive community which would have attracted social marginals and thus particularly women. Jesus is remembered as Sophia who

is put to death because of His challenge to imperialism. The pre-Gospel traditions are interpreted as addressing patriarchal structures (exclusion of the power/status accorded to fathers, rejection of patriarchal structures of domination to name but two). Schüssler Fiorenza traces the patriarchalizing trajectory of the communities after Jesus' death. While the majority of the communities succumbed to the patriarchalizing influences, the Gospels of Mark and John point to an alternative vision of community which emphasized love and service as the core of Jesus' ministry and the mark of discipleship. Although patriarchy was victorious, it is not rooted in the praxis of Jesus (Field-Bibb 1996:88).

Gerald West from KwaZulu-Natal also works with the aim of liberating the marginal audience by reading the text closely with them. West calls his method contextual Bible study and involves individuals with differing academic abilities together in the same group. A close reading of the text is followed, but the difference is that West endeavors to refrain from dominating the discourse by giving too much input of his own. The group participants are empowered to start reading the text critically, from their own situated, immediate context. Thus the audience defines the context within which study is undertaken, and their context defines the questions asked of the text. Fiorenza differs a bit from this, and in the above mentioned section, it becomes clear that she places a good deal of focus on reconstruction of the Biblical context, something which West and his audience are less concerned about.

#### **4.8.7. The Problem of "Canon-within-the-Canon"**

Feminist theology struggles with the problem of canon-within-the-canon. However much some authors wish to deny the problem or call it by other names, the problem persists. The minute one tries to draw a central essence from the text that is true above others, the inevitable result is a canon-within-the-canon.

Cady Stanton and her co-authors confirmed the general tenet of historical-critical scholarship, namely that Divine revelation is articulated in historically limited and culturally conditioned human language. Feminist interpretation went further to point out that Biblical language is *male* language. By this action, it resorts to the third model of interpretation which stresses the interaction between text and situations. This hermeneutic-contextual model shows that the Bible sometimes contains contradictory responses, and reverts back to the doctrinal model in sifting out the

truthful claims from amongst others. Such a practice ultimately leads to a "canon within the canon" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:13-14).

Schüssler Fiorenza elaborates her argument by going on to say that patriarchal imagery and androcentric language are the form but not the *content* of the Biblical message. The content of the tradition is Christ, and feminist theology must point out that Christ's work was not "that of being a man" but "that of being the new human being" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:15).

When one begins to distinguish between form and content, theological essence and historical variable, language and Divine action, it becomes possible to develop a feminist Biblical hermeneutics that can at the same time acknowledge the patriarchal language of the Bible without conceding its patriarchal content. It can do so only by declaring a theological statement as the essence of Biblical revelation, in this case *God's redemptive and liberating activity in Jesus Christ*. An example of this method in action is the Pauline subordination statements being handled as situation-variable and therefore script but not Scripture (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:15).

The work of Phyllis Trible now becomes important because she speaks from a Protestant angle while Schüssler Fiorenza's dialogue comes from a Catholic worldview. Phyllis Trible focuses on the Biblical text and rejects any attempt to separate text and tradition, and form and content. She shares with Letty Russell and Rosemary Radford Ruether an understanding of the hermeneutic process that is rooted in neo-orthodox theology:

<u>Russell and Ruether</u>	<u>Trible</u>
Focus on tradition	Focus on structure of the Biblical text
Uses metaphor of "usable past"	Personifies the text as pilgrim wandering through history
God acts through Christ throughout time and this action falls within the culturally variable forms of traditions	Advocates explicit feminist hermeneutics The voice of God is identical with the Biblical text. Uses rhetorical criticism as interpretive model.

Phyllis Trible states that the Biblical texts and themes display a depatriarchalizing principle at work in the Bible itself. This is a hermeneutic operating within Scripture itself and not an operation the exegete performs on the text. In her own words: *We expose it, we do not impose it*. For her, the Biblical text possesses *countervoices* within the patriarchal document. These voices do not eliminate the male dominated

character of the Bible, but can be uncovered as neglected traditions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:19-20).

The question here comes to mind whether Phyllis Tribble and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza do not perhaps see the same things from different angles. For Tribble the text contains countervoices. For Fiorenza an action of reading against the grain creates countervoices.

Phyllis Tribble points out that feminists repeatedly employ canon within the canon. Sections of Scripture are used to judge other sections. Rosemary Ruether finds the authoritative core in the prophetic-messianic tradition. She subjects the rest of the canon to its criticism even though its limitations are exposed by different social and temporal settings. Fiorenza establishes a distinct canon by claiming that only the nonsexist and non-androcentric traditions of the Bible have revelatory power. For Katie Cannon, the Bible's essence and not its totality is the highest authority. These scholars embrace passages that speak life while rejecting those that speak death. Selectivity is also present in the separation of descriptive and culturally conditioned texts from prescriptive and existentially valid ones. With all the above readings, feminists are building canons within the canon. For Tribble, the final word, if allowed, is the Bible itself, which provides feminism with a needed critique of itself (Tribble 1985:149).

In her book *In Memory of Her*, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that a feminist hermeneutics that depends upon distinguishing between the essential and the non-essential, is inadequate. She criticizes Ruether's hermeneutic proposal (the centrality of the prophetic-liberating tradition) by pointing out Ruether's rosy view of the prophetic tradition, and her failure to point out the androcentric elements in these traditions. Ruether did not consider the prophetic tradition's repression of the cult of the goddess (West 1991:88). Schüssler Fiorenza states that a feminist Biblical hermeneutics must take seriously the historical-patriarchal elements of the prophetic traditions in order to set free their liberating social-critical impulses for the struggle of women. Prophetic elements in the Bible should not be elevated to an abstract interpretative principle or criterion (West 1991:88).

This dilemma has not been resolved. As much as canon-within-the-canon is criticized, it seems to be inescapable if one wishes to find authoritative and unauthoritative passages. It may be that any attempt at all to paint some passages

as less binding than others will ultimately lead to this result, and that the only way to escape the problem of canon-within-the-canon, would be to give all passages the same authority, or to concede that feminist theology is unable to keep both sides of the argument happy. Either every passage is essential, or there is a canon in the canon.

Fiorenza places the locus of the power to grant authority to the text in the hands of the womēn-Church. One of the main benchmarks in Fiorenza's theology, is the fact that the authority of the text should be affirmed or confirmed by the *ecclesiā* of women and their experiences. To make this statement, she probably assumes a community where people are in harmony and one mind, able to make decisions as to the authority of an outside factor like the Biblical text. But people seldom do agree, and they certainly are not inclined towards agreeing with one another.

In the context suggested by Fiorenza of a womēn-Church, ministry by and for all members is very important. Anne Clifford describes ministry as any service that a person gives as an expression of a Christian commitment (Procario-Foley 2002:138).

The moral authority of the Bible is then grounded in a community that is capable of sustaining Scriptural authority in faithful remembrance, liturgical celebration, ecclesial governance, and continual reinterpretation of its own Biblical roots and traditions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:65).

#### 4.8.8. The *Ekklesiā* of Women

Fiorenza explains her own understanding of feminism and patriarchal oppression as follows:

For her, feminism is not just a theoretical world view or perspective but a women's liberation movement for social and ecclesiastical change.

The hermeneutical center of a feminist Biblical interpretation is the *ekklesiā gynaiikon* (women-Church). This is a movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in Biblical religion. Fiorenza uses women-Church not as exclusive term, but as political-oppositional to patriarchy. It then becomes necessary to explain what she means by patriarchy. To her, patriarchy is not a case of all men dominating all women equally. She means by Patriarchy the classical Aristotelian sense of the term, which holds that patriarchy is a male pyramid of graded subordinations and exploitations which specifies women's oppression in terms of class, race, country, or religion of the men to whom they "belong". This definition of patriarchy enables its

use as a heuristic concept for feminist analysis. Now sexism, racism, classism, and all other forms of exploitation or dehumanization can be identified as basic structures of women's oppression (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xiv). Patriarchal oppression is not identical with androcentrism or sexism. It is not just a dualistic ideology or androcentric world construction in language. It is rather a sociopolitical system and social structure of graded subjugations and oppressions. This patriarchal system has experienced changes throughout history, but it has prevailed as the dominant sociopolitical structure of the last five thousand years or so. Its classical expression is found in Aristotelian philosophy, which has decisively influenced Christian theology as well as Western culture. Patriarchy defines women, as well as all subjugated people and races as the "other" to be dominated. Women are defined as the other of men, but also as subordinated to men in power insofar as it conceives of society as analogous to the patriarchal household, which was sustained by slave labour. Women of colour and poor women are doubly and triply oppressed in such a patriarchal social system (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:5).

A critical feminist theology of liberation does not advocate the co-optation of women's religious powers by ecclesiastical patriarchy, or the feminist abandonment of Biblical vision or community. Its feminist heuristic key is not a dual theological anthropology of masculine and feminine, or the concept of complementarity of the sexes, or a metaphysical principle of female ascendancy. Its formulations are based on the radical assumption that gender is socially, politically, economically and theologically constructed and that such a social construction serves to perpetuate the patriarchal exploitation and oppression of all women, which is most fully expressed in the fate of the "poorest and most despised women on earth" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:6-7).

There are many painful issues on which not even women agree, though it may seem as if they should. Women are, for instance, especially divided about the issue of culture. There are great chasms between the views held by women on issues of culture such as female circumcision (not all women are against it!), lobola dowry, polygamy, dry sex, male inheritance of the land etc. For some women, these practices are the essence of their cultures (and identity), while for others they are acts of injustice to women and their bodies. The second group see these practices as harmful, oppressive, and reducing women to instruments of men in general, while the first group find in these practices their identity and a foundation to their community (Kanyoro 2001:39). How can a Church with/of women whose opinions are so diverse, make decisions on the authority of texts in the Bible where there are



such close semblances to their own societies? They obviously may perceive it as less inhibitive to liberation. Is the result of such reasoning that the authority of the text changes from group to group and opinion to opinion? Do I first need to bring you around to the viewpoint that footbinding is harmful before I can bring you to the opinion that oppressive texts should not be given canonical authority, to name but one example?

In my opinion the playing field of the text is definitely not the same for all of us, not even if the audience consists just of females. There is no universal or essential women's experience, just as there is no "universal" theory or theology that is the "one truth". One's experiences are constructed by many factors, some of which are consciously known and some not (Christ in Martin 2002:118).

Schüssler Fiorenza expands on her image of the *ekklēsia* of women, and discusses two main other objections to this concept:

1. The first objection is that the Church of women does not share in the fullness of Church. This is correct, but Fiorenza points out that exclusive male hierarchical assemblies are also not fully Church. Women's religious communities have always existed within various Churches, and the male hierarchical Church in turn has always sought to control these communities by colonizing them through male theology, liturgy, law and spirituality. The Protestant Reformation has strengthened patriarchal holds on women by abolishing communities of women, but female communities have risen time and again. A Christian feminist spirituality claims these communities of women and their history as the heritage of women and seeks to transform them into the *ekklēsia* of women by rejecting the patriarchal structures of laywomen and clergywomen etc (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:346-347).
2. The second objection to the *ekklēsia* of women is the charge of "reverse sexism" and the appeal to "mutuality with men" whenever women gather as the *ekklēsia* of women. This objection does not face the issues of patriarchal oppression and power. The coming together of the exploited does not spell the oppression of the ruling group or that the oppressed have gained ruling power. Why would men feel threatened when women bond together in their struggle for liberation? Women do not gather together over and against men, but in order to become *ekklēsia* before God and to decide matters that affect our own spiritual welfare and struggle. Because the spiritual colonialization of women by men has entailed our internalization of the male as divine, men



**MAGNA MATER**  
JANET MCKENZIE

have to relinquish their spiritual and religious control over women as well as over the Church as the people of God, if mutuality is to become a real possibility (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:347).

Feminist Christian spirituality defines women's relationship to God in and through the experience of being called into the discipleship of equals, who is the assembly of free citizens who decide their own spiritual welfare. The image of the *ekklēsia* of women replaces all other previous images rooted in patriarchal dualisms. These dualisms will only be overcome in and through solidarity with all women and in a sisterhood that transcends all patriarchal ecclesiastical divisions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:349).

A feminist Christian spirituality is rooted in the *ekklēsia* of women as the body of Christ. Bodily experience is constitutive and central to our spiritual becoming as the *ekklēsia* of women. Not the soul or the mind or the innermost self is the image or model for our being Church, but our bodies are. How can we point to the bread of the Eucharist and say "this is My body" as long as women's bodies are battered, raped, sterilized, mutilated, prostituted, and used to male ends? How can we proclaim "mutuality" with men as long as men curtail and deny reproductive freedom and moral agency to us? Men fight wars on the battlefields of women's bodies and make women the target of physical and spiritual violence. The task of the *ekklēsia* of women is to reclaim women's bodies as the "image and Body of Christ". All violence against women must be denounced (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:350-351).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza indicates the hermeneutical center of feminist Biblical interpretation as the women-Church/womēn-Church (*ekklēsia gynaikōn*). This is the movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in Biblical religion. The *ekklēsia* of women is part of the wider women's movement in society and religion. It conceives of itself as a social rights movement as well as a liberation movement, with its goal being women's religious self-affirmation, power and liberation from all patriarchal alienation, marginalization and oppression (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:126).

The Greek term *ekklēsia* means the public gathering of free citizens who assemble in order to determine their own and their children's well-being. It can be translated as assembly, synagogue, or Church of women. Schüssler Fiorenza uses the expression women-Church not as exclusionary, but as a political-oppositional term to patriarchy (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:126-127).

All Christian Churches suffer from the structural evil of patriarchal sexism and racism in various degrees. In opposition to this, the Church of women as a feminist movement of self-identified women and women-identified men, transcends all traditional man-made denominational lines. The commitment and mission of women-Church is defined by the solidarity with the most despised women suffering from the triple oppression of sexism, racism, and poverty. A feminist Biblical interpretation that develops within the framework of a critical theology of liberation, must be situated within the feminist community of women in Biblical religion (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:7-8).

The Church is a sacred reality, a gift given by God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Fiorenza's hermeneutics respects the unique nature of the Church. It is not just one organization among others — the Church is not just a sacred reality, but also a human one (Clifford 2001:134).

Jesus gathered followers while proclaiming God's message, from all walks of life, from both genders, to form a community with a mission. In the manner in which Jesus accomplished this, He modeled that patriarchal behaviour was not of God. Jesus welcomed marginal people among His disciples, since His was an inclusive community in which the first would be counted last and in which those who desired to be first would give service to others (Clifford 2001:134).

There are many good reasons why Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza stresses time and again in her writings that the community which Jesus founded was a discipleship of equals. There is evidence that the pattern of women acting as disciples continued in the Christian movement after Jesus' death and resurrection (Clifford 2001:134). Many texts prove the conclusion that the patriarchal patterns of civil society overcame the discipleship of equals that Jesus had instituted. The spirits were tested and cognitive dissonance emerged between Jesus' behaviour and gender roles defined by society. The Churches chose to conform to the status quo as it became Romanized (Clifford 2001:135).

In Fiorenza's theology, the term "Women-Church" quickly replaced "Woman Church". Women-Church invites women to explore their identity as Church and to articulate a guiding vision for the transformation of the Christian Churches as they now exist. The goal of Women-Church is to develop communities liberated from sexism. In the

US, Women-Church has focused mainly on providing a place where women (and men who support a discipleship of equals) can gather for ritual and prayer that express a female sense of God and repudiate the idols of patriarchy (Clifford 2001:151-152).

Such a radical egalitarian politics of *ekklēsia* requires the articulation of a theology of Divine *politeuma* as its theological grounds and theoretical frame for which it can draw on Biblical resources. Christian Testament writings such as Phillipians or 1 Peter express the self-understanding of the early Christians as foreigners and resident aliens whose citizenship is elsewhere. For instance, in Phil 3.20 Paul asserts in dualistic terms that Christian "citizenship" or "commonwealth" (*politeuma*) is "in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:188-189). Carolyn Osiek pointed out that

*This is the second time in the letter that Paul draws upon the language of the city-state (see 1.27) to imply that all Christians, male and female, have the responsibility of full participation in the commonwealth in which they belong most appropriately. This is the basis for any vision of a discipleship of equals in the Pauline Churches. In a world of social inequalities, Christians are to live in the consciousness of their heavenly equal citizenship here and now (Osiek in Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:189).*

This empowering mandate from the Bible itself motivates Fiorenza to build the image of womēn-Church as legitimate alternative to the patriarchal Church.

#### **4.9. THE PRINCIPLES WITHIN ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA'S WORK**

Schüssler Fiorenza indicates that feminist theology must articulate its advocacy position not as an option for the oppressed, but as the self-identification of women in patriarchal society and religion, since all women are socialized to identify with men. In this aspect her differentiation from liberation theology becomes clear (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:128).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza used as starting point the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. When Stanton published *The Woman's Bible* in 1895 she outlined two critical insights for a feminist theological hermeneutics:

1. The Bible is not a neutral book, but a political weapon used against women's struggle for liberation.

2. The Bible bears the imprint of men who never saw or talked with God (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:7).

Cady Stanton outlined three arguments why a scholarly and feminist interpretation of the Bible is politically necessary:

1. Throughout history, to this day, the Bible is used to keep women in subjection and to hinder their emancipation.
2. Women are the most faithful believers in the Bible as the Word of God. The Bible has numinous authority for women.
3. No reform is possible in one area of society while others are ignored. The law and cultural institutions cannot be changed unless Biblical religion is also reformed. All reforms are interdependent — political issues are not more pressing than religious ones, since the impact of the Bible on Churches, society and the lives of women, is immense (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:11).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza uses feminist hermeneutical methodology to help in the interpretation of the stages of the formation of the Bible. Feminist hermeneutics refer to the theory, art and practice of interpretation of Biblical and other ancient extraBiblical texts in the interest of women. Schüssler Fiorenza's purpose for developing feminist hermeneutics is to enable women to engage in the critical reconstruction of religious meaning from the standpoint of women's experience, especially the experience of the struggle against dehumanization and oppression (Clifford 2001:55).

The last few years saw a renewed focus on rhetorics in the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, but Fiorenza did not abandon hermeneutics in her move to rhetorics. She still seeks to integrate interpretive and pragmatic elements in a critical feminist rhetorical interpretation for liberation. Her feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and imagination are represented by the sleuth, the quilt maker, the health inspector and the poet. Fiorenza uses suspicion and proclamation as critical methods, while remembrance and imagination are constructive and visionary. These two sets of terms are complementary, but the division of labour between the analytic and the poetic remains (Hughes 2002:8). Despite her using the image of sleuth, quilt maker, health inspector and poet, Fiorenza insists that feminist theology should still distinguish between the four main hermeneutical principles within her work:

1. A hermeneutics of suspicion which illustrates the androcentrism of many of the Biblical texts (ideological suspicion),

2. A hermeneutics of proclamation which claims that some texts are unsuitable for liturgical use because of their strong affirmation of patriarchy (historical reconstruction),
3. A hermeneutics of recollection which seeks to find the Biblical texts which acclaim women (theoretical assessment), and
4. A hermeneutics of creative imagination which allows women to use ritual and artistic devices to identify with Biblical texts (Fraser 2002:198; Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xx).

These strategies of interpretation are not undertaken in a linear fashion, but should rather be understood as critical movements that are repeated again and again in the "dance" of Biblical interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:173).

She points out that the four rhetorical movements can only be sustained when contextualized in a feminist critical process of **conscientization** (learning to recognize socio-political, economic, cultural and religious contradiction). The process of conscientization strives to create critical consciousness and has as its goal both a praxis of solidarity and a commitment to feminist struggles. Cognitive dissonance is experienced, and leads to conscientization. These "breakthrough and disclosure" experiences bring into question the "common-sense character" of patriarchal reality. Such "breakthrough" experiences and the systematic critique of oppressive patriarchal reality are made possible through emancipatory movements (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:173-174).

#### **4.9.1. The Hermeneutics of Suspicion**

A hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to detect and analyze the androcentric presuppositions and patriarchal interests of a text's contemporary interpretations and historical reception as well as those of the Biblical texts themselves. A hermeneutics of suspicion does not presuppose the feminist character and liberating truth of Biblical texts, but rests on the insight that *all* Biblical texts are articulated in grammatically masculine language. The Bible is a male-centered book (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:174) and is used to serve patriarchal interests (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:15).

Feminist interpretation begins with a hermeneutic of suspicion that applies to both contemporary androcentric interpretations of the Bible and the Biblical text themselves. Certain texts of the Bible can be used in the argument against women's

struggle for liberation not only because they are patriarchally misinterpreted, but because they are by nature patriarchal texts, and can therefore serve to legitimate women's subordinate role and secondary status in patriarchal society and the Church (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xii). The interpretation sprouting from the text is also identified as patriarchal, with the result that this hermeneutic also questions the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and unarticulated interests of contemporary Biblical interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:16).

Suspicion is first and foremost a consciousness-raising activity that requires one to take into account the influence of culturally determined gender roles and attitudes on the Bible. It often also includes systemic analysis that seeks to uncover its causes in Biblical society, Church and academy. Its starting point is the assumption that patriarchy deeply affects Biblical texts and their interpretations in the Christian tradition. Text as well as interpretation is resultingly examined for their possible androcentric assumptions and positions. This includes how Biblical texts treat women in stories and laws, and neglect women's experiences completely. The hermeneutics of suspicion is not only concerned with what is said about women, but also with the silences. This is but one side of the feminist interpretative coin (Clifford 2001:55-56), with the hermeneutics of remembrance making up the other side.

Fiorenza alerts us to the fact that the Biblical texts come with the warning — Caution, could be dangerous to your health and survival. Since most women have been catechized and preached at to regard the text as sacred, deserving of respect and obedience, this step can be a difficult one to learn. It is not only texts which are obviously poisonous to women such as can be found in 1 Cor 14.34-35, but Scripture as a whole reflects kyriarchal power and domination. Fiorenza is aware that this step demands a great deal from women since we must engage our fears and feelings of breaking the taboo which says that the Word is sacred. The hermeneutics of suspicion is concerned with the distorted ways in which wo/men's actual presences and practices are constructed and represented in and through kyriocentric language and media (Rakoczy 2004:158-159).

The hermeneutics of suspicion must be applied in four different modes:

1. To grammatically masculine kyriocentric texts in order to expose their ideological functions and power;



2. To kyriocentric stories in order to analyze the point of view of the story, demonstrating the ideological perspective of the story and its treatment of women;
3. To past and present interpretations of texts;
4. And our "common sense" approach to the text which is so profoundly shaped by our social location and experiences of domination (Rakoczy 2004:159).

The hermeneutic of suspicion stands as contrasted to the hermeneutic of charity as well as the hermeneutic of consent. Schüssler Fiorenza frames her own use of the hermeneutic of suspicion in conscious opposition to the hermeneutic of consent. A hermeneutic of consent will seek to consent to the text of Scripture, however diversely consent may be understood; it will also seek to consent with and within the tradition of interpretation, and will attempt to form and conform to the community of faith that has owned that text and interpretative tradition as well as have been shaped by that text and tradition. Text, tradition and community are tightly woven into the hermeneutic of consent (Thompson 2001:249).

#### **4.9.2. The Hermeneutics of Remembrance**

A hermeneutics of remembrance cannot simply accept grammatically masculine texts about women at face value, but understands that what remains is submerged in androcentric consciousness. By likening the reading practices of a hermeneutics of suspicion to the work of a detective, the hermeneutics of remembrance can be likened to the work of a quilt maker who stitches all surviving notes about women together into a new design. The hermeneutics of remembrance must develop various models for historical construction that can dislodge the eradicating frame of the androcentric Biblical text. These reconstructive models must allow one to reintegrate women and other marginalized people into history as agents and at the same time write Biblical history as the history of women and men. The hermeneutics of remembrance reconstructs early Christian history as a memory and heritage for the *ekklēsia* of women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:174).

The hermeneutics of remembrance balances the hermeneutics of proclamation which follows it. It recovers *all* Biblical traditions through a historical-critical reconstruction of Biblical history from a feminist perspective. Rather than relinquishing androcentric Biblical texts and patriarchal traditions, a hermeneutics of remembrance seeks to utilize historical-critical analysis to move beyond the androcentric text to the history of

women in Biblical religion (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:19). Rather than abandoning the memory of our forefathers' sufferings and hopes in our patriarchal Christian past, a hermeneutics of remembrance *reclaims* their sufferings and struggles through the subversive power of the "remembered past" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:19).

The hermeneutics of remembrance proposes theoretical models for historical reconstructions that place women in the center of Biblical community and theology. It has as its primary task the keeping alive of the *memoria passionis* of Biblical women as well as to reclaim our Biblical heritage (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:20). Feminist hermeneutics cannot be satisfied simply with unmasking patriarchy as cause of human suffering. The hermeneutics of remembrance is the tool that enables us to reclaim the past suffering of women and all people subjugated through enslavement, exile, and persecution, and treats it as a dangerous memory, one that today invites us to solidarity with all people who struggle for human dignity. Many of its memories are "subversive", because even in the midst of crises, Biblical figures found in their relationship with God reasons for hope and reasons to be agents of human liberation. A hermeneutics of remembrance does not negate the dehumanizing effects of patriarchy on Biblical history, but neither does it give that the final and definitive word. The Bible and many extra-Biblical sources provide rich resources for constructing a theology for our time that heals suffering and brings liberation from struggle (Clifford 2001:56).

A feminist hermeneutics of suspicion holds that the dominance of the presence of males in the Biblical stories is the result of cultural factors that are part of the deeply embedded patriarchal structure of Biblical societies, not the inability of women to have relationships with God and to recognize the presence of God in their lives. A hermeneutics of remembrance is drawn upon to look behind the stories of men's experiences of God, told by men, in order to unveil women's experience in the unrecorded silences (Clifford 2001:58). In this way, a feminist hermeneutics of remembrance engages in the search of a "useable past" by probing the Bible for texts that depict women in roles uncommon for females in the culture of the Ancient Near East (Clifford 2001:64-65). The stories and faint echoes of women provide far more interesting trivia about women long since dead. Remembering these women and their stories is an activity that empowers women for their own liberation in the present (Clifford 2001:65).

Remembrance, as suspicion, focuses not just on the text, but also on interpretation of the text. A hermeneutics of remembrance seeks to retrieve from Biblical texts interpretations that have been overlooked or distorted by patriarchal patterns of interpretation. Scholars engaged in this second form of hermeneutics attempt to uncover cultural understandings that are good news for the oppressed. Fiorenza describes this second activity as "reading against the grain". It entails interpreting Biblical texts in ways that subvert the prevailing androcentric interpretations. This form of hermeneutics requires a close reading of Biblical texts with an eye for discovering those things that provide women and other oppressed persons with a basis for hope in the midst of their struggle for liberation (Clifford 2001:65).

#### **4.9.3. The Hermeneutics of Proclamation**

A hermeneutics of proclamation insists that texts that reinscribe patriarchal relations of domination and exploitation must not be affirmed and appropriated. They should not be proclaimed as the Word of God but must be exposed as words of men. This third strategy can be linked to the work of a health inspector who tests all food and medicine for possible harmful ingredients. A hermeneutics of proclamation assesses all canonical texts to determine how much they engender patriarchal oppression and/or empower us in the struggle for liberation. This ethics of interpretation transforms the understanding of Scripture as from "foundation of truth" to that of "nourishing food and bread". The hermeneutics of proclamation tests food to see what is poisoned, but also seeks out the food that is not poisoned, and additionally judges under what circumstances such food can be given (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:174-175).

A hermeneutics of proclamation assesses the Bible's theological significance and power for the contemporary community of faith. Faithfulness to the struggle of women for liberation requires a theological judgment and an insistence that oppressive patriarchal texts and sexist traditions cannot claim the authority of Divine revelation. Oppressive texts and traditions must be denounced as androcentric articulations of patriarchal interests and structures, and tested for their sexism, racism, and colonial militarism (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:18). In a culture that socializes primarily women to altruism and selfless love as is often seen in Western culture, the Biblical commandment of love and the call for service can be misused to sustain women's patriarchal exploitation. A feminist hermeneutics of proclamation

must therefore analyze the role of Biblical texts in contemporary patriarchal culture (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:18).

A feminist hermeneutics of proclamation must on the one hand insist that all texts identified as sexist or patriarchal should not be retained in the lectionary and be proclaimed in Christian worship or catechesis. On the other hand it should be actioned that texts that are identified as transcending their patriarchal contexts and as articulating a liberating vision of human freedom and wholeness should receive their proper place in the liturgy and teachings of the Churches (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:18-19).

#### **4.9.4. The Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination and Actualization**

A hermeneutics of imagination is a place of freedom in which wo/men's creativity is engaged to image beyond the text. The story is told differently and new endings are proposed. Fiorenza insists that historical imagination is absolutely necessary for any knowledge of Biblical texts and worlds since it enables us to fill in the gaps and silences, and thereby to make sense of a text. We should not necessarily identify with the wo/men characters of a kyriocentric text, but approach them with the hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation before we can re-imagine them in the radical democratic horizon of the *ekklesiá* of wo/men (Rakoczy 2004:160-161). This step is a process of making new meanings, which is part of the dynamic of reader-response criticism. We fill in the gaps, imagine new beginnings and new endings to Biblical stories, and expand the personalities of women in the texts who often do not even have names (Rakoczy 2004:161).

A hermeneutics of liberative vision and imagination seeks to actualize and dramatize Biblical texts differently. The social function of imagination is to introduce possibilities that we can work towards. Creative re-imagining employs all our creative powers to celebrate and make present the suffering, struggles and histories of our Biblical foresters and foremothers. All kinds of artistic media are utilized in order to enhance and elaborate the textual remnants of liberating visions. Biblical stories are retold from a different perspective and emancipatory voices are liberated that have previously been suppressed. Marginal figures' roles are elaborated and their silences are broken (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:175). This step invites us to increase our historical knowledge and reconstruct the religious world of the text to increase the presence of women (Rakoczy 2004:161).

Since men wrote the Scriptures, their kyriarchal worldview informed their selection of material, depiction of characters male and female, absence of women and interpretation of events. Fiorenza outlines three hermeneutical assumptions which can expose the andro-kyriarchal perspectives of the Biblical texts:

1. Assume that women were present and active in history unless a text explicitly states that women were not present.
2. Texts that censure or limit wo/men's behaviour must be read as prescriptive rather than descriptive of reality (eg if women are told not to do something it probably means that they were doing so and that men felt threatened).
3. Texts need to be recontextualised not only in terms of the Biblical ethos but also in ways that describe alternative movements for change (Rakoczy 2004:162).

Historical reconstructions of women's Biblical history need to be supplemented by a hermeneutic of creative actualization that expresses the active engagement of women in the ongoing Biblical story of liberation. Whereas a hermeneutic of remembrance is interested in historical-critical reconstruction, the hermeneutic of creative actualization allows women to enter the Biblical story with the help of historical imagination, artistic recreation, and liturgical ritualization (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:20).

The hermeneutic of creative actualization seeks to retell Biblical stories from a feminist perspective, to reformulate Biblical visions and injunctions in the perspective of the discipleship of equals, and to create narrative amplifications of the feminist remnants that have survived in patriarchal texts (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:21).

This may appear too complicated for anyone other than trained Biblical scholars. But Fiorenza has used this process with women in parish groups, college classes and with illiterate women. She cites the experience of Swiss theologian Regula Strobel who has used it with women in parishes. These women moved slowly and steadily from first relying on the expertise of the theologians, then to realizing that they were subjects in reading Biblical texts, to being able to sift a text and discover what was oppressive and what was liberatory. From this perspective they could begin to use the criterion of the full liberation and humanity of women as the basis for decision-making and action (Rakoczy 2004:163).

#### 4.10. EVALUATION OF ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA'S HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION FOR SOUTH AFRICA

In praxis all is not so easy as in theory, and the same applies to the hermeneutics suggested by Fiorenza. Anne Clifford concedes that it is easier to write about the inclusion of diversity than to practice it (Murray in Procario-Foley 2002:144). It is also easier to include diversity when all people share the same education and language, however much their cultures may differ. From an American context where white and black all speak American, and where everyone has the same access to public schooling, this may be easier despite varying economic, racial and cultural indicators. In South Africa alone there are 11 official languages, and black people have far more variances among them as far as culture, language and economy is concerned. White people themselves prove to have different languages and cultures. Then there are also to be added the Asian and Colored Communities, with their own inherent differences. In South Africa the further challenge of education comes to the fore. Varying cultures often do not have the same basic levels of education, and oftentimes previously disadvantaged people cannot even speak English very well, which limits their avenues of communication considerably. Difference in these contexts would greatly influence a suggested institution such as women-Church, where it is expected that all individuals should strive for a common goal of liberation. It has also been shown in the work of African theologians, that cultures closer to the Bible are less inclined to criticize it, and that people with higher levels of education are more susceptible to suggestions of reading with suspicion than their uneducated counterparts.

Fiorenza leans heavily on the historical-critical method, and this too is not without its own problems. Historical-critical methods offer a history of the text rather than an exploration of what the text means for today. Croatto sees an urgent, but partial role for such studies. He answers allegations of his subjective reading by pointing out that the hermeneutics of a text is conditioned by the text itself. The text indicates the limit of its own meaning. A text says what it permits to be said. Its polysemy arises from previous closure. From here springs the urgency to set it within a proper context, by means of historical-critical methods, and of exploring its capacity for the production of meaning (West 1991:132).

Croatto states the importance of locating a text within the proper context of production and so refuses to go along fully with a reductionist structural analysis

which abstracts from the life of a text. Our Bible is a process Bible in which the process of intratextual rereading is part of the very message of the Bible, a process which the historical-critical praxis and redaction criticism, fails to explore (West 1991:132-133).

On the African continent the Bible should be read in an African context and from an African context.

Musimbi Kanyoro writes from the African rural context, and shows how the culture of the reader in rural Africa has more influence on the way the Biblical text is read, used and understood than the historical facts about the text. She comes to the conclusion that lack of knowledge about the nuances about the culture of modern Bible readers has more far-reaching repercussions to Biblical hermeneutics than is normally acknowledged (Kanyoro 2002:10). Kanyoro goes on to say that cultural hermeneutics is a prerequisite for Biblical hermeneutics and a necessary tool for all in positions of theological training (Kanyoro 2002:10).

Her insight is important. When doing theology in South Africa, one first needs to identify whether one is dealing with a reader/hearer who has a culture distanced or parallel to Biblical culture. Once this is established, one can proceed. Fiorenza does not consider this at length in her work, but in her defence it should be said that she herself hails from a European culture and now lives in America. She also works in the Academy full-time. In South Africa one finds a unique situation where Christianity is made up of people across various races, genders, languages and cultures, but also the added challenge of believers in a First-World setting, while other believers in the same faith and sharing the same geographical locus read from a Third-World setting. I would suggest that South African theology for black women would look different than that for white women, due plainly and simply to cultural differences. It might even be said that European and American academic theology, since it does not have any African exposure, has limits in what it can teach Africans and South Africans specifically, because the cultural gap is simply just too large to bridge. Have these theologians even considered the impact of their own cultures on their work? One finds a lot of references to her economic and academic background in Fiorenza's work, but very little consideration of her German and American cultural influences.

Kanyoro suggests that cultural hermeneutics is an important first step toward an African women's liberation theology. All questions regarding women in Africa are

explained within the context of culture. The question comes to mind whether this is also true for white women in Africa. I would say that white women have less cultural impact on their lives, and that their cultures are more removed from Biblical culture when compared to that of rural African women. In the rural context, women cannot own land or inherit it since the culture prohibits it. Culturally, leadership remains the domain of men. Politics, economics, religion and social issues are all firstly influenced by culture before any other consideration. It is important to state that culture cannot simply be analyzed without considering the people who maintain that specific culture and the people whom this culture impacts. This brings the need for gender-sensitive cultural hermeneutics to the fore, since it not only addresses issues of culture, but is also critical of the culture from a gender perspective (Kanyoro 2002:18).

The Church in Africa does not stand unaffected from cultural influence, but becomes part of the analysis. The question must be answered within the Church of how Africans should live as both Christians and cultural people. For the African, the Bible forms the base of faith while it informs the African Christian on what they can validate and not validate within their culture, and thus the starting point would be to read the Bible with cultural eyes. Kanyoro makes a strong point of proving that cultural hermeneutics is the first step towards a Biblical hermeneutic (Kanyoro 2002:18-19).

To African people, culture is the hermeneutical key that unlocks social, legal or Church issues. To the African worldview, culture is the most important authoritative canon, and any form of liberation theology would have to come to terms with culture. In this sense, cultural hermeneutics becomes imperative. African people must learn how to question, examine and scrutinize their own cultures. Once this tool to empowerment has been given, the way is open to critique of other systems of sociology, religion, economics and politics (Kanyoro 2002:55).

Kanyoro points out that the culture of the reader in Africa has more influence than the historical culture of the text. The implication is that lack of knowledge of the culture *into which the text is read or preached* has far more repercussions than the exegesis of the texts, than is normally recognized (Kanyoro 2001:42).

One of the points made clear in an analysis done by GH Muzorewa in 1985, is that African theology must be contextual. The African Christian theologian should not be merely based on the continent but should have a genuine African outlook (Getui



2001:182-183). The meaning of this for Fiorenza's hermeneutics, is that where she situates her canon in the praxis of liberation within women-Church, Africans would tend to situate it within their culture itself, which is most often patriarchal and not liberating at all. It would not be so easy to simply replace the canon of culture with a different canon, since the need and mandate to criticize culture itself should first be taught. Only once believers are able to criticize and abandon culture if necessary, can one move forwards on the path of Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion.

To do theology in Africa is to do theology within a community with much suffering. Death abounds so freely that reality almost makes a mockery of the bravery of Job, the Biblical giant of tribulations. Africa is pestered by diseases, illnesses, wars, oppressive governments, economic struggle, corrupt leadership and bad management of national economies (Kanyoro 2001:43). These factors influence women's lives, and lead to prayers and songs and poems as ways of theologizing on the continent. In such a context, culture can seem the only constant factor for a community. To challenge these cultures is no easy task, but yet it is a necessary calling (Kanyoro 2001:43).

In distinguishing a formalist literary criticism, a critical theory of rhetoric insists that context is as important as text. What we see depends on where we stand. One's social location or rhetorical context is decisive for how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets Biblical texts (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:19).

Africans do not just have the influence of oppressing cultures to cast off, but also often stand in ambivalence towards the Bible — their tool towards liberation. Whereas feminists experience their ambivalence to originate from the insight that the text as patriarchal text has been used against them, Africans experience their ambivalence on a different point. One view of the Bible is that its interpretation has made it a divisive factor in African Christianity. This is in line with the observation that one of the factors responsible for the springing up and mushrooming of denominations is the interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is a double-edged tool that divides and unites, which promotes life and oppresses at the same time. The Bible is considered to be infallible. Despite this loadedness and ambiguity, the Bible is directly or indirectly part and parcel of African spiritual and general reality (Getui 2001:182).

Fiorenza does take seriously the situation of women across the globe. Her hermeneutics of suspicion is her attempt at lessening the oppression of women in the world, and specifically Christian women. Despite its flaws and omissions, it is hugely influential across the world, mainly in academic circles. Time and exposure will tell if it is at all viable for an African and South African setting.

It is possible to read the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in an alternate way. One can read her work as rooting her loyalty to Christianity in her notion of women-Church (as constructed in the struggles of Christian women) rather than in an essentialist or ontological definition of Christian "meaning" (Christ in Martin 2002:117).

Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion have challenges to face on this continent, specifically the lack of education, which makes the transferral of her hermeneutics quite difficult. On the other hand one should admit that her hermeneutics of creative actualization already is alive and well in Africa and among African Christian women.

When the use of the Bible is considered in Africa, the existence of rampant illiteracy should be recognized. While this situation persists there is need to turn to the cultural aspect of oral tradition. Walligo has noted that Africans are people of oral orientation, and that even the Western-educated African elite read very little. They quickly interiorize what has been personally communicated, especially when it has been presented in the forms they appreciate: story, proverbs, songs, drums, dances, plays, ceremonies, and real life situations (Getui 2001:185-186). In this aspect lies a great part of creative actualization of the Biblical text. In creating a song about a Bible story, there is also already an interpretation in the making by the creator of the song, dance, poem, drumbeat etc.

Walligo goes on to recommend that it is important and more effective to combine the written and the oral (Getui 2001:186). Herein lies a great option of bridging the gap between cultures and backgrounds. When looking at a play, we are all delighted, educated and illiterate alike.

This chapter has given an overview of Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion and the factors that influenced her in formulating this hermeneutics. It has also placed her within the broader framework of reading strategies, so that the reader can now situate her and understand her points of communality and difference with other prominent feminist theologians.

I am a Church Person who believes that religion does not just deal with a certain compartment of life. Religion has a relevance for the whole of life and we have to say whether a particular policy is consistent with the policy of Jesus Christ or not, and if you mean to say that that is political, then I am a politician in those terms. But it won't be as one who is involved in party politics.

Desmond Tutu in Hulley 1996:52.

The next chapter will be utilizing the principles of this hermeneutics of suspicion on various Old Testament narratives.

## CHAPTER 5

# CRITICAL READING OF SELECTED NARRATIVE TEXTS — THE APPLICATION OF MY WORKING MODEL

### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

In this section the reader is confronted with various Old Testament narratives concerning women, and the way they have been interpreted traditionally. The reader is introduced to modern feminist insight and various hermeneutical processes used on these texts. The texts are read against the grain, from a viewpoint of suspicion. The ideal striven towards, is the negation of traditional negative views held of women, and the emergence of a positive attitude based on a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion used in understanding and scrutinization of the text. The narratives chosen are well-known and have been presented to Christians since childhood. Due to this fact, their cultural and gender biases run deep, and in the following case studies the reader will be introduced to the praxis of a process of consciousness-raising and a burgeoning awareness of the patriarchal processes that have led to current views held of these narratives.

It should ever be kept in mind that the Judeo-Christian tradition left us with so many deep attitudes that they create powerful barriers to an understanding of the antecedent functions of certain texts in Israelite life. Current readers are not aware that they read Israelite texts with post-Israelite minds (Meyers 1987:73).

A reader should furthermore be aware that the simple act of reading a translated text holds its own challenges. Not all ancient translations presume to be word-for-word translations. Though literal translations were attempted in some places, other passages, sections or whole books have been freely translated. In our modern day, the trend continues, with Bible texts ranging from literal translations to free translations (eg the Afrikaans translations of 1933's literal- and 1983's dynamic equivalent translation, the Living Bible, the Lifestyle Bible for Women, the Study Bible

for young people etc). Ancient scholars held that translation should occur word-for-word, and that the text as revealed Word of God should not be altered. Despite this, the very act of translation is interpretation, especially since there is no syntactical correspondence between the ancient Hebrew and the language of translation. Each generation has the task of re-examining the original source, especially in the case of texts that provide controversial doctrinal materials (Meyers 1987:97-98).

In this chapter an effort is made to bring narratives of the Old Testament under the scrutiny of a hermeneutics of suspicion. As has been mentioned before, the foremost proponent of this hermeneutics is Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, but her work focuses largely on New Testament texts. In order to bring the texts of the Old Testament into dialogue with a hermeneutics of suspicion, certain steps are taken with the help of authors other than Fiorenza. It must be said at the start that not all can ever be said about a text. It is impossible to dialogue with every single commentator who has written about the selected texts, and as a matter of course, it flows naturally that some major exegetes' work will not be given consideration. This is not the focus of the exercise. An attempt is rather made to look at lesser considered angles when looking at the texts, and consider them in a new light, where the ultimate goal is to bring females from their silence and marginality, and highlight them as central, if possible. This chapter does not propose to do exegesis in the traditional manner. It rather handles the text in a more eclectic and heuristic way which becomes clear when one looks at the questions posed to the texts.

1. A first step lies in a closer reading of the text in order to find out what is really going on.
2. That is followed by discussions of interesting new angles of the text that can be gleaned from the text. It is in this step that the work of various authors is considered in as far as it pertains to new insights that can be learned from the text.
3. Only after the text has been discussed thus, are questions asked by the reader.

In this chapter the selection of texts are listed as they roughly follow in the Old Testament. I have drawn up a set of generic questions that can be asked at each step of the process of applying a hermeneutics of suspicion to these texts. This list is given at the start of the chapter in order to enable the reader to ask such questions of every segment that will be discussed. There are also other questions that can be

asked of these texts that might help the reader to "grow into" the process of suspicion and which might enable her/him to read with a critical mindset. These questions are listed in the addendum where questions about the various chapters can also be found. The generic set of questions and the questions in the addendum were mainly generated by myself — they were not questions generated by the group of readers I worked with during our sessions together (see chapter 6). The criticism may be given that in giving these questions, one is dominating the discourse. This was not the aim. I have found that merely giving the theory of the function of the hermeneutics of suspicion, still left my audience timid and in the dark. They wanted to have clear-cut examples of questions to the text to follow in order to set them at ease. The reasons for this are also discussed in the following chapters. Chapter 6 will be looking at the religious history of specifically Afrikaans women and how modern Afrikaans women still carry this burden of an inherited piety. In the group work that follows in chapter 6, attention is given to how these texts and questions posed in chapter 5 were received, discussed, and how the reading strategy was incorporated into the piety of these women.

At the start I want to enlighten the reader about the group of people I worked with during 2005. They will be mentioned throughout chapters 5-7 and the feedback received from the group will be worked into the argument where relevant. We met for four weeks during August 2005, and our sessions were three hours long each time. These people called me to enlist in the group after a radio invitation was transmitted in June 2005. This interview is included on CD at the start of this work. No males came to the group. The group consisted of mostly single women — divorcees and unmarried women, with only two married women, one being myself. Their ages ranged from 25 upwards to 50 and over. They were all residents of Bloemfontein in the Free State, and were Afrikaans mother language speakers although they were fluent in English. They were mainly members of the Dutch Reformed Church, a Protestant Church. In the first session I explained the theory and mindset of feminist theology and a hermeneutics of suspicion to them. During sessions 2-4 we discussed selected texts at the hand of the questions stencil I developed, which is to follow below. The questions in the addendum are more advanced and some of these were also discussed, but then with the guidance and help of myself. Later chapters expand on the reasons for this and the results of this interaction. The method I followed was to give a list of questions beforehand (the questions below as well as some questions picked from the Addendum), referring to texts, which they could prepare in the week to come, and we discussed these answers in group sessions.

The issues circled wider than just the questions on the paper, so that more topics were touched. I made notes of these, as well as the group's answers, attitudes towards questions, discomfort with certain issues etc, and worked them into my argument where they are relevant in chapters 5-7. I did not use recorders of any kind. The idea of sessions 2-4 with the group was also to invite relaxed, uninhibited and unguarded reactions, and my role was that of a participant as well as an observer, as stated in chapter 1 (while constantly being aware of the danger of dominating the discourse). Chapters 5-7 of this work report on the feedback and insights I gleaned where relevant. In an effort to keep the work contextualized, I did not just segment it into one separate section, but in order to show how the personal is political in feminist theology and criticism, I refer to it where it is applicable. Hence mentioning the inherited religious past and its influence in group work is slotted into the section in chapter 6 dealing with that matter, for instance. The questions stencil was evaluated during an informal session of feedback on the tool used. The members discussed their problems with individual questions, eg we would discuss the ease with which they were able to understand and answer question 5.1.1.1., and so on. Feedback is given on this stencil towards the end of the chapter. The addendum offers more extensive and in-depth questions for readers wanting to go a bit deeper into the exercise. Janet Sprong mentioned, as will be discussed in later chapters, that not all members are willing to go to such great lengths with a text. The ideal with the addendum is to exercise the "critical muscle" in the thinking process to such a degree that it becomes second nature.

The steps in the hermeneutics of suspicion are:

1. Suspicion
2. Remembrance
3. Proclamation and
4. Actualization.

The generic questions pertaining to these steps follow. I have tried to make these questions generic so that they can easily be put over any narrative text encountered (as a stencil). It is hoped that these questions can help the reader become more sensitized, conscious and aware of the thought process to follow in order to critically read the text with a hermeneutics of suspicion.



### **5.1.1. Questions about Suspicion**

- 5.1.1.1. Which characters are painted as the main actors — who assumes agency (and who are acted upon)? Are they male or female?
- 5.1.1.2. What are the social and cultural conventions painted in this narrative?
- 5.1.1.3. What are the social positions of the various characters?
- 5.1.1.4. How has this text traditionally been presented?
- 5.1.1.5. Is this presentation true to the Biblical text?
- 5.1.1.6. Who has benefited from the traditional presentation?
- 5.1.1.7. Who, if any, has been the party who has been harmed as a result of the traditional presentation?
- 5.1.1.8. What negative attributes are given to the various characters? Are women in the narrative given more negative attributes than men?
- 5.1.1.9. Can you identify stereotypes in the narrative? Which stereotypes are linked to which gender?
- 5.1.1.10. Is the text itself patriarchal?
- 5.1.1.11. How is the text used against women's struggle for liberation?
- 5.1.1.12. How does the text legitimate women's subordination and secondary status in society and Church?
- 5.1.1.13. What underlying supposition can be identified in the interpretation of the text?
- 5.1.1.14. How does the identification of such a supposition help you to distinguish the difference between reality and the ideology of the text?
- 5.1.1.15. How does the text treat women or other marginals?
- 5.1.1.16. How does the text neglect women's experiences?

### **5.1.2. Questions about Remembrance**

- 5.1.2.1. What is the grain of the text?
- 5.1.2.2. How can one read against the grain of the text?
- 5.1.2.3. Whose are the silenced voices in the text?
- 5.1.2.4. How can these voices be made audible?
- 5.1.2.5. How can this story be written to include the people left out/excluded?
- 5.1.2.6. How were women a part of this text?
- 5.1.2.7. Does history offer any clues to what women's role in the text might have been?
- 5.1.2.8. Can an active role be reconstructed for marginal parties?
- 5.1.2.9. How can the memory of women be kept alive with regards to this text?

- 5.1.2.10. What reasons for hope and liberation are present in the text?
- 5.1.2.11. What would women's experiences entail with regards to this text?
- 5.1.2.12. What stories can be told about the women in the text?

### **5.1.3. Questions about Proclamation**

- 5.1.3.1. Is this text the Word of God or the words of men?
- 5.1.3.2. What arguments can motivate your viewpoint?
- 5.1.3.3. Under what circumstances can this text be used to empower people in the struggle against oppression?
- 5.1.3.4. What aspects of this text should be denounced as serving patriarchal interests?
- 5.1.3.5. What is the role of this text in contemporary patriarchal culture?

### **5.1.4. Questions about Actualization**

- 5.1.4.1. How can this text be dramatized/actualized differently?
- 5.1.4.2. What possibilities towards liberation can this text/dramatization/actualization introduce?
- 5.1.4.3. How can creative powers be used to celebrate and/or make present the suffering/struggles/histories of our Biblical foresters?
- 5.1.4.4. How can the roles of marginal figures be elaborated?
- 5.1.4.5. How can modern women be enabled to enter the Biblical story?
- 5.1.4.6. How can the text be retold from a feminist perspective?

## **5.2. GENESIS 2-3: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT EVE**

This text was chosen for study due to the immense importance it has in the role of women. Since earliest childhood, women grow up with the narrative of Eve ringing in their ears, influencing their lives, defining their image of self and women in general. It is not only the first narrative involving a woman in the Bible, but it is where the start of female subjugation is to be found. The group members chose this narrative as being so fundamental to religious self-understanding that it warrants closer study.

### **5.2.1. Eve in Tradition**

Genesis 1-3 offers some of the most influential texts for human existence.

Throughout the history of faith (Jewish or Christian), the view people have of the world and the way society is structured, has been defined by the understanding of these texts. One would think that Genesis 1 would be more descriptive of the reality of women in society, but, although Genesis 1.26-27 has God saying that they should make the human in their image, after their own likeness, the text that has been more descriptive of the reality of women throughout the history of Judaism and Christianity, has been Genesis 2-3, which seems to have been written at least four hundred years earlier than Genesis 1. Genesis 3.16 is especially relevant since it shows God interacting with Adam and Eve after they have sinned. The symbol of women as "daughters of Eve" has been far more influential than women being made, alongside men, in the image of God (Genesis 1.27). Women seem to bear more heavily the burden of being associated with Eve, than receiving the acknowledgement that they are image bearers of God alongside men. Genesis 1 flows from the pen of a priestly author, likely from the same group as the authors of Leviticus, where women with their impure bodies are excluded from pure/sacred/holy places where God is properly worshiped by men. Some feminist critics see this text (Genesis 1) as a text of good news to women, while others insist that a hermeneutics of suspicion leads to a possible conclusion that the reason for including both genders in the text lies in Genesis 1.28, where God blessed them and told them to be fruitful and multiply. This does not, however, rule out a reader-response interpretation of Genesis 1.26-28 that emphasizes the theme of women's dignity and equality (Clifford in Procaro-Foley 2002:153).

Before Genesis 2-3 can be re-evaluated and appreciated, the reader needs to be aware of the effect of a negative reading of this text on the lives of women throughout the history of not just Christianity, but also Judaism. Feminist Biblical scholars have been aware of the powerful and detrimental impact of the second creation story (Meyers 1987:78).

We have a long history of metaphors of faith that have influenced all segments of life. When studying metaphors closely, the most powerful archetypal gender metaphors in the Bible have been the creation of woman from Adam's rib, and Eve the temptress causing the fall into sin. For over two millennia, these two metaphors have been used to prove the Divine sanction of the subordination of women. They have had a definitive impact on values and gender relations. The tradition of interpretation, which has been overwhelmingly patriarchal until the last ten years, has in its turn resulted from an entrenched and theologically sanctioned tradition that long

antedates Christianity (Lerner 1986:182). The negative view of Eve, and of woman as created from man's rib, is older than Christianity, and its cultural impact runs very deep indeed. It could almost be called ingrained in our psyche.

Eve as first woman stands as symbol for all women. She personifies the essence of female existence. Her story is so well known that it comes as a surprise to see that in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, Eden is not a prominent theme. The actions of Adam and Eve are nowhere cited as examples of disobedience and punishment (Meyers 1987:3).

Eve is associated with sin even more so than Adam, while at the same time her creation (which is called equal to Adam's according to Genesis 1) is seen as secondary (Meyers 1987:75).

In the early centuries of the Christian era, this negative attitude towards Eve was common in religious literature. Eve and sin is furthermore associated with sexuality and lust, with the serpent playing an increasing satanic and phallic role. The more Eve is condemned as the source of sin, the more urgent becomes the need to dominate and control her. Since Eve is seen as the representative of her sex, all women are seen to require subjugation to superior males (Meyers 1987:76).

Some of the interpretive readings have reached almost canonical status on their own, and are listed below:

1. A male God creates a man first (making him superior), and a woman second, which means that she is inferior.
2. Woman is created as a helpmate and lower-order companion to curb male loneliness.
3. Woman tempts man; she is responsible for all human sinfulness.
4. Woman is cursed by pain in childbirth (Meyers 1987:78).

The above and other similar assumptions are all based on the Genesis story. When one carefully analyzes the text, it becomes clear that the above assumptions are not intrinsic to the text and that they violate its rhetoric and cultural setting (Meyers 1987:79). This was also found by Christina Landman, and is explained in earlier chapters. It seems that these readings have a great impact on the psyche of especially women in Africa.

But can an argument such as no 1 be countered? If the argument is followed that

woman is inferior to man because she was created after him, then man is also inferior to creeping creatures, because he was created after them (Bennett 1989:74).

In order to come to a better understanding of the text, and in order to facilitate a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, it is necessary to look at what is happening in the text more closely. In the story of Adam's rib, the male is the original human prototype. In a reversal of natural experience, he is painted as giving birth to the woman with the help of the father God (Ruether 1975:15).

Brueggeman's interpretation of Genesis 2.18-23 serves as illustration of the limits of a Biblical interpretation that does not take a nuanced approach to the available materials. There is much affirmation of women within the Biblical materials, but grounds for violence exist as well. The material of Genesis 2 has shaped cultural attitudes toward women. Thistlethwaite suggests that contemporary experience (society, conversations, films, music, books, Church- and religious life etc) should also shape our interpretation of the text (Thistlethwaite 1985:107).

The way the relationship between Adam and Eve is pictured in Genesis 2-3, has laid the greatest foundation for a patriarchal system in which the man stands in the centre position of life. There is a general consensus that Adam and Eve's relationship is troubled after the Fall, but it is less easily recognized that their relationship was also disturbed *before* the offence. The text made it easy for traditional interpretation to cast the whole relationship in a patriarchal light:

1. The woman is created *for* the man, to be his helper
2. She is derivative from the man
3. He rules over her
4. The man names the woman (Stratton 1995:96).

Feminism is concerned with the roots of patriarchy and the subordination of women, which seem to spring from the traditional understanding of the Yahwist's story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Simkins 1998:32). The story of Yahweh's creation is not focused on gender alone, but entails the whole of creation. The brief story of Adam and Eve, however, seems focused on gender. The Garden narrative itself can be viewed in four movements:

- The creation of man from the earth (2.4b-17)
- The creation of woman from man (2.18-24)

- The maturation of the human couple through knowledge (2.25-3.7)
- The social consequences of human knowledge (3.8-24)

Stuart Charmé conducted a study in which the different meanings boys and girls gleaned from the tale of Adam and Eve were studied. There was no theological information added to the simple presentation of the story itself. What were their ideas about gender, and how did it influence their understanding of this particular story? For half the children there were two reasons for the creation of Adam before Eve:

1. God is a man and gives precedence to men.
2. Men are stronger and better than women.

In this regard the statements of the boys showed great similarity to the tradition of Western (male) theologians' work. From the study it was further noted that this story reinforces gender stereotypes and that one of these is the reinforcement of the inferiority and subordination of women. Eve, however, was not seen as the guilty party through the eyes of the children. The children, who drew a more positive picture of Eve, read this into the story contrary to the dominant structure provided by the text. The different genders showed very different understandings of the text, and the overall study found that religion is definitely experienced through the "lenses of gender" (Arzt 2002:34-35).

It was found that, not only is the text itself written with a negative slant towards Eve herself, making its gender bias felt most strongly, but that a patriarchal culture then further enforces this negative view when the reader reads through gendered lenses.

### **5.2.2. Patriarchy in the Text**

Many feminist theologians feel that feminist efforts have not been able to eliminate the patriarchy in the man/woman relationship in Genesis 2-3. The woman is created as the man's helper, she is a derivative from him and precisely for him. The man exercises authority over her by naming her before the Fall in 2.23 (Stratton 1995:101). On the other hand, patriarchy evident in the text does not necessarily deem it meaningless or useless. In the following sections, this story will be viewed from different angles in order to play with different meanings. Such exercise is in line with Fiorenza's definition of the text as "playing field" where various interpretations from various angles come into play to shed light on possible meanings. Firstly, however, attention must be given to feminist identification of patriarchal trends in the story of Eve.

Feminist criticism identifies ideological motives in the Eden story. Stratton views one of the main ideological functions as the construction of reality and gender from a male viewpoint. All concepts that flow from this should then be seen as natural, and should be assumed rather than questioned. Some of these features are seen even in present day society.

1. The man/male is the norm of humanity. Even in Genesis, he was made first, and God and the writer give him the most attention.
2. The man's perspective is God-given — it is the way things are.
3. The man acts as a type of co-creator when he names the animals and eventually determines the woman (Stratton 1995:209).

The woman is referred to as "this" three times and finally does not object to being referred to as an object. The patriarchal slant of the text is very strong when the man names the creatures and finally the woman. The text paints the man as the definer, the labeler, the categorizer. Feminists see in this relationship a patriarchy in the man/woman relationship even *before* the Fall (Stratton 1995:98-99).

The woman in Genesis is depicted as the "other" party to the man. She is only shown to us in relation to the man. It seems that her only vocation is to help the man and keep him company. She comes from the man and lives for the man. The writer of Genesis makes us believe that gender in Genesis is not something he has created in writing. Rather, we are led to believe that gender is linked to and the result of biological sex characteristics (Stratton 1995:209).

Hierarchy is already introduced in Genesis when the woman is told that the man will rule over her. This understanding of gender relations almost seems like one of the main functions of the story.

That God created woman from man's rib, has long been used as argument to prove that God self made woman inferior. Whether it has been because the rib is a "lower" part of the man, or whether Eve was created from flesh and bone, the arguments stayed negative. John Calvin's interpretation is ample proof:

*The woman ... was nothing else than an accession to the man. Certainly, it cannot be denied, that the woman also, though in the second degree, was created in the image of God ... We may therefore conclude, that the order of nature implies that the woman should be the helper of the man. The vulgar proverb, indeed, is that she is a*

*necessary evil; but the voice of God is rather to be heard, which declares that woman is given as a companion and an associate to the man, to assist him to live well ... Adam was taught to recognize himself in his wife, as in a mirror, and Eve, in her turn, to submit herself willingly to her husband, as being taken out of him ... (Calvin 1979:129).*

Various feminist theologians have tried to bring more sense and sensibility to the negative view of women sprouting from traditional interpretations of the story of Eve. Phyllis Trible's interpretation shows both Adam and Eve (created from dust and rib) as fragile material which must be processed by Yahweh in order to live. She also sees the last creative act (Eve's creation) as the culmination of creation. Other arguments and interpretations hold that man and woman together constitute humankind. R David Freedman argues that the term "to make him a helpmate" should rather be translated as "a power equal to man". These feminist interpretations can be called optimistic and positive, but suffer lack of equally positive support from other Biblical passages (Lerner 1986:184).

If patriarchy is identified in the text, the question leads to the possible identification of matriarchal tendencies in the story. There are two elements of matriarchy in the story of Eden. The first hint of matriarchy is found in the statement that a man will go and live with his wife. The second indication is the first great promise to humankind which is given to the descendants of the woman, Eve. The woman's children will strike the serpent (Bennett 1989:9).

Despite such matriarchal tendencies, the overpowering tendency of patriarchy overshadows such alternative paradigms. Trible's thoroughgoing critique of the interpretations of Eve's story draws attention to the reality that is a recurring theme in feminist Biblical scholarship: The extensive influence of patriarchy in the Bible as a whole and in many key Biblical texts in which women feature strongly. This influence is so extensive that it can be called a Biblical paradigm (Clifford 2001:71).

### **5.2.3. Eve and the Author**

The problem of translation creates even more problems with our view of Eve. Most readers read about her in texts that are not the original language, and the translations at their disposal follow on centuries' worth of bias and distortion (unconsciously) in the process of translation itself (Meyers 1987:76). Throughout this



study has it been and will it be pointed out that not even the task of translating a text is something that happens without a measure of interpretation and influence on the part of the translator. The translator is involved in the shaping of the text. Reading a translated text then, poses the problem of reading the interpreted version of the translator which often further patriarchalizes the already misogynic view of the original writer. This is certainly true in the case of Eve. But does she manage to break the surface of this murky pool despite efforts to keep her down and drown her female voice under male writing?

It seems that the writer of the text has trouble getting this woman to bend under hardship. Instead of the toil and suffering and the troublesome position she is assigned in 3.16, the reader finds in 4.1 a triumphant cry. The passage makes no mention of hardship or toil. Eve does not seem to go and sit quietly in the corner, despite the ambiguity of her relationship to God. Maybe she and God managed to come to an agreement in the meantime? It is clear that she accepts her role as mother, but the woman seems to chafe at the bit. She rebels against subordination and claims for herself a role as partner to God in the creative process. Just as God did in Genesis 2, she has gotten a man. She bears *אִישׁ* (*iš*) from *אִשָּׁה* (*išša*) just as God made an *אָדָם* (*adam*) from *אֲדָמָה* (*adamah*) (Stratton 1995:220).

#### 5.2.4. Ideals of Subversive Readings

In this brief focus on Genesis 2-3, various aspects are touched upon in order to subvert traditional meanings. traditionally Genesis 2-3 has served as base text for the roles women and men are expected to play in society. This passage has also led to the oppression of women at various levels of society. Looking at this text from various feminist perspectives, using different critical tools and questions, opens this text to a world of new understanding and richness. For feminist theologians, the ideal is to bring Genesis 2-3 back to women as a text that can speak into their lives — not in a condemning fashion or as mandate for subjugation, but to build up the idea that the female is as much a bearer of the image of God as the male.

The way feminist theology goes about reclaiming the text for women, is to unearth overlooked aspects of the text, or reading against the grain of the dominant discourse. When this is done, a different world of meaning becomes apparent to the reader. Reading from the perspective of feminist critical thought, the story itself

undermines the obvious given reality of the story as the *only* reality. In the Eden narrative, there are two realities, and we have Eve to thank for showing us the one that the text is trying to hide from us. Eve tries to perceive reality when she makes her decision, and the writer tells us that this is the wrong reality. We are led to believe that the only legitimate reality is the one the writer tells us about. The existence of two realities implies that at least one of them is made up.

Phrases like "good and evil" suggest that difference exists, if not actual duality. The woman implies that other options were possible when she says that she has been tricked. When their eyes are opened and they acquire a different knowledge, a new way of looking is implied. This leads to the conclusion that the world is a matter of perception. God's internal monologue confirms that the alternative world is not false, but that the woman is the wrong person to lay claim to knowing it. The use of the generic terms "man" and "woman" show an obvious attempt to universalize. It shows that the story has ideological fabrications that are supposed to sustain and maintain a specific generalized reality (Stratton 1995:210-211). The above conclusions serve as mandate for feminist theology to read against the grain and delve for alternative meanings and interpretative possibilities within the given text.

The positive outlook of some feminist theologians on the Genesis 2-3 text is not general. Not all academics are equally optimistic about the possibilities of the creation narrative to emancipate oppressed people. Milne finds it impossible for a feminist to read the story in Genesis 2-3 in a positive light. But to deny this emancipatory possibility, is to engage in the feminist scholarship that McIntosh describes as finding women to be a "problem, absence or anomaly" in the discipline (Stratton 1995:96). Though the previous sections have to various degrees pointed out that the woman is portrayed less easily than the other characters in the tale, and giving acknowledgement to the fact that patriarchy is inscribed in the story in three areas,

- (The man/woman relationship,
- The priority of the man in the story, and
- The woman's relationship with God) (Stratton 1995:96),

there is much to be gleaned from the text. Feminists point out that various ways of reading a text critically, can all help to subvert traditional meanings and bring out more feminist-sensitive aspects of the tale.

It is not meaningless to wrestle with a text while keeping in mind that not all parts of it can always be 100% understood and clear without possibility of question. Stratton suggests that interpretation should not firstly and only be about "settling" a text by understanding it. In some cases it is a far richer experience to simply "converse" with a text. When looking at Genesis 2-3, rather than sending a message of doom, the text challenges readers to think and consider the choices we face, the ways we interpret our world and the ways we experience our relationships with God. Genesis 2-3 is very effective in using persuasive speech and wordplay to remind the reader that interpretations have effects (Stratton 1995:15).

It is possible that critical reading may help to construe a textual meaning far more congruent with reality than with the ideological reality the implied author sought to communicate with the audience. It is, however, not a given. Even critical reading suffers the typical postmodern burden of being committed and subjective. The reader is time and again confronted with: do we claim the text as authoritative, but not the interpretation and praxis thereof, or do we subvert the authority of the text? I have found this question to lie at the heart of the way any reader interacts with the text. A further challenge is presented by the cultural divide between the culture of the text and the culture of the reader. Bridging this gap is no easy task, and the results of reading the own culture into the text make up the reality of many a woman living under the authority of the text.

Traditional exegesis of Genesis 2-3 can be criticized from feminist perspective. In our day, a rereading of the text without patriarchal presuppositions brings the reader to the judgment of patriarchal culture. In this way Genesis 2-3 is a narrative that serves to liberate and not to enslave. The Yahwist narrative gives us our identity (creatures of equality and mutuality) and tells us who we have become (creatures of oppression), thus opening possibilities for change. The story calls male and female to repentance (Trible 1979:81). This repentance may include male repentance of domineering, subjugating etc, and female repentance of easily being subdued, not living in practical communion with the life's partner, etc.

Genesis 2-3 belongs simultaneously to the genres of "creation myths" as well as "etiologies", with chapter 3 also belonging to "wisdom parable". The tale operates on many levels and conveys important messages about human existence (Meyers 1987:79). The "creation myth" genre represents the tale on the most overt level. To use the word "myth" does not imply that the tale is false or that it tells an antiquated



**PHOENIX RISING**  
JANET MCKENZIE

story. The term means that Genesis 2-3 deals with origins, and is a tale meant to help people understand the nature and meaning of their own existence (Meyers 1987:79).

One of the most important emancipatory aspects of the story is the fact that the first great promise is given to woman: it is her children who will strike the head of the serpent. It is impossible to explain the distortion of this story in patriarchal history and culture (Bennett 1989:81).

Another emancipatory motif runs in the painting of the relationship between man and woman before the Fall. Pre-fall Genesis 2 presents a "subversive memory". It reminds those who read and hear this text that partnership was God's intention for human creatures. Yet, Jewish life and law would reflect the contrasting post-fall reality, where partnership between the sexes did not exist (Clifford 2001 :70).

Subversive readings bring hidden meanings and motifs to the fore, and lay them on the playing field of possible meanings of the text. By showing alternatives to traditional interpretation, they furthermore serve as critical tools against current society and current and traditional trends in interpretation of the Biblical text.

### 5.2.5. "Man" in Language

The generic word for "human", אָדָם is often used in the Hebrew Bible. In English, this word is translated as "man", leading to a gender specific meaning being wrongly attached to a Hebrew word that designates "human life" as a category to be distinguished from God on the one hand, and animals on the other (Meyers 1987:81).

When אָדָם (*adam*) in the creation tales is translated as "man" (אִישׁ), a priority to male existence is implied, and a Hebrew wordplay is ignored. The word for the matter from which the first human was formed, is אֲדָמָה (*adamah*), translated as "ground" or "earth". The words for "human" and "earth" are phonetically connected, and perhaps also etymologically. In the light of this, a good translation for Genesis 2.7 would be:

*Then God Yahweh formed an earthling of clods from the earth and breathed into its nostril the breath of life; and the earthling became a living being (Meyers 1987:81).*

Feminist theology has made a great contribution in pointing out how a wrong translation, ignoring the fine linguistic nuances of the original Hebrew, leads to a distortion in society in the relationship between male and female, and a loss of equal humanity for women in the life of the Church itself.

Genesis 1.27 furthermore shows a connection between humanity as created in the image of God and humanity as male and female. The traditional Church view completely neglects this point (Wasike 2001:176). Early writers from the New Testament and Patristic period could not easily accept the woman's status as carrier of the image of God. A closer reading of the text provides women with as much a mandate of being created in the image as God, as the one enjoyed by men through the ages.

In Genesis 1.26 when God creates human beings, a particular formula which engages a counsel is used: God says: "Let us make man". The distinction between the creation of a human being and other beings is pronounced further by this. Humanity is created as a result of a particular deliberate decision on the part of God the creator. Human beings are also uniquely created in the "image and likeness of God" both male and female. The distinction between male and female is a foundation intrinsic in the idea of humanity. M Evans has stressed this idea by emphasizing that the creation of humankind as male and female is an integral part of God's decision to make humanity. This clearly shows that the idea of humanity has its full meaning in woman and man, and not man alone. The human personality has to be expressed in either male or female form. In this creation narrative, the sexual distinction is quite clear. There is no indication of subordination of one sex to the other. Humankind is created both female and male and entrusted with stewardship over the rest of creation (Wasike 2001:176).

#### 5.2.6. "Man" from Earth

One way to bring different meanings to the fore is to look at the way words are used in the passage. In Genesis 2-3, gender is understood through the metaphor that likens procreation to agriculture. We find interesting wordplays between the human, **הָאָדָם** (*ha'adam*) and the earth, **הָאָדָמָה** (*ha'adamah*) (2.7). Other interesting wordplays occur in the places where "man", **אִישׁ** (*iš*) and "woman", **אִשָּׁה** (*išša*) are

used (2.23), as well as the phrases in 3.16-19 where the couple's social roles are defined (Simkins 1998:39).

God/Yahweh made the man (*ha'adam—masculine*) from the earth (*ha'adamah—feminine*).

The wordplay shows masculine and feminine forms of the same word. This passage shows the origin of the man, as well as his destiny (3.19) (Simkins 1998:40). The creation of the man from the earth can be seen as the man's "birth" from the earth. This passage does not just play with male and female concepts of the same word. It also casts Yahweh (God) into various roles that have traditionally been reserved for women:

1. Yahweh as potter forms the man (fetus) in the womb of the earth.
2. Yahweh is a midwife when he delivers the human out of the earth and breathes life into his nostrils.

The male *ha'adam* comes from the female *ha'adamah* like a fetus from its mother. The wordplay depicts the relationship between man and earth to be like that between mother and son. The theology of the Yahwist writer is at work in the fact that we see some ideological pointers that stand out from this creation story: The Yahwist writer is careful not to give the impression that Yahweh impregnates the earth to bring forth the man. It also does not depict Yahweh as father of the man. Though Yahweh might be assumed, the birth process is brief and only includes gestation (being carried in the womb between conception and birth) and parturition (childbirth) (Simkins 1998:44).

### 5.2.7. Woman from Man

Yahweh acts differently when creating the first woman (2.18-24). Woman is not made from earth, but from the man's ribs. God does this so that the woman will correspond to the man כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*kenegdo*). With the creation of the woman, the human species becomes differentiated. Humans are now male or female. The terms used are social in orientation rather than sexual. The man is identified as foremost a husband, and the woman as wife. Specific gender roles have not yet been defined. At this point in the story the point is simply made that both find social fulfillment in the marriage institution (2.24) (Simkins 1998:45).

The text does make it clear that the woman is created *from* the man. She is not

primary, but derivative. Immediately after being created, the woman becomes the object of the male (as well as the reader's) gaze. We are not given a description of Eve, but make up our own ideas on the basis of the man's poetry in Genesis 2.23.

### 5.2.8. Woman as Helper

The second chapter of Genesis contains another creation myth that enables readers to understand "woman's place". The traditional interpretation of the story has the woman as a helper to the man. Keeping in mind that myths should not be interpreted too literally, it should be noted that the Hebrew word used for helper/helpmeet is the same word used of Divine help. This word never refers to inferior help in the Bible (Bennett 1989:38).

Feminist criticism can also glean other meanings from the text. God decides that it is not good for the man to be alone, and creates the woman *for* the man (Genesis 2.18). The woman's creation seems like an afterthought. She is created as *helper* specifically. Clines wants to shift the question from the woman's status as helper to what she actually *does* as helper. According to Phyllis Trible the woman alleviates the man's isolation. Bonhoeffer has her embodying and helping to bear the creaturely limit God has imposed. Watson wants the woman to mainly meet the man's sexual needs. Bird has the woman help the man in terms of procreation. Clines agrees with Bird's opinion that the woman has to help the man with what he cannot do alone: procreate. The woman's help could not be ordinary or it would not be mentioned at all (Clines in Stratton 1995:97). The text makes it clear that the woman does not help the man to name the animals, since she was not there at the time. Clines infers that the woman's help is not of an intellectual nature. The reasons given for this are that God does not punish the woman after sin with intellectual inferiority or by making her incapable of keeping up interesting conversation with her partner (Stratton 1995:97). This seems a very strange motivation for assuming that the nature of Eve's help is not intellectual. Still, on this issue as on many others, the text remains cloudy.

The creation of woman is to be set against the Divine judgment that "it is not good for אָדָם (*'adam*) to be alone". God decides to make a helper fit for him (Genesis 2.18, 20). The word *helper* עֵזֶר (*'ezer*) has many usages. In this context it is a relational term and designates a beneficial relationship as it pertains to God, people and animals. The word does not imply inferiority. The proof of this lies in the word נִגְרַל



(*neged*) used together with עֵזֶר (*'ezer*), and which connotes equality. The helper is also counterpart (Trible 1979:75). With the woman's creation, gendered life is introduced. The relationship between them is described by the phrase "suitable counterpart" which is often translated as "helpmate". The woman is the one who helps. Keeping in mind the word נֶגֶד (*neged*) how does this helper stand in relationship to the one receiving help? traditional interpretations would have us believe that the helper is subordinate, but in the Hebrew Bible a helper can also be a superior, as in the case of God being a helper. The ambiguity is solved by the prepositional phrase in Genesis 2.18, 20. The helper stands neither higher nor lower than the one being helped, but states a nonhierarchical relationship between the two. The helper is corresponding to, parallel with, or on a par with the one being helped (Meyers 1987:84-85). In the second and third chapters of Genesis the word for woman is positive: she is called חַוְוָה "Eve" (life) and the word about her creation is "Help" (helper/helpmate), a word that is used of superior help. Woman is described as the one to give the superior help that man needs. Anne Bennett calls her the civilizer and the one to seek wisdom (Bennett 1989:81).

Trible prefers the word "companion" as translation for the Hebrew word *'ezer* (Genesis 2.18). *'ezer* is usually translated as "helper". The word helper suggests assistant, and lends itself to the argument that women are created to help men and are therefore their subordinates. Tribble points out that *'ezer* is used in the Old Testament in reference to God, who is the "helper" of Israel. God is not subordinate to humans. Thus, *'ezer* is a relational term signifying a beneficial relationship: "companion" captures this sense without a hint of subordination. She believes that her word choice is further supported by the accompanying Hebrew word כִּנְגֶדוֹ (*kenegdo*), "corresponding to itself". Inferiority of women is neither asserted nor implied when mutual correspondence is included. The translation of *'ezer* as companion captures the notion that the woman is a true counterpart to the man, corresponding in every way to him as another fully human creature of God (Clifford 2001 :68).

### 5.2.9. Animal Naming

One of the most controversial aspects of the Eden narrative is the man's naming of the animals, and later of the woman. Theology has traditionally used this act as

mandate for man's domination over woman, and in modern times this naming has received much attention from feminist theologians. Feminists themselves give plural meanings to the act, and exegesis and hermeneutics on this section form a good illustration of the difference and variedness at work within feminist theology. For some, the naming act asserts man's domination, while others see a mutuality within the act when the narrative is read closely. Four examples, depicting various views, will be illustrated here:

1.

God gave the power of naming to Adam. This power is greatly significant. Divine breath creates, but human naming gives meaning and order. If one reads the Hebrew word אָדָם (*'adam*) as humankind, this naming is given to the male as well as female. But in this instance, the power to name was granted specifically to the male alone. This might have been so because the female had not yet been created, but this pattern repeats even after Eve's creation, when Adam names her as he had the animals (Lerner 1986:181) (Genesis 2:23).

By naming the woman, she gets defined in a special way as a "natural" part of the man (bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh ... she was taken out of man). This statement becomes an inversion of the only other human relationship of which this can be said: that between child and mother. The man defines himself as the mother of the woman (Lerner 1986:181).

One cannot reason away the strong given impression that the male shares in the Divine power of naming and re-naming (Lerner 1986:182).

2.

Traditionally, the fact that the man names the animals, and later names the woman, has been used as one of the main examples of his male superiority or leading role over the woman as well as nature. The naming of the animals is interpreted as an expression of dominance and superiority over the animals. When one looks closely at the text, this meaning of naming is alien to the Yahwist narrative. In the creation story, the whole act of naming the animals was done against the background of the man who should realize that there is no suitable partner for him among the animals. As he names them, this becomes clear to him (Simkins 1998:45). In naming the animals, the man becomes increasingly self-aware and conscious of his difference

when compared to the subjects named. By calling the woman  $\text{יִשְׁשָׁא}$  ('išša), the text points her out as corresponding to the man. She is a suitable helper. The text remains cloudy about the nature of the woman's dependency (came from the man) on the man. Apart from Adam, all men are dependent on the mothers who birthed them. This is reflected in the text showing that  $\text{אָדָם}$  (*ha'adam*) comes from  $\text{אִמָּה}$  (*ha'adamah*) like a baby from its mother (2.7). When the man calls/names his wife Eve, he signifies her as the mother of all living (3.20) (Simkins 1998:46). If name giving signifies anything about the name giver, it is the ability to discern, rather than the right to dominate.

### 3.

Traditionally a naming motif has been read into the poem by the man. It is said that the man names the woman and so exerts his power and authority over her. But the verb *to name* does not occur in the poem. Instead, the verb *gara'* (to call) is used. This verb is no substitute for the verb "to name". A naming formula would have the verb *to call* followed by the explicit object *name*, as found in Genesis 4:17, 25, 26a and 26b):

Cain built a city and *called* the *name* of the city after...  
 And she bore a son and *called* his *name* Seth ...  
 And he *called* his *name* Enoch ...  
 Men began to *call* upon the *name* of the Lord ... (Trible 1979:77).

The noun *woman* itself is not a name. It designates gender but not the specific person. By using the words  $\text{יִשְׁשָׁא}$  ('išša) and  $\text{אִשָּׁה}$  ('iš), Adam recognizes sexuality. This is not a naming act (Trible 1979:77-78).

### 4.

After the fall, at this time of sin and judgment, the man now calls his wife's name Eve (3.20), thereby asserting his rule over her. By naming her, the man corrupts a relationship of mutuality and equality (Trible 1979:81).

Eve names her children (ch 4). This action on her part shows her asserting her power to name just as the man did in 3.20.

#### 5.2.10. Sexuality in Eden

According to Genesis, compulsory heterosexuality is God-given. God is not sorrowful

for this condition, though He is grievous because of human wickedness in Genesis 6.5-6. Phyllis Trible is one theologian who ascribes to a view of a primary androgynous interpretation for אָדָם ('adam). Male Biblical scholars do not generally support this view. Yet, some ancient male rabbis share the same interpretation (Trible 1979:82). According to this view, God first made the earthling as an androgynous being, and only with the creation of the woman did God create the sexes. Despite this observation, it is obvious that concern for sexuality comes last in this story, especially for the creation of woman. Some theologians have traditionally used this order of events to prove the subordination of women (Trible 1979:74-75).

Genesis goes further and tells of the Fall and subsequent awareness/knowledge of the man and the woman. This is brought into specific context of Adam and Eve's nakedness. The implication is that they were sexually unaware before the Fall. Without knowledge, they were unaware of the meaning of their bodies.

When one looks closely at the Fall story, it does not seem that the man and women are cursed for what they did. In only one place does Yahweh impose what seems like punishment — He curses the land on account of man's actions, and leaves it unproductive for agriculture (3.17-18). Yahweh temporarily withholds rain — a condition that is alleviated with the flood (8.20-22). The way the story is told makes us understand that the roles the man and women get, are direct results of their knowledge. Yahweh defines the woman's social role when He declares that she will increase her toils and pregnancies (3.16). Due to her sexual knowledge childbirth is possible, but this will be painful. Her status as mother will be dependent on her husband. Since she is אִשָּׁה ('išša) coming from אִישׁ ('iš), her husband will rule over her. The woman's relationship to the man is mirrored in the man's relationship to the land. Though he comes from the earth, the land is dependent upon him to bring forth vegetation. Without the man to till it, it will remain barren. Similarly, the woman's fertility depends on the husband. The passage does end with another Yahwist theological statement: In future the woman, and not the land, will be the mother of all living (Simkins 1998:48-50).

Women have always felt uncomfortable with the sentence passed on all females after the Fall. God announces the disruption of the woman's relationships. Her children and that of the serpent will be enemies. Her man will rule over her. In the text it seems that God himself emphasizes her motherhood, sexuality and body — she has

a sexual nature. The woman will desire her husband, although the specific contours of this desire are never defined. Specifically in her body will she feel her punishment of increased toil, pregnancies and pain of childbirth (Stratton 1995:106).

Genesis 3.16b has the woman longing for her husband and him ruling over her. Earlier in the narrative the text shows that men will leave their parents, and cleave to the woman (they desire) (Genesis 2.24). In 3.16b there occurs a reversal of this desire. This passage leads to several questions: Does God create the woman's desire, and does she choose whom she desires? For what was the woman's desire previously? In Genesis 3.16 it sounds new, as though it was not for the man before. According to Genesis 3.16 it may seem that woman's initial desire might have been for sustenance, beauty and wisdom (Stratton 1995:208). This might indicate that the nature of her desire is not just to be assumed to be sexual. Also, what is the meaning of the rulership the man gets? (Stratton 1995:59).

Care should be taken when using Genesis 1-3 as definition of acceptable sexual relationships to those who are heterosexual. The story does not necessarily show a loving, mutual relationship between husband and wife. A close look at the text shows that, according to modern standards, mutuality is rather absent throughout the whole story. Marriage is constructed by the narrator/writer and informed from a male perspective (Genesis 2.24). The eroticization of dominance in 3.16 is also problematic (Stratton 1995:209).

### 5.2.11. Man and Woman in Genesis

There are strong arguments both for and against the unity experienced by man and woman in the Garden. The text itself plays on various meanings with the use of interesting wordplay techniques. The man and woman are sometimes depicted as sharing a very intimate unity of being, while the text at other times also shows a marked breach of unity in their relationship. First we will focus on instances of unity and equality, and afterwards give attention to signs of the opposite.

Phyllis Trible has argued that both the male and female have their origin in the human creature. According to her, אָדָם (ha'adam) was not the man as tradition would have it, but rather the human creature. Only with the creation of Eve did gender come into existence. Yet, the man אִישׁ ('iš) is identified with אָדָם (ha'adam)

throughout the story. The woman is furthermore taken from the man *מֵאִישׁ* (*me'iš*) just as the rib is taken from the man *מִן־הָאָדָם* (*min ha'adam*). This suggests that the woman has her origin from the man and is subsequently dependent upon the man. But the wordplay between *אִישׁ* (*'iš*) (man) and *אִשָּׁה* (*'išša*) (woman) also suggest a complementary relationship. The man is called *אִישׁ* (*'iš*) to emphasise the unity between him and the woman, *אִשָּׁה* (*'išša*). Though the man and the animals shared their origin (all are from the earth: *מִן־הָאָדָמָה* (*min 'adama*)) no partner was found for the man who corresponded with him *כְּנֶגְדּוֹ* (*kenegdo*). His naming of the creatures sets him apart from the creatures themselves (Simkins 1998:45).

Another reading can hold that the creation story moves to its climax and not its decline in the creation of the woman. The structure of Hebrew literature itself seems to support this argument. In Hebrew literature, the central points often appear at the beginning and end of a unit and serves as an *inclusio* device. This is seen in Genesis 2. The creation of man first and woman last form a ring composition with the two creatures equally important (Trible 1979:75).

Certain parallels exist between the creation of both man and woman.

1. God creates both man and woman. Woman is not created with the help of man. Man is neither spectator nor consultant. The verb *בָּנָה* (*bnh* — to build) suggests considerable labor.
2. Both are created out of raw materials: the man from dust and the woman from a rib. To call the woman "Adam's rib" is to misread the text, since it takes pains to tell that Divine labour was used to make it into a female. To assume from this that the man is superior and woman inferior, is to read into the text qualities for the man that are not given to him by the text. The man of Genesis 2 is not superior, strong, aggressive, dominant or power-hungry. The rib shows solidarity and equality which is affirmed by the man in the poem of verse 23:

This at last is bone of bones and flesh of my flesh.

She shall be called *אִשָּׁה* (*'išša* — woman) because she was

Taken out of *אִישׁ* (*'iš* — man) (2:23)

(Trible 1979:76).

Nowhere in the text is the woman shown to be more cunning or sexual than the man.

They have the same Creator who called His work *good* when He created woman. In birth they are equal (Trible 1979:78).

The next aspect in the text (2.24) explains this connectedness in human terms. Woman was created as part of man, and therefore man must cleave to her and choose her above all other kinship relationships — they shall be one flesh. This flesh shall be the man's flesh because he has defined his authority over her by naming her. This authority implies intimacy, interdependency, and was traditionally used to upgrade the dignity of the wife in marriage (Lerner 1986:181).

Genesis 2:24 gives an indication that the conjugal bond gets priority over the parental bond, for a man will leave his parents and cleave to his wife. Male and female are complements of the whole in marriage, since the parent-child bond is basically hierarchical in nature, while the marriage relationship is not (Meyers 1987:86).

Despite the wordplay between man/woman/earth, the relationship between the man and woman remains ambiguous. The man might come from the female earth, but the female human is dependent upon him for existence. The words used are אִישׁ (*iš*) and אִשָּׁה (*išša*), and then again הָאָדָם (*ha'adam*) and הָאִדָּמָה (*ha'adamah*) (Simkins 1998:46).

It is also possible to look at the story of Adam and Eve from a perspective of types of character. In all tales, we find various types of characters, for example villains, heroes, mysterious figures at the border of the tale, victims, etc. When one focuses on one of these character roles, namely the hero, a whole new understanding of the relationship between Adam and Eve comes to the fore. The hero role involves three traditional aspects of the hero — successful, failed and equivocal (ambiguous). It can also happen that two characters share a single role in a narrative. Adam and Eve share the role of hero. This seems only fitting since they are one flesh until separated in Genesis 2.21-24. Both eat of the fruit, and both are punished. Eve is the aspect of the hero directly tempted by the serpent (Genesis 3.1-6), but only Adam was present when the command was given (Genesis 2.16-17). Eve had not yet been created at that time. Together, Adam and Eve represent the hero that is tested and fails (Sharon 1998:71).

The idea of Adam and Eve as a heroic unit is further accentuated by wordplay. When

speaking to the serpent, Eve is referred to in the second person masculine plural. Her response to the temptation is as though God's interdiction of eating from the tree has been given in the masculine plural (Genesis 3.1-5), though it is reported in the masculine singular in Genesis 2.16 (Sharon 1998:78).

Adam and Eve also share one nature on gender level: When Adam is first created, he contains within himself the female aspect that is later literally split from his body (Genesis 2.21-24). Their unity is upheld throughout the text. They are addressed as a unit even when apart, and the essence of their punishment is identical though the form may differ. Eve will have a difficult childbirth, and Adam will toil hard. Both words for punishment are taken from the Hebrew word translated as "*pain*" or "*sorrow*". In the Hebrew Bible this term is far closer in meaning to "*hard work*" (Sharon 1998:79). The cultural message in the text may be interpreted as shared responsibility and bearing of the double burden of mortality as well as hard work. Tikva Frymer-Kensky is right when she states that Biblical gender relations are egalitarian when stripped of the interpretive overlay of post-Biblical exegesis (Sharon 1998:79). This reading of the story of Adam and Eve as a heroic unit confirms her statement.

The text also shows the separation between man and woman. The man seems to be sentenced because he has listened to the woman. In the original Hebrew the word שָׁמַעַתָּ (שמע) means "listening to the voice of" as well as "obeying". The man is judged because he obeyed the woman. But did he? Contrary to popular tradition, there is no scene where the woman lured, tempted, seduced or tricked the man to eat. The man does not blame her for doing any such thing. The woman gave and he ate. His own words confirm this. Eve did not command him so that he could "obey" her. If this is the case, what did God mean when He said that the man should not have obeyed the woman? (Stratton 1995:60). There is currently no agreement on this in the field.

Trible argues that the man makes it clear that the woman was the one who gave him the fruit and tempted him. The woman accepts responsibility for her actions after noting that the serpent beguiled her. Trible further states that in the man's betrayal of the woman to God, he opposed himself to her; while the woman, in ignoring him in her reply to God, separates herself from the man (Clifford 2001:70). Their behaviour is not due to pride as Augustine would have it, but is rather an expression of a shattered partnership. Their once mutual companionship has been replaced with



separation, not only from each other, but also from the other creatures in the garden. God judges the serpent and the human. God curses the serpent, and punishes the woman with pain in childbearing. Of special concern are the words to the woman that, though she will yearn for unity with her husband (the unity she experienced at the time of their creation) he will not reciprocate her desire (Clifford 2001:70). Her husband will rule over her. Tribble expresses that this statement is not a Divine legitimation of male superiority, but rather a condemnation, because it results from sin. Through her misguided choice the woman has become the property of her husband, similar to a slave. The man is also corrupted, for he has become master of his God-given equal. Where there once was mutuality in companionship, there is now only a hierarchy of division. The man will labor hard for his food (Clifford 2001:70).

Are all relationships now doomed, with special focus on the relationship between man and woman? From the Genesis story, it seems that Eve's are the first relationships. In Genesis 4.1 Eve exclaims that Yahweh helped her to create/give birth to a man. These words show her responses to both God and her man. Once again, the text enjoys reversal of words and exclamations. When Eve was created, Adam exclaimed that she came from him. Eve now knows the processes of procreation, and knows that man ultimately comes from a woman. The text continues to play with words, leaving the reader the responsibility of looking at all the various angles of this diamond.

### **5.2.12. God Talks**

What is the nature of the language used to refer to the man and the woman, and how do they address God and He them? Are there any clues in the pronouns used as to the status of the characters and their relationship to each other and God?

In Genesis both the woman and the man begin as "lack". The ground needed a worker, and the man needed a helper, but by the end of the narrative (Genesis 2) the woman does not have the stature that the man has. The man changes from being lack, object, to becoming a speaker and possessor (he uses "my"). The woman remains an object. When the man calls her "this" in Genesis 2.23 he does not even recognize her as person, while the narrator affirms her status as possession by calling her "his woman" in 2.25. Genesis 2 reveals differences in the subject status of the characters. God is a subject and uses "I". The man is an incomplete subject who is called "you" by God and uses the pronoun "my" in reference to himself. The

woman stands outside of the discourse as an object and possession (Stratton 1995: 159).

When Adam and Eve hide themselves, God initiates communication by asking them where they are. It should be noted that God speaks only to the man. Is it possible that God is not interested in the woman, and, if so, why? Is He perhaps shy? In the Eden story, the only entity that has a conversation with the woman seems to be the serpent. The man exclaimed in her presence (Genesis 2.23) but did not talk to her. God spoke to the man in 2.16-17, but He is not shown speaking to Eve in the presence of the reader. Maybe God speaks to the man alone since the man alone heard the initial prohibition. The text gives no clues. It is possible that no clues were needed in ancient Israelite culture where men used to speak for their families.

The man heard the voice calling and hid himself. After God ignores the woman, the man follows suit and speaks only for himself. Indeed, a lot of "self" occurs. In English "I" appear four times. In the Hebrew text the optional personal pronoun אֲנִי (*'anoki*) is used, resulting in an emphasis on the naked state of the man (Stratton 1995:51). The mutuality of Genesis 2.25-3.8 falls apart when the man/woman relationship is pressured. The woman does not confirm the man's story, and neither does he support hers. Mutuality has vanished (Stratton 1995:99).

God does eventually speak to the woman, but the generic language (language that includes the man as well as the woman) used in conjunction with these people's status as first humans, make readers view these words as representative for all humanity. When God eventually asks the woman a question, it sounds accusatory: "What is this you have done?". What does God refer to? Is He upset? Is God angry because she ate — is eating the problem, or is God perhaps angry because the woman gave fruit to the man? (Stratton 1995:53). Maybe God is asking the woman to interpret/explain her actions. If this is the case, the woman's response in 3.13 is proof that she has considered the matter. She interprets, and does not simply report. Eve states that the serpent "tricked" her. She recognizes her action as something she should not have done (in this light it can also be seen as a confession). Her remark is not merely blaming the serpent, since the word "tricked" suggests her own complicity in addition to the serpent's agency (Stratton 1995:55). In her own language the woman shows insight into her position and her actions.

### 5.2.13. God and Woman

How does God react in the tale? From the perspective of the underside or the oppressed Genesis 3.16 has God turning on the woman. Even when pronouncing the sentences, God speaks four times more often to the man than the woman. He will actively multiply her toil and pregnancies. It may seem that the woman's punishment is out of proportion to her deeds. It might also imply that God's reaction is an appropriate frustration or sorrow that humans cannot even show obedience in the smallest matter. When one looks closely at the text, it seems strange that God multiplies pains that have not yet occurred. The reader is not told that the woman has had any children yet. Was there any pain in childbearing before this or is God the source of it? It might even be that He is simply increasing it. Why does God assign toil to the woman? (Stratton 1995:58-59). Female readers are specifically troubled by Genesis 3.16. The question comes to the fore: What does God think of women?

God's relationship to Eve is not clarified or enlightened by the text. God is not shown to define or restrain the man's means of ruling the woman. She is not given a divine mark to insure her protection (unlike Cain in Genesis 4.15) (Stratton 1995:100). There are other troubling aspects of the difference in God's handling of Cain and Eve. God warns Cain about trouble, but does not warn Eve. God keeps Adam from eating from the tree of life in 3.22-24 (and maybe getting into more trouble?) but is not depicted as having kept Eve from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. There is no helper that was made for Eve.

It is also interesting to see that in Genesis 2.23 the man failed to recognize or exclaim God's role in creating the woman, but that Eve immediately acknowledges God's role in creating a human being (Genesis 4.1).

Gerda Lerner tries to understand and interpret the tale in the light of the rise of a patriarchal societal system. This broad scope in which social sciences are taken into account, widens her view to cast a new light on the relationship between Eve and the snake. Adam reinterprets Eve's name, and despite the redemptive quality of her motherhood, she will remain severed from the snake and will be ruled by her husband. If the snake also symbolizes the fertility goddess, this severance is crucial for the establishment of monotheism. There shall only be One God, and the fertility goddess shall become a symbol of sin. Free and autonomously exercised female sexuality is condemned (Lerner 1986:197).

When the answer is sought to the question "Who brought sin into the world?" the textual answer seems to be woman, in her alliance with the snake, which stands for free female sexuality. In this line of thinking it is natural then, that women should be excluded from active participation in the covenant community and that the symbol of this community should be a male symbol (Lerner 1986:198).

#### 5.2.14. The Fall in Genesis

A close scrutiny of the language used in the Fall dialogue might reveal new meanings for women and men, and serve to banish traditional mandates of male domination as being sanctioned by God.

After disobedience, the contrast between man and woman fade. They both know nakedness (3.7), they both hear and hide and flee from the sound of God in the Garden (3.8). The man first is addressed with questions of responsibility (3.9,11) but the man fails to be responsible ("The woman gave and I ate"). The man does not blame the woman, but rather blames God. The woman is not painted as temptress and seducer. The verb used is נתן (*ntn*) (to give). The woman, on the other hand, identifies the snake as a beguiler by using the word הַשִּׂיָּאֵן (נָשׂ) (*nš'*) (deceive, seduce) (Trible 1979:80).

The serpent is cursed but the man and woman are judged. These judgments are not mandates. They describe and do not prescribe. They protest and do not condone. Of concern are the words to the woman that her husband shall rule over her (3.16). This statement is no license for male supremacy, but rather a condemnation of such a situation. Subjugation and supremacy are perversions of creation. The sin of disobedience affects all relationships: between animals and human (3.15), mothers and children (3.16), husbands and wives (3.16), humans and the earth (3.17-18), humanity and work (3.19) (Trible 1979:80).

The judgments are also culturally conditioned. Husband and children define the woman, while wife and work define the man. The suffering both men and women know now are marks of our fall, not our creation (Trible 1979:80-81).

The consequences of sin fall more heavily on the woman. Sexual knowledge now

Women in the academy are seen as "competent" scholars when we adopt the investigative methods and theoretical frameworks of our male mentors. Women scholars are expected to gather "data", to faithfully apply standard methods, or to do routine research in insignificant areas, but not to cut new paths, to establish new theoretical frameworks, or to write groundbreaking works, works that will change the discipline.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:xix

severs female sexuality from procreation. God puts enmity between the woman and the snake in Genesis 3.15. The snake used to be a symbol of the fertility goddess, and the open sexuality of the goddess became forbidden to fallen woman. Her sexuality was rather to be expressed in motherhood, with two conditions added: she would be subject to her husband, and she would give birth with pain (Lerner 1986:196).

Genesis 3.16 should be reconsidered, since a careful word-by-word analysis of God's word to the woman is the right way to evaluate the accuracy of traditional translations. By simply reading a translation, one cannot assume that the meaning is correct (Meyers 1987:98).

The first line of the oracle sees God greatly increasing the woman's conceptions or pregnancies. The language has a word that means conception and pregnancy, and NOT childbirth. The Latin translation of St. Jerome attests to his recognition of the difference between the two words, while the Septuagint, that has a language of pain for the woman, has mainly influenced later translations. What does the word translated as "pain" mean? The word עֲצֻבוֹנָה (*'iṣṣabon*) is a noun that was apparently formed from the root צָב (*'sb*), meaning "to upset, to grieve". Of the fifteen places where it is used, all but one refer to psychological or emotional discomfort, and not physical pain (Meyers 1987:103-104).

The most correct interpretation of the word's (*'iṣṣabon/iṣṣēbonēk* — עֲצֻבוֹנָה) use in Genesis 3.16 would be as physical labour, rather than an abstract condition of distress. It does not signify ordinary physical labour. The Hebrew Bible has other words used for physical labour, and the work with which one satisfies human needs, is usually seen as positive. In this case, the physical labour is not seen as positive. In this case it rather signifies the distress of agricultural work in an unfriendly environment. "Toil" and not "pain" fits the lexical data for the use of עֲצֻבוֹנָה (*'iṣṣabon*) as a noun, and also suits the idea of physically difficult work (Meyers 1987:105).

"Toil" is the object of the phrase "greatly increase". The amount of work the woman must do is greatly increased. Work was not unknown in Eden, since Genesis 2.15 states that the humans had to "work" the Garden (Meyers 1987:105).

A better translation would be

*I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies* (Meyers 1987:105).

This translation illustrates that the two objects of the complex verbal form are independent concepts. Line 2 could be translated as:

*(Along) with travail shall you beget children* (Meyers 1987:108).

"Travail" in line 2 heightens the intensity of "toil" in line 1. The repetition of same forms of a word serves to produce a more complex idea: the audience is not only reminded that women work and have children, but that women learn that the work is unremitting and not mitigated by procreative demands. The fulfillment of God's charge does not necessarily entitle one to bliss and joy, and that anguish inevitably makes up a part of life's tasks (Meyers 1987:108-109).

The last line of the oracle in Genesis 3.16 has traditionally been understood as Divine approval of the social conditions of patriarchal control. Medieval Jewish commentators were more alert to the connection between line 4 of the poem and the preceding line with its sexual connotations. For them, the words "he shall rule over you" lie within the context of the female's "desire" for the male. In this light, the rulership does not constitute male domination (Meyers 1987:114). Genesis 3.16 has been consistently misunderstood as an assertion of woman's general subservience to man. Medieval Jewish commentators understood the oracle of Genesis 3.16 in relationship with the issue of human sexuality (Meyers 1987:114).

Once again, a good translation, keeping in mind all the above, should read:

*I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies;*

*(Along) with travail shall you beget children.*

*For to your man is your desire,*

*And he shall predominate over you* (Meyers 1987:118).

The silence in the rest of the Bible about Adam and Eve provides a mute comment on the validity of the female job description. The universal applicability of God's address to the woman might be tested by asking whether the parallel imperative to the man means that males must forever plow thorny fields. The context determines the prescriptive validity of the proclamation to the archetypal male, and the same should also then be true in the words to the woman, and every woman after her (Meyers 1987:121).

### 5.2.15. Men's Rulership

Traditional arguments held as proof for the subordination of woman to man are:

1. Woman was created after man and is therefore secondary to him.
  2. Woman is "taken from man" and is therefore secondary to him.
  3. Woman is named by man and is therefore subordinate to him.
  4. Woman is created to be a helper for man and as such is subordinate to him (Wasike 2001:177).
- 
1. Being created first implies no superiority of being or function. If so, animals that were created before humans are more superior than both man and woman. Genesis 2 also gives no significance to temporal priority. In 1 Tim 2.13 Paul refers to the fact that Adam was created before Eve. Paul's assertion that woman was second in order of creation is not a strong argument in favour of her subjection. It is necessary that we interpret creation narratives in their historical context (Wasike 2001:177).
  2. Genesis 2 indicates that the man is incomplete without the woman. The emphasis here is not on the differences between male and female, but on their relatedness. When Adam recognized Eve the first time, he exclaimed that she was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. Adam identified with Eve rather than saw her as different from him. Woman is taken from the man but her primary contact is with God himself as her Creator (Wasike 2001:177). Man has no part in making woman. He is neither participant nor spectator or consultant at her birth. Like man, the woman owes her life solely to God. For both of them, the origin of life is Divine mystery (Wasike 2001:177). Derivative cannot be an argument for subordination. By saying that a woman owes her existence to man, it can also be said that man owes his existence to dust. Here we see that both man and woman are portrayed as created unequivocally or directly by a purposeful creative act of God (Wasike 2001:177-178).
  3. In the Old Testament, naming implied dominion over the named. In Genesis 2.19 both the verb "to call" and the noun "name" are found together. Adam names the animals which were brought to him, but in the case of the woman he "calls" her "woman" to denote gender and not her name. Genesis 2.23 can be interpreted as something other than the Old Testament understanding of official naming (Wasiki 2001:178).
  4. In the case of woman being the helper of man, I refer to arguments set forth



earlier in this section, where mention is made of the fact that the language of "helper" does not in any way denote a secondary status for the woman.

Despite the clear arguments in the above paragraphs, the man's rule over the woman has been problematic from the start. History has proved it to be extensive. Even in the Genesis story, it includes rule over her sexuality since his rule is related to her desire.

The further problem is that since the rulership is linked to her desire, this domination is eroticized. The rule probably also encompasses her reproductive capacities in lieu of his statement in Genesis 3.20 that Eve will be the mother of all living. Adam's rule is social as well — he rules over the woman's sustenance, since he has the breadwinning role (3.19). In history his dominion has sadly also included physical domination. Over the centuries this verse (3.16) has been read as permitting the abuse of women's bodies. Instead of being viewed in light of the condemnation of the Fall, the practical use of this verse has been towards the condonation of domination of women in all situations, and especially in domestic life and religious life.

In the text, the man later once again gives the woman a name (a new one in new circumstances) in 3.20. By this time it seems as if he has accepted his dominant role and that he will control her sexuality. The text shows him committing her to motherhood. The writer of Genesis further confirms the man's dominion in Genesis 4.1. This verse also shows the man playing the dominant sexual role. He is the active one who "knows" her, while Eve is passive. Genesis 4.1 may be seen as the preview of the role of women in Genesis as a whole. They seem, at first glance, to be mainly sexual objects and mothers. Eve is the background against whom all these following women are depicted (Stratton 1995:100).

Eve shall be ruled by her husband, and this decree is given Divine sanction. This decree was to become fully integrated into a religious world-view (Lerner 1986:197-198). But was this a decree, or an effect of sin? Is it really correct to say that God wanted this to be the ideal, or is this a painting of the brokenness caused by sin?

The writers of *The Woman's Bible* pointed out that woman received equal dominion over every living thing, and that the Bible did not give man dominion over woman (Bennett 1989:74; Stanton 1988:15).

Genesis 3.16 is still sometimes translated as "*man shall be your master*" despite admission from linguists that the verbs in the Hebrew phrase have no true tenses. The commentators imply that this passage is a warning to woman against turning toward her husband, and not a curse on woman. In *The Woman's Bible* the commentary on Adam's behaviour in the Fall story ends with the comment: *We are amazed that upon such a story men have built up a theory of their own superiority* (Bennett 1989:75; Stanton 1988:26-27).

#### **5.2.16. Eve the Mother**

God curses Adam to mortality. In the next line, Adam re-names his wife, because "Eve" is the mother of all living. This statement carries a profound recognition that the woman now carries the only immortality to which mortals can aspire — generation. Men will sweat and toil, and women have painful birth, but the mother's life-giving function will be their closest living experience with immortality (Lerner 1986:197).

There was never much made of the life-generating capacity of women in Christianity, and the role of motherhood in immortality and access to it. The Church further downplayed motherhood and limited the influence of the mother to the domestic sphere. A second-century development in the depiction of Mary emphasized how she as mother of Jesus contrasted with Eve, the mother of the living (Genesis 3.20). Theologians like Justin Martyr (100-165) and Irenaeus (130-200) denigrated Eve, the disobedient woman responsible for the Fall, while they lifted up Mary as the great exception among women. Mary undid Eve's disobedience through her own obedience to God. The Biblical sources for drawing the parallel between Mary and Eve stems from Genesis 3.15 where Eve receives a promise as does Mary, and Romans 5.14-18 where Paul compares Adam with Christ (Clifford 2001:186). As Jesus is the New Adam, so Mary is identified with the New Eve. This New Eve symbol gave rise to the succeeding prominence of Mary above Eve and other women in Christianity (Clifford 2001:186).

#### **5.2.17. Female Knowledge**

In Genesis 3.2 the woman adds to the prohibition God has given. This addition (*'nor shall you touch it'*) suggests interpretation on her part. Commentators still argue whether the woman heard the prohibition from the man in this way or whether she altered God's words. Seldom is this addition of hers seen in a positive light (Stratton

1995:44). It is not impossible to read Eve in a positive light, and then as thoughtful interpreter and decision-maker, even in light of the fact that the text itself remains patriarchal.

In Genesis 3.1-7 the woman and serpent are discussing something about which they have no direct knowledge as far as we know. God's command was spoken to the man before the woman and animals were made, yet they seem to know something about it. Their knowledge seems to imply an ellipsis in the story. Something has happened in the fabula which the narrator chose not to tell about (Stratton 1995:147). Could it be possible that the writer withheld information that could have resulted in the more positive image and understanding of the woman's actions? Is the missing part perhaps the part where it is made clear what her motives and intentions were, and does it perhaps contain the part that fills in the circumstances against which she acted?

To look at the woman's actions from a feminist viewpoint, entails the conscious effort to view the situation in a light different from the traditional negative portrayal. Readers must consider the reasons given for her action: She saw that the tree was good for food and a delight to the eyes, as well as "desirable for insight" (3.6). The narrator shows that the woman possesses evaluative skills which run parallel to that of God. The woman, like God, saw that creation was "good". God saw that man living alone was "not good". Eve merges God's claim of the goodness of creation with the intended purpose for trees, namely to be food. Though unaware of it, the woman is making a right judgment. The reader also knows that she is correct (Stratton 1995:46).

The woman's judgment about the tree's quality shows it to be desirable for insight. The text is unclear about the nature of this insight. Does it signify open eyes or maybe being like God? It is traditionally interpreted to mean knowledge of good and evil. The serpent mentions these things, but is his meaning necessary equal to what the woman means by insight? When focusing on the interpretations that underlie the woman's choice, she comes to the fore as an intelligent, rational and even brave human being. It seems that she has weighed the consequences, and her actions are bold when she executes her decision (Stratton 1995:47).

Eve comes to the fore as a moral decision-maker. Her choice might have been wrong, but in the story her decision shows a myriad of character qualities that enable

her to make this decision. Evelyn and James Whitehead have developed a fourfold model for moral discourse, which involves

1. Attending
2. Asserting
3. Deciding
4. Acting

According to the model, even though all the steps are followed, decisions will be wrong fifty percent of the time. Despite that, the process of weighing options and decision making is still useful. An individual or group can also learn from mistakes and move on to new decisions.

The woman in Genesis 2 shows many of the characteristics of this model for good moral decision-making (Stratton 1995:91). Eve "attends" (ch 2). She has listened to the man's appraisal of her in 2.23. She also has heard the prohibition from the man or from God and she knows it in some way in 3.2. She gives attention to the serpent's questions and "asserts" her response and own interpretation. She attends to the serpent's further remarks in 3.4-5 and shows thoughtful consideration in her interpretation of them in 3.6. After having attended and asserted, the woman considers the options and makes her decision. After deciding, she "acts". She continues to "attend" the situation as well as the interchange between God and her partner. When God questions her, she asserts again, indicating that she realizes the mistake of her earlier decision, and that she has learned from it already (Stratton 1995:91).

The story is written in such a way that the reader is convinced that the woman's perception of reality is wrong. The proof of this lies in the results of the Fall (3.17-19). This dominant patriarchal discourse can be resisted by reading against the grain, and specifically looking for a different view of the woman — one where she is not painted in a negative light of contradicting God's will, but one that depicts her as being fully human and acting accordingly.

When read in a positive light, the woman is both theologian and translator when she interprets the prohibition of God ("neither shall you touch it"). She does not consult with her husband, but acts independently without seeking permission or advice (Trible 1979:79).

To delve deeper into the positive aspects of the woman, brings one to an unexpected new appreciation of her wisdom characteristics. A feature of the narrative that seldom

gets attention, is the prominent role of the female rather than the male in the wisdom aspects of the Eden tale. The woman sees that greater wisdom is desirable. The woman is furthermore also the articulate member of the pair who engages in dialogue. This close connection between woman and wisdom is started in Genesis and taken to its climax in Proverbs where Wisdom is personified as woman. The Hebrew word for wisdom, (חֵכְמָה) also has a female gender (Meyers 1987:91). The Bible gives examples throughout of wise women or women acting wisely.

Genesis paints the scenario between the woman and whatever it is the tree of knowledge can give. The female is first portrayed to utter language, and she is the first to respond to the attentions of an animal described as "the shrewdest of all the animals". At this point the serpent is not a cursed creature (Genesis 3:1). The woman's dialogue with the serpent should not be seen as a blot on her character, but rather a comment on her intellect (Meyers 1987:92).

Anne Bennet further colored the woman to make her shine as full character. In the second and third chapters of Genesis we find a woman-figure who is symbolic of civilization and wisdom. Woman is translated as the "help" for man, but this specific Hebrew word is used only of Divine or superior help. Woman is portrayed as a being with intelligence and civilization; it is the woman who is interested in true wisdom, the knowledge of good and evil. She shows intellectual perceptiveness and aesthetic appreciation, and in this sense is a real person, whereas the man is somewhat of a brute: "*..and-he-ate*" (Bennett 1989:9).

#### **5.2.18. Questions asked to the Text**

If one looks at the generic questions at the start of the chapter, the following must be stated:

1. Not all questions could be discussed in equal detail, even in group work. Time constraints placed a limit on what could be done and the level of probing of the text that could be achieved.
2. Not all answers were generated by the group for the above reason. More detail of the group's interaction also follows in chapter 6.
3. Since my own group only met for three hours every Sunday for four weeks, not all texts could be studied in this manner. We had to select the most popular ones and the ones that interested the group the most. For this

reason, the answers generated by the group will only be given for the narratives of Eve, Hagar, Deborah and Ruth. Answers to the other narrative's questions stencil were not generated by the group.

4. The answers that follow some of the generic questions after each text, can in no way be extensive since space does not allow it, and since the interaction of a group of readers is required, not just the input of myself.

Herewith some of the feedback on the questions posed to the text:

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

The woman (Eve) definitely comes to the fore as a main character. She acts and shows insight and desire. This narrative possibly does not yet paint social conventions at the start, but social conventions have been read into it in later ages. Women have afterwards been blamed as daughters of Eve for being prone to sinfulness and being weak of moral character. This text shows a rich tradition of exegesis, not all in favour of Eve and women in general. The presentation of tradition has definitely not been 100% true to the Biblical text. The traditional presentation has mainly held Eve to be the sole cause of all that is wrong with the world, and this has benefited men to a great extent. Blame could always be shifted to woman when things went wrong. Woman was also identified as the moral weak point, with men being relatively blameless. Females are given negative attributes in light of traditional exposition of the text, and popular myth surrounding the text. Women are painted as scheming, morally corrupt, eager to overthrow the godly order of things. The text itself can be identified as being patriarchal. Traditionally this text has been used to legitimate women's subordination — since woman sinned, all females are to bear the brunt of sin — whatever form that may take in society and individual circumstances. The underlying supposition in the interpretation of the text is that women are weaker and more prone to sin — Eve is a "defective" human being. The ideology of the text is proven wrong by reality: women are not weak, are not more prone to sin, and do not have less morality. The text tries to keep Eve on the periphery, but she refuses to be silently swept to the side. The text makes nothing of Eve's experience of sin, giving birth, and her relationship with God who enables her to bring forth life.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be that Eve is the cause of sin. She is secondary in creation as well as moral strength, and had Adam been tested in like manner, the

outcome probably would have been different. By rejecting this assumption, one starts reading against the grain of the text. Eve has a silenced voice which can be brought to the fore by a close reading of her actual textual dialogue. Eve's voice can be made audible by various means. One is to discuss in the group the various ways in which she might have reasoned to herself and with the snake about the forbidden fruit. One can also tell stories in the group of the way she brought up her children and the stories she told them about their situation and why it is so. The memory of women can be kept alive in this text by always teaching a close, critical reading of the text. Readers should be sensitized to different options of interpretation as listed in the discussion of the text, and this is very liberating to women once their attention is drawn to alternative readings of Eve's character. Women are given hope in their personal lives and in their relationship with God when they meditate on Eve's words that she gave birth with the help of God. She has not been abandoned and she still has a relationship with the Deity. Her redemption does not lie in the birth act itself, but in her proclamation of power. Women experience daily the unwritten, unofficial results of this text in their lives: they have a history of inherited sin-weight (as will be seen in chapter 6) which they have carried for millennia and which have formed part of their religious self-image.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

The group would not readily call the text the words of men. To them, it is the Word of God. Their motivation for this was their deep-felt religious heritage. Questioning the text on its authority was an alien concept. People under oppression can use this text when they understand that to question and reason does not make one sinful. Simply going with the order of things is not necessarily what God wills. The text's traditional interpretation, or at least its lived inherited understanding should be denounced as serving patriarchal interests, as it has for hundreds of years. This text remains very influential. Although one does not today necessarily find a sermon in a mainline Church depicting women as evil Eves, one still feels the unspoken burden of Eve's sin in religion. What is needed, is clear exposition on the positive attributes of Eve (as well as Adam) in order to start combating the inherited guilt.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

The group could not, due to time constraints, dramatize or actualize this text. They did find the art of Janet McKenzie redemptive, and a lot of her paintings reminded them of the themes surrounding Eve.

### **5.3. GENESIS 19: THE NARRATIVES ABOUT LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS**

This narrative was chosen for closer study due to its problematic portrayal of the lesser value of women and the greater value of men in a household. The Bible never criticizes Lot for throwing his daughters out to a rape-mad crowd, and a female reader has to wonder why this should be condoned. In what follows, a new insight is given to aid understanding of this problematic tale.

In the following section, attention is given to the narrative about Lot and his daughters. The story of the daughters comprises two main events: Lot and his daughters with the visitors in his house, and the daughters' actions later in the cave when they think that there are no other people alive. Two factors should here remain in the mind of the reader: The exercise of reading against the grain, with suspicion, and the philosophy of feminist theology that other fields may offer insights into narratives that may lead to greater clarity in understanding events in the mind of the reader. In order to read against the grain, one first must identify what the grain is. Attention is given to the events in the narrative, after which a brief overview is given of patriarchal apology and traditional understanding of the text. That is then followed by two possible readings, one casting light on the first main event in Sodom, and the second explaining the actions of the daughters in the cave from a literary point of view. The idea is not to apologize for the narrative. The reader is introduced to the exercise of using insights and input from other fields of study to broaden the understanding of the text events. In each case a reading other than the main stream traditional understanding is possible. One must furthermore distinguish between a morality of Lot's actions and our opinion of these actions, and the socio-cultural context of the times he lived in, without it serving as an apology for his deeds. In his time, daughters were the property of the father to be disposed of as he wished, which should always colour the understanding of his offering of them.

#### **5.3.1. The Problem of the Modern Reader**

Since it is impossible to read a text without being subjective, one does bring modern views and experiences to text reading and interpretation. The problem the reader faces, is that, keeping in mind the androcentricity of the Hebrew Bible, one tends to think that women and sexuality in ancient Israel was viewed as it is today. If seen in this light exclusively, it is easy to imagine that Hebrew Scriptures have been interpreted to exclusively justify the marginalization of women and condemnation of



homosexuality. This is not entirely correct. Life, women and sexuality were viewed differently in ancient times than today.

Though feminist theology puts great emphasis on the androcentricity of the Biblical text, it must also be said that modern assumptions about patriarchy, when imposed on the patriarchy of the Biblical text, may compound and distort the text and eventually impoverish it to readers (Bechtel 1998:108). Though male dominance, the marginalization of women and homophobia are serious issues the modern reader has with the text, it is possible that by using the history of ancient times to influence our view, different images and motives in the text might be gained without ignoring these issues. This is not to say that textual crimes have not been committed. It does, however, offer alternative understandings of what transpires in difficult texts.

Bechtel applies a paradigm that tries to articulate the worldview and assumptions of Biblical society (group-orientation) in contrast to that of the modern Western world (individual-orientation) (Bechtel 1998:108). In the story of Lot offering up his daughters, it might give insight into this strange action.

Despite the above mentioned, the story of Lot and his daughters is difficult to stomach. According to Genesis 19, two men/angels visit Lot in Sodom to warn him of coming destruction. Lot prepares a lavish drinking feast for them and they are invited to spend the night at his house (the word used for feast in the text *מִשְׁתֶּה* (*mišteh*) is derived from *שָׂתוּ* (*šth*). The meaning is usually connected to occasions of hard drinking).

### 5.3.2. Lot and his Daughters in Sodom and the Cave

The men of Sodom surround the house and demand intercourse with the strangers. At this point in the tale, the writer gives a detailed account of the size of the mob. He stipulates that *all* the men were there. To the modern reader, what follows is very strange. Lot goes out and shuts the door after him. Why does he leave the safety of his house? Lot then offers his virgin daughters instead of the strangers. Lot's dialogue makes readers believe that he sees the townsmen as his comrades. He calls them "brothers" (19.7). What makes Lot's offer all the more strange, is that his daughters are betrothed. He does this, knowing that the rape of a betrothed woman

is punishable by death (Deut 22.23-27). Can Lot be seen as anything else but an accomplice in the possible rape of his daughters? (Rashkow 1998:99).

The tale luckily does not stop here. The visitors reveal themselves to be angels, and blind the storming mob. They warn Lot of the pending destruction of Sodom, but assure his family's safety. While they flee, Lot's wife is turned into a salt pillar, so that only he and the daughters escape. Their flight ends in a cave. Not only does the cave have a sexual connotation on the psychoanalytic level, but it also has sexual connotations on a linguistic level. It is associated with words like *'arah* (naked), *'erwah* (genitals), *'arah* (bare place), *'eryah* (nakedness) and *'arar* (to strip oneself) (Rashkow 1998:102).

### **5.3.3. Patriarchal Apology and Traditional Explanation of Events**

In the past, commentators have been lax to condemn Lot's offer of his daughters. John Calvin and Bruce Vawter, as well as N Skinner, N Sarna and Nehama Leibowitz rather point to the demands of hospitality that excuses his behaviour (Rashkow 1998:100-101). To make the central issue one of hospitality, thus disguising the terrible possibility these girls faced, might seem like betrayal of the minority and the weak in society.

### **5.3.4. Reading in a Broad Feminist Perspective**

If we refer to the questions listed as suspicious questions under no 6.1.1, a few have been answered already. Lot is a main character and the acted upon characters are his daughters. A brief view of the social and cultural conventions has also been sketched. It has been made clear that daughters were the assets of their fathers. The harmed party has been identified as the daughters.

Feminism tends to give a view of the story of Lot in which he is not innocent as far as his children are concerned. The similarities between what happens with Lot and Noah are also highlighted. But does it really satisfy the reader to know that Lot is not so innocent? In my opinion, the reader is still left wondering about the motives of the father. What made him do this? In order to really understand the "murder" of the daughters in a suspicious context, one must try to understand what motivated the actions of the father. Simple denouncement does not suffice. In tradition with feminist theory, the help of other aspects of science can be brought into play on the

text if it may give some different ideas as to the meaning of the text, or what really transpired without being mentioned by the writer. In what follows, light will be cast on the possible motives of the father by viewing the narrative from the perspective of historical criticism and sociology in ancient times. This might help to clarify the strange act of Lot throwing out his daughters to a rape-mad mob.

According to Bechtel's paradigm that tries to incorporate ancient society and modern sociology, there are various orientations to be identified. In **group-orientation** individuals seek to reach their full potential for the benefit of the group. The ego needs of the individual are filled within the context of the needs of the entire group. Identity stems from the group and the welfare of the group is synonymous with the welfare of the individual (Bechtel 1998:110).

In **individual-orientation** little or no bonding with the group occurs. Individuals derive their identity from within the self. Individuals seek to fulfill their potential for their own benefit, and the ego needs of the individual are filled within the context of the self (most often at the expense of the group). The needs of the individual have priority over the needs and wellbeing of the group. Society as a group is perceived as alien and having the ability to repress individuality. Group loyalty, obligation and bonding can be considered threatening to freedom and individuality (Bechtel 1998:111).

In what follows, the individual- and group-orientation theory is applied to Genesis 19.1-13. When viewed from an individual-perspective, the destruction of Sodom is traditionally ascribed to the practice of homosexuality. This assumption is problematic and overlooks the fact that if sexual activity had taken place, the central issue would have been rape, albeit homosexual in nature. Traditionally it has also been assumed that hospitality towards men takes precedence over the protection of women. The result of these two most common assumptions has been that the potential rape of Lot's daughters has not been closely and critically investigated. The assumptions behind these conclusions fit an individual-oriented worldview, but may not be congruent with the assumptions of the group-oriented text. To arrive at such conclusions, many elements of the text are ignored.

The characters and how they function must be studied in order to get a group-oriented insight.

#### 5.3.4.1. The Messengers

There are two מַלְאָכִים *mal'akim* (messengers) who may represent God or a king, and they may be either instruments for protection or of destruction. The reader and inhabitants of the city do not know who sent these men (19.1). They are clearly outsiders. In a group-oriented community, insiders are seen as good (contributing life to the group) while outsiders are seen as threatening (contributing to the dissemination/destruction of the group) (Bechtel 1998:113).

It seems that the people of the city see the messengers against the backdrop of previous texts. In Genesis 14.1-16 a coalition of kings fight against Sodom and takes Lot captive. In lieu of the previous attack, the messengers' presence is alarming to the community. In ancient times messengers were commonly sent as spies, and these messengers would possibly not have been an exception. In the previous chapter three men אַנְשֵׁים (*'anašim*) are associated with an announcement that God may destroy the city if found guilty of injustice (Genesis 18.16-33). The community is unaware of this pronouncement. Are the two messengers in 19.1 related to the three men in ch 18? If so, they may also be spies for God (Bechtel 1998:113).

#### 5.3.4.2. Lot

The text states that Lot is a sojourner, an outsider who has been allowed to live in the community and has full protection, but limited political rights within the town. What is true of Lot is also true of his daughters. Sojourners are marginal in status and threatened to an extent. The story emphasizes Lot's marginal status by picturing him only at the entrance of the city and the entrance of his house. He sits at the city gate where the judges of the community (insiders) make judgments and where there is general awareness of who comes and goes. Being marginal in status, Lot does not have any authority to judge (Bechtel 1998:114).

#### 5.3.4.3. Men of the City

The men of the city (insiders) are mature adults, described as נְעָר *na'ar* (young adult males) and זָקֵן *zaqen* (old adult males), thus stressing the maturity of the group. As

mature adults they should be able to judge good and bad. Since they are insiders, they could be called to the gate for the task of judging (Bechtel 1998:115).

The text goes on to focus on how the different parties relate to the outsiders, and answers the question of how they will be treated by the marginal character (Lot) who should not judge and by the insiders who can judge. Because of his marginal position, Lot can be expected to be more open to outsiders since he is half insider and half outsider. Lot greets them, offers them hospitality, and honours them by bowing down in a humble position that characterizes the behaviour of an inferior before a superior (particularly a king). The messengers may, after all, represent a king (Bechtel 1998:115).

The townsmen interpret his behaviour as threatening. They do not see how Lot's actions can benefit them as a group. Accordingly, they surround Lot's house and demand "to know" the messengers ידע (y'd'). This is intentionally an ambiguous word. "Knowing" covers broad intellectual, experiential and sexual knowing. If they do want to know the messengers sexually, the intention is rape, a shameful and status-reducing act, albeit homosexual or heterosexual. Rape would dehumanize the messengers and diminish their status, dignity and pride (Bechtel 1998:117).

On this point the text gives no clues as to the motivation behind the townsmen's demands. When interpreting from the perspective enlightened by ancient group-oriented society, it seems that homosexual intercourse is not the issue. It would be rape — not homosexuality. Heterosexual or homosexual rape is a forceful boundary violation that involves lack of consent. The townsmen may see it as a way of dealing with a threat to the community.

The issue of rape within a group-oriented society casts a light on the troublesome offer of Lot's daughters to the townsmen. When studying rape in a group-oriented society, the issue of coping with death comes to the fore. In a group-oriented society death is overcome through birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth. The salvation of each individual comes from the biological continuation of life through children, which guarantees the continued existence of the household and society as a whole (Bechtel 1998:118-119). Women play a central role in this salvific process by giving birth to children.



**JOURNEY**  
JANET MCKENZIE

In such a society marriage is central and plays a critical role in the survival of the society. Fidelity and sexual reproduction are vital for the continuation of the household. In a group-oriented society, the position of women is not marginal. Their sexual power, when used properly outside the household, leads to the salvation of the household and society so that their position is central to society. Since women receive social status from the number of children they produce, they are logically sexually aggressive. Although women's power and authority lie mostly within the household, the household is both the major economic unit of the society and the locus of salvation for it. In such a society the household is a realm of power, unlike today. It is even possible that patriarchy may have begun in group-oriented societies as a counterbalance to women's power and role within society (Bechtel 1998:119-120).

In the context of the household being the core social unit, homosexuality is viewed as negative. It is not seen as immoral, but rather as negative because it does not produce children and cannot contribute to the wellbeing and longevity of the community. In light of this discussion, the issue in Genesis 19 is not homosexuality but rape (Bechtel 1998:120).

### **5.3.5. The Problematic Offering of the Daughters**

In his mediation Lot asks his "brothers" not to do evil. Then, as a response to this situation, he offers his daughters who have not known ידע (y'd') a man, to the townsmen who want to know the men. Lot encourages the men to do with the daughters whatever is "good" in their eyes (v8). This would not be to rape them. In the group-oriented community, Lot's daughters have the potential of building a household and thus the community as a whole. On the surface Lot's offer of his daughters may seem harsh and in violation of the Deuteronomic decree (Deut 22.25-27). Lot makes the offer to protect the strangers who may "destroy" the community. His offer of two non-threatening, marginal women, is inappropriate under the circumstances, and the reason for it may be to defuse a tense situation. The townsmen's reaction to Lot's offer is central. They are offended and do not take up the offer (Bechtel 1998:123-124). Their reaction serves to affirm the group-oriented nature of the community.

As Lot protected the messengers, they now protect him by pulling him into the house. The townsmen are struck with blindness at the entrance to his house סְנַוְרִים (sanwerim).

Lot's words in Genesis 19.7-8 have always been embarrassing to commentators. Some simply ignored it altogether. Martin Luther praised Lot for upholding the law of hospitality while apologizing for him at the same time: *I will defend Lot and think he made his offer without sin. For knowing that the mob was not interested in them, he only tried to appease it and did not think he was exposing his daughters to any danger* (Lerner 1986:172). John Calvin thought that Lot's great virtue was speckled with imperfection since he did not hesitate to prostitute his daughters. He is not free from blame in Calvin's eyes (Lerner 1986:172) and Calvin goes as far as to call Lot's actions evil: *...because he would ward off evil with evil...* (Calvin 1979:499-500).

With closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that the Bible takes for granted Lot's right to dispose of his daughters even to be raped. It does not need to be explained, and we can assume that it reflects a historic social condition (Lerner 1986:173). This once again reaffirms the androcentricity of the text.

### 5.3.6. Xenophobia

Seeing the story of Lot's offer through group-oriented eyes, results in a shift of focus from the inappropriate offer of Lot's daughters, to the issue of **xenophobia** (a deep dislike of foreigners). This once again is in line with the feminist ideal of reading against the grain of the text, and gleaning new and diverse meanings. Where traditional interpretation held the text to be about homosexuality, this alternative reading opens up a new meaning of the text as addressing xenophobia. Xenophobia characterized one element of the Israelite community (possibly those that adhered to Deuteronomic theology). The xenophobic element advocated a policy of exclusivism and wanted Israel to be isolated. Alliances, negotiations or interactions with outsiders (and opposing views) were seen as evil — to the point that outsiders were to be totally destroyed.

The story of Lot challenges these xenophobic and isolationist elements by projecting them onto the men of Sodom. The story advocates an inclusive vision that strives for openness to outsiders, for peaceful coexistence and negotiations with surrounding



nations as a way of strengthening the community. The story of Lot does not show hospitality to be central to the morality of events, but seen against the backdrop of a lesson in xenophobia, use is made of hospitality to symbolize the openness of this inclusionary vision (Bechtel 1998:127).

### **5.3.7. Results of a Broader Reading**

When Bechtel did his interpretation, the idea was to try and avoid looking at the text through modern individual-oriented lenses. When the assumptions of homophobia and the devaluation of women and minorities are not imposed on the text, the reading goes in a radically different direction. The practice of homosexuality is probably not an issue in the text. Hospitality and protection seem to be as critical to women, who build the community, as they are to outsiders (Bechtel 1998:128). This does not serve as apology for the androcentric slant of the tale, but opens up the text to new dimensions of meaning.

### **5.3.8. The Daughters Trick Lot**

The story of Lot's daughters does not end at the Sodom events. The reader encounters them again after a passage of time. They are now widows who did not receive an inheritance at the death of their husbands. They have to rely on others to provide their needs, and are, as far as social status goes, to be counted as living at the bottom rung of the social ladder along with orphans and sojourners. Gain through power and might is not an option available to these women, and they have to show wit and cunning to achieve a better life for themselves (Jackson 2002:33).

Lot's daughters think that the whole world has been destroyed and that they are the only survivors. On two successive nights they give Lot wine and have intercourse with him. From the narrative it seems that Lot did these acts unknowingly. The father himself takes away the virginity of his once-betrothed daughters (Rashkow 1998:103).

The low status of Lot's daughters is proven by their unnamed status in the text. They are unnamed, and, it seems, considered unimportant by the Biblical editors. Despite this, they hatch a plot which involves subverting the normal order of male over female, parent over child, and age over youth. They take a daring initiative to

inebriate their father, since he would not agree to their plan if he is sober (Jackson 2002:33).

According to patriarchal law, born children belong exclusively to the father. Rashkow points out the story of Lot as an extreme scenario of this law. Both daughters fall pregnant, and Lot calls the children *Moab* (from my father) and *Ben-Ammi* (son of my kinsman). Lot did not only possess these daughters in the way a father possesses children under patriarchal law, but he also possessed their wombs fully. His first act of possession over their wombs was when he offered them up for rape, and the second by filling them himself.

The older sister seems to already have an improved state when she says in verse 34, "Look, it worked!" (הִנֵּה — *look!*). The reader is left to imagine the tension in the air once the plot and trickery is discovered, and Lot's realization that he has been tricked (Jackson 2002:33).

We now come to a second alternative reading of the text which is against the grain. Once again, the reader is introduced to insights other than the traditional. Jackson offers a reading that focuses on a literary genre after acknowledgement is given to the androcentric elements in the text.

### 5.3.9. Reading in a Broad Feminist Perspective — Comedy

Jackson makes a connection between trickster figures as comic characters, and trickster narratives as comic genres. She points out the comedic elements in the trickster narratives, showing that trickster genre *is* comedy (Jackson 2002:35).

According to Morreal, comedy has four elements:

1. The hero is a "not hero". Emphasis falls on human limitations rather than human greatness. Even when the comedic characters defeat a foe, it is through cleverness and not strength and courage. This is in line with the tenets of a theology of suspicion, where, in this case, the subjugated female character rises above her circumstances and becomes an active role player in her own destiny — flawed as it may be.
2. Conflict occurs.

3. The “no hero” suffers but does not usually die. Lot’s daughters survive their foolish father, even.
4. The “no hero” has a unique response. Comic protagonists handle conflict and suffering with clever indirect methods rather than confrontation. They are not given emotions like resentment, self-pity and sadness, but are painted to rely on their wits and willpower (Jackson 2002:36-37). The text nowhere gives sympathy to the daughters and their plight, and they most definitely do not get any from their father. They do not bewail their lot but act with cunning.

The comic vision in a tale has further characteristics which sets it apart from other narrative styles:

1. It is flexible, and matches the complexity, diversity and movement of life itself.
2. It is pragmatic, and celebrates our physical vitality and delight in biological living.
3. It is egalitarian rather than elitist, and champions the underdog. It allows more sexual equality.
4. It questions authority and tradition.
5. It prefers situational ethics to rules (Jackson 2002:37).

When looking at the narrative of Lot’s daughters’ trickery, and the Tamar narrative to follow later, these comic elements are plain to see. These elements play a role towards reading the text against its androcentric grain.

In light of the above, one should read all trickster narratives carefully for traces of the comic, and see whether it is possible that we are dealing with a comedy. Trickster narratives have an anti-establishment quality at its source and as such subverts the grain of the androcentric text. Tricksters are also able to show readers a different reality through their subversive nature, and facilitates a new reading experience. Trickster stories are furthermore able to point the reader to that which is covered by the dominant grain of the text — things are definitely not as they seem (Jackson 2002:38).

Two further elements are definitive in trickster narratives:

1. Irony is an element of the comic, and
2. The tricked character is a “fool”.

It is necessary to have irony in a story where the powerless bests the powerful, since this ensures an unexpected outcome. Secondly, for a story to have a trickster, there must be a tricked character, who is not as wise or resourceful, and emerges as the "fool" (Jackson 2002:38).

The foremost irony in the story of Lot is that he knows, and yet does not know. He "knows" his daughters without knowing, and yet, as their pregnancies progress, he will come to know. The comedy is heightened by the consistent use of the term יָדַע (to know), which points to both sexual and mental awareness. Lot becomes the fool of the tricking daughters, and his ignorance is played in contrast to their cleverness (Jackson 2002:39).

Rashkow pointed out that the story of Lot and his daughters has a lot in common with a similar story of Noah and his daughters.

1. Both are saved from destruction for being righteous men
2. Both are involved in creation myths
3. Both allow themselves to be overcome by wine
4. Both are sexually involved with their children
5. Both Noah and Lot are declared guilt-free and remain righteous (in their own eyes, the minds of the narrators, and the writings of commentators)
6. The most striking resemblance is that in the patriarchal world of the Hebrew Bible, fathers commit incest with their children and remain unpunished while the children involved are condemned (Rashkow 1998:106-107).

This androcentric slant in the text itself, and especially in traditional commentaries, should not be allowed to remain unquestioned by the suspicious reader.

The story of Lot and his daughters remain disturbing to female readers and will probably never be an easy tale to read. It has been shown above that reading from different angles can bring new understanding of this problematic text without excusing this father's behaviour.

### **5.3.10. Questions Asked to the Text**

In the section on Eve, the answers to the questions posed to the text reflect the answers given by the group I read with during the focus group meetings as explained

elsewhere. In this case, the answers here are generated by myself and offer the result when the stencil of questions I have developed is posed to the narrative of Lot and his daughters.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

In the story in Sodom the main character in the narrative is Lot with his daughters being the ones acted on. In the cave, however, the main characters are the two daughters to a degree, though they remain unnamed. Lot is acted upon in the cave, but later in the tale is active when he names the children. Social considerations in the first narrative are that of homosexuality, xenophobia, rape, patriarchal power and hospitality. A social consideration in the second narrative is progeny. The social position of Lot is that of Paterfamilias of the household, who has the right of life and death over his daughters. Within the greater social picture, he is a powerless social figure who is a sojourner without any rights. The daughters are powerless characters who remain unnamed, but in the second narrative they take the role of tricksters, turning the power of their father upside-down. Very little is traditionally made of Lot's actions of firstly throwing out his daughters to a mob and secondly of making them pregnant. Traditionally, the tale of Lot is mostly told with him being the righteous man saved from the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Such a traditional presentation is only a selective reading of the tale of Lot. Men have benefited from the traditional presentation, with women forever being told not to be like the wife who looked back and changed into a salt pillar. Very little was ever said about Lot's less virtuous acts so that the myth of male moral superiority remained firmly intact. While Lot shows negative attributes, very little was ever made of it and it was explained away under strange arguments (hospitality, for instance). The wife was always lifted out as a negative character who meets with a tragic end because she disobeyed God's command. A definite stereotype is in the wife who looks back, holding too fast to material things and the past. Lot's virtue is stereotyped. He does not deserve the label. The text is a truly patriarchal text and perpetuates women's secondary status to such a degree that the daughters have no names, even to the end. The underlying supposition of the text might be a problematic acceptance of Lot's virtue, and consequent interpretation has further enforced this. The text itself shows such an ideology while reality is the opposite. Women are treated as beings of no importance or consequence, beings truly possessed by their father in every sense of the word. The text at no point pauses to ponder the women's experiences in the narrative.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be the virtue of Lot and how he can do almost anything to anyone without losing this label. A reading against the grain would expose Lot as not being virtuous at all — he does not care for his daughters, he drinks, he impregnates them, he possesses their children. The daughters' voices are silenced in the text. These voices can be made audible by creative imagination. A radical re-thinking from the underside will give voices to those unnamed and silenced. By celebrating the trickster model in this tale, women can be celebrated. The marginal daughters become active characters when they trick Lot. They take their own destiny in their hands. The sons of these daughters grow into great nations. Herein lies a lot of hope. From taking your destiny into your own hands, reward is to be gleaned. Modern women's experience of this text may be one of horror and shock. The role of the Biblical scholar in painting the world of the text is crucial in this regard.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

It is impossible for me, coming from the background I do and thinking about text authority the way I do, working with people in a setting of Biblical counseling, empowering them from the Bible, to see this text as the words of men. I do, however, see traditional interpretation about this tale as purely patriarchal and the words of men. The trickster model in the tale gives opportunity for the empowerment of people from the underside. Traditional interpretation, masking Lot's problematic so-called virtue, should be denounced. A lot more wrestling with this text is necessary in order to glean meaning from it for the modern woman and man.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

The text can be actualized by writing a story containing the motivations and considerations of the daughters. They should be given a voice, and the means of doing this, is through creative actualization.

## **5.4. GENESIS 16 & 21: THE NARRATIVES ABOUT HAGAR**

The members of the group chose this narrative section for closer study since they grew up with it and wanted to utilize the chance to do a close, critical reading of the text with other women. There are also many dimensions to this woman which needed exploration since they have never been confronted with Hagar as character worthy of remembrance.

### 5.4.1. Sarai Infertile

The story of Hagar really begins in Genesis 11.30, where it is stated that Sarai had no child. This verse provides the background for a later typical conflict between the infertile wife and her fertile rival. In this conflict it is standard for the two rivals to appeal to the shared male partner to listen, and he in turn proves unable to do just this (Gruber 1998:173).

### 5.4.2. Hagar the Surrogate Mother

Sarai uses a surrogate mother, Hagar (Gen 16.2), (just like Rachel (Genesis 30.3) and Leah (Genesis 30.9)) to provide her with an heir. Sarai feels that she has less status in Hagar's eyes after Hagar becomes pregnant (Genesis 16.4-6) and she blames Abram. Abram's rejoinder is that according to ancient Hebrew law and custom (Ps 123.2), a woman's slave is her own property to dispose of as she pleases:

*Look! Your handmaid is your property.*

*Do what you think is right (Genesis 16.6).*

According to Lerner, these texts, as well as the Nuzi tablets, and Hammurabic and Babylonian laws, show some implicit assumptions about the lot of women (Lerner 1986:92;113):

1. A slave woman owes sexual services to the mistress' husband.
2. The offspring of intercourse with the master counts as the offspring of the mistress.
3. All women owe sexual services to the men in whose household they live and should produce offspring in exchange for protection.
4. The woman who cannot produce may use her female slave property to substitute for her.
5. Barren women are seen as faulty and worthless, with the only redemption the act of producing a child.
6. Hammurabic law states that a (slave) concubine may not make herself equal to her mistress. The Babilonian law goes further to stipulate that such a concubine must serve the first wife.

Jo Ann Hackett holds that the translations of Hagar's reactions to Sarai after Hagar falls pregnant are too harsh. The RSV has "Hagar looked on Sarai with contempt" (this is also the meaning according to the Afrikaans translation of 1933 and 1953) while the NEB states that "she despised her mistress". According to Hackett the Hebrew can simply mean that Sarai became less or diminished in Hagar's eyes (Hackett 1989:12).

Von Rad and Gunkel interpret the meaning that Sarai's status and power as wife and mistress was threatened by the new status of Hagar being Abraham's concubine. Sarai's outburst then becomes understandable (Hackett 1989:13).

Hagar has been a slave until the point of her being given as concubine. At no point has her opinion ever been asked (Hackett 1989:13) in all the things that have happened to her and have been done to her. The text is also silent on her innermost thoughts on this point.

#### **5.4.3. Hagar Flees into the Desert**

When Hagar flees into the desert, the tale takes a turn with great liberating aspects for women living under oppressive circumstances. Sarai harasses Hagar until Hagar flees into the desert (Genesis 16.6). She is found by Yahweh's messenger who tells her to go back to her mistress and submit to her abuse/ endure her harassment so that:

*You will give birth to a son,*

*And you will name him Ishmael (God listens)*

*For God listened to your being harassed (Genesis 16.11).*

In William's interpretation of the Hagar texts, she is the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures. To read her story, is to evoke a "dangerous memory" of extraordinary power. Hagar flees into the wilderness, where the angel finds her by a spring. The angel makes a promise similar to the promise made to Abraham — her descendants will also be too numerous to be counted. She will bear a son of strength and defiance who will be a "wild donkey of a man" (Clifford 2001:80).

The promise made to her of many descendants, follows the same lines as the promises made to the patriarchs. This promise is made to a woman, which marks it



as remarkable. It is also the only case in Genesis where this promise is made to a woman, and is followed by the first well-known annunciation speech (Hackett 1989:15).

The establishment of Yahweh's relationship to Hagar in Genesis 16 is integral to other women in the Hebrew Bible. Yahweh is not shown as making covenants with women: He rather seems to make contractual relationships that are expressed in the literary form of the birth narrative. Yahweh's contractual connection with Hagar (Genesis 16.7-15) is the foundation and prototype for all future associations between Yahweh and potential child-bearing women, which culminates in the impregnation of Mary in the New Testament (Jarrell 2002:4).

Yahweh initiates a relationship with Hagar in order to continue a ritual action or to reaffirm a covenant relationship. It has been argued that covenants have mainly been made between the patriarchs and Yahweh, with women mainly left out from the obligations of the relationship (Jarrell 2002:5). Maybe the birth narrative can be seen as the female translation of the covenant with men.

#### **5.4.4. The Covenant with Hagar**

In order to check whether the birth narrative follows the definitions of a covenant, one has to define the components of a covenant:

1. It is a binding relationship with Yahweh that functions in various contexts.
2. There is a promise that is sanctioned by an oath, or the terms of the covenant are agreed to.

In light of these essential elements, birth narratives could be seen as forms of covenants (Jarrell 2002:5).

In the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, there are nine cases of birth narratives that follow a specific format and include six elements particular to all nine cases, and three elements particular to three cases. They are as follows:

1. Description of a woman's "mother status" — she is either barren or a virgin.
2. There is protest on her part.
3. Yahweh offers contractual terms.
4. The son's future is forecast.
5. Yahweh names the child.
6. The woman accepts the contractual terms.

7. In three instances, the woman offers a poem or song (Jarrell 2002:5).

When Hagar names Yahweh ("calling the name of Yahweh") we furthermore find the only act of naming by a human/woman to a deity in the Hebrew Bible. The text uses the verb **קָרָא** to designate the act of naming (Jarrell 2002:10).

Phyllis Tribble notes that this act of naming is not given to any other person in the Hebrew Bible, and she finds no parallel to Hagar's act of naming/calling. Hagar's giving Yahweh a name or calling the name of Yahweh may be explained as a consequence of her formal acceptance of the terms of the birth contract. Her remarkable act is often obscured by the untranslatable portion of the text that follows (Jarrell 2002:10). Janzen, however, finds that Hagar's exegesis of the Divine name, has parallels in Moses' revelation of the Divine name in Exodus 33.19 (Jarrell 2002:10-11).

Hagar's naming/calling the name of Yahweh at the water source may also indicate Yahweh's procreative power. Hagar's act of naming clearly possesses theophanic significance (Jarrell 2002:11).

Hagar is the only woman who receives a promise from Yahweh in Genesis 16.10 concerning her **זָרַע** (seed) (Jarrell 2002:12).

The birth narratives show similarities to covenant structures in the text, while at the same time showing that it is not exactly the same type of covenant created between Yahweh and males. Women obviously did not have access to such formal and ritualized relationships with Yahweh (Jarrell 2002:12).

Despite the above, it might be said that Hagar calling the name of Yahweh, signifies a remarkably intimate relationship between woman and Deity. The further fact that she is not a member of the "chosen line" while being given the opportunity to act this way, shows a tremendous tenderness towards the oppressed woman from the side of Yahweh. This aspect can be a truly liberating whilst empowering fact in the tale of Hagar's suffering.

#### 5.4.5. Hagar is Sent away

Hagar goes back and gives birth to Ishmael. When Ishmael is sixteen years old (Genesis 17.25), Sarah tells Abraham to throw out the slave woman and her son (Genesis 21.10). Abraham is distressed but God tells him to do as Sarah says (Genesis 21.11-12) (*modernly translated as: As for whatever Sarah tells you, obey שָׁמַע (šm') her*) (Gruber 1998:175). In Genesis 21.9 Ishmael is playing. The word used for what he was doing is מְצַחֵק (mēšāḥeq), and comes from the root צָחַק (šḥq). One of the root meanings is "to laugh". This is also a play on the words stating that Sara *laughed* when she heard she will beget a child. Besides *to laugh*, the word also means *to play*. This is also the root basis for Isaac's name. When Ishmael is מְצַחֵק (mēšāḥeq), he is not just playing or laughing, but also "Isaac-ing" (Hackett 1989:20-21). This may give an indication for Sarai's motivation in complaining. She might have noticed that Ishmael is so like Isaac, that they were equals, and she was threatened by this. Ishmael might have committed the transgression of striving for a social and familial position that was not his (Hackett 1989:21).

Gruber notes the ambiguity of the Hebrew verb שָׁמַע (šm') which can mean "obey", "understand" or "listen".

Rendering Genesis 21.12 as "listen to her voice" has two implications:

1. God is acquitted of conspiring to put Hagar and Ishmael to death by thirst in the desert, and
2. The discrepancy between God's unconcern in Genesis 21.12 and God's and His angel's promotion of the welfare of Hagar and her progeny throughout Genesis 16 and Genesis 21.17-20 is eliminated (Gruber 1998:177).

When Sarah finally bears Isaac, Abraham, though distressed, heeds Sarah's demand and dismisses Hagar and Ishmael. The promise to Hagar of a great nation is not revoked by this act. Hagar and Ishmael are forced from their home and driven into the wilderness, but God is with them in their plight (Genesis 21.14-19) (Clifford 2001:80-81).

#### 5.4.6. Abraham Listens without Hearing

What does Genesis 21.12 convey when one seeks to look deeper than popular interpretation? A refreshingly new interpretation is given by Gruber who sees it as portraying the impulsive behaviour of men who seem unable to simply "listen" to the women in their lives. One example of this is found in Genesis 22. When God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the text reports no listening noises or verbal response. Abraham says nothing. The reader does not even know if he is listening. He gets up the next morning and proceeds to solve the problem so that God eventually has to send an angel to shout STOP! (Gen 22) (Gruber 1998:177).

What would have been an appropriate response to Sarah's expression of distress? On hearing God's response to listen to Sarah and do what she says, Abraham probably should have entered into dialogue with her. A possible dialogue would have looked like the following:

Abraham: Are you really upset about Ishmael?

Sarah: I am upset to death.

Abraham: We have not been made to come all this way simply to lord it over people and drive them into the desert.

Sarah: I see and I agree.

If the scenario would have been such, there probably would have been no need to send an angel to rescue Hagar and Ishmael in the desert (Gruber 1998:178).

One should try to move away from the traditional interpretations that would place Abraham between two quarrelling women. Such interpretations trivialize the experiences of the two women involved (Hackett 1989:13-14). Gunkel and Von Rad are good examples of this type of interpretation, with von Rad painting Abraham as playing an unhappy role between two headstrong women, and Gunkel referring to the contentious wife spoken about in the wisdom literature (Hackett 1989:14). By such interpretations the female characters and their roles in the narrative are belittled (Hackett 1989:14).

*The Woman's Bible* stands as a critic against Abraham, since he sends his child and its mother forth into the wilderness without bread and water to fend for themselves. This Bible asks why he did not provide for them a servant, an animal, provisions, a tent and a resting place. According to *The Woman's Bible*, common humanity demanded this much attention to his own son and the woman who bore him

(Thompson 2001:20). It is interesting to note that critique of Abraham's carelessness has not often been heard in commentaries throughout the ages.

In such traditional interpretations, it is often Sarah who is painted as a heartless villain. If Sarah is a villain, she is not alone. Abraham was not prohibited from aiding Hagar and Ishmael. Susan Niditch updates Stanton's critique when she classifies it as difficult. Abraham does not care for the maid he has bedded and Sarah would expose mother and child to death (Thompson 2001:20). The tale continues to puzzle and disquiet modern readers still.

#### 5.4.7. Hagar and Sarah

In Genesis 16.5 the Hebrew phrase *חַמְסִי עָלַיְךָ* (*hamasi 'aleka*) is used, which literally means "my violence on you". Sarai is blaming Abraham for what she is going through. Other translations of this phrase is "let my violence be on you", or "my violence is your responsibility". The traditional reading is that the violence is a violence done *to me*, and that it is thus objective. But it could easily be translated as subjective genitive, then meaning *the violence done by me*. Sarai might in fact be threatening violence, which can be violence against Abraham or violence against Hagar, but the responsibility will fall on Abraham (Hackett 1989:21).

In Genesis 16 and 21, Hagar and Ishmael as the less powerful people, are the protagonists in the stories. Hagar receives an unexpected promise, an annunciation speech, meets Yahweh and is supplied a well. Ishmael plays at being Isaac, represents a threat to Sarah, and is made into a nation (Hackett 1989:23-24).

This story gives a poignant insight into the tales of both Sarah and Hagar. Hagar especially deserves to be approached from a feminist perspective in order to view her as the example of the oppressed woman who has the courage to seek freedom. Note the reversal here of the later Exodus paradigm. In this tale, the Egyptian flees the oppression by Israel. Hagar becomes the mother of a great nation who has a characteristic of refusal to be submissive (Exum 1985:76-77).

Both Sarah and Hagar are victims of a patriarchal society that stresses the importance of sons. Even the narrative structure revolves around the promise of a son. In such a context the women have but little choice but make victims of one

another. The privileged woman exploits her subordinate. After giving Hagar to Abraham (her feelings are never given) Hagar covets Sarah's position, and Sarah can only assert herself by oppressing Hagar. Women are viciously played off against each other in a quest for status, which repeats itself in other narratives of women in pairs (eg Rachel and Leah) (Exum 1985:77).

#### **5.4.8. Power Abuse**

At the heart of the scenes with Hagar and Ishmael, lies a portrayal of the abuse of power, in this case the power of owners over slaves. Hackett goes on to ask if this tale might not portray the power of deities over human beings? (Hackett 1989:24). From Yahweh's provision for Hagar, it would seem a force of the narrative to bring it to such a conclusion.

When one sets the story of Hagar and Sarah within the bigger story of the life and times of Abraham, one sees that the writer of this part of the story of Abraham has given the text a twist by making the central character a female. In the story we have one human abusing another, in this case one woman abusing her female slave, and another angle where the slave has no say over her own body and no status in the household where she lives. In this the writer of the texts shows a sensitivity towards power relationships, gender relationships, and making the powerless the central character (Hackett 1989:25).

It might be said that this story gives evidence that Israelite religious texts have a positive opinion of the most vulnerable person in society: female, slave, and foreigner (Hackett 1989:25).

#### **5.4.9. Women are not Perfect and should not be Portrayed as Such**

The narrative of Sarah should serve as example against the rhetoric of women's purity. This rhetoric holds that women are more pure and moral than men, and thus more able to make decisions. But, if women's full personhood is to be acknowledged, so too must women's full capacity to make bad judgments, act destructively, and make mistakes, even be cruel. The Sarah narrative should serve as rejection for an exalted moral status for women. By so rejecting a moral higher ground for women, one is actively pursuing realistic community-building, and in

In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: "You think thus and so because you are a woman," but I know that my only defense is to reply: "I think thus and so because it is true," thereby removing any subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: "And you think the contrary because you are a man," for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong.

Simone de Beauvoir in Clifford 2001:20

keeping with Naomi Goldenberg's rejection of a dualistic, transcendent "otherness" (Warne 2002:54).

One must here point out the difference between the ontological claim that women are different from, and "superior to" men in some moral sense (when women are perceived as more cooperative, nurturing and caring) and the phenomenological claim that women's experience of oppression renders them more able to see the mechanisms of oppression than men, whom such a system serves. Although women may experience marginalization as subjects, it does not make them better people (Warne 2002:54).

This example of self-critique (and honesty) is one of the ideals of feminist theology, and can be successfully used to encourage women to open up to the praxis of feminist theology in order to bring about change in self, societal structures and relationships.

#### 5.4.10. Patriarchy Overshadows Women

The perspective of the reader when reading the story of Sarah and Abraham has great influence. Traditionally people have only heard the male perspective. The practice of reading with suspicion wants to highlight exactly this phenomenon where women as well as men read from a male perspective (usually the traditional perspective). Reading with suspicion implies that the whole act of reading itself should also be scrutinized for elements of this praxis. While admitting that reading objectively is impossible, the subjectivity of the reader should be defined and stated.

In this tale, the promise of a great nation was given through Sarah, and not Abraham (Bennett 1989:62). Abraham already had a child by another woman. He had a further six sons after Sarah's death, and the Bible also refers to the sons of his concubines. It is important to highlight that the promise was given through Sarah and her son (Genesis 17.15-16). It is even possible that the name of the Hebrew people comes from Sarah's name, which has the same root שָׂרָא (śr') (Bennett 1989:63).

Sarah had the gift of prophesy and the *Shekinah* (cloud that signified God's indwelling presence) was over her tent. This woman was also so important that Abraham found it necessary to own the land where her bones were buried. No other



sale of land is so carefully written up in the Biblical record. Why is this so? Was it necessary for Abraham to establish legal rights to Sarah's bones and inheritance? Years later, the tribe also went back to Sarah's family for wives for the son and the grandson (Bennett 1989:63).

Are we not the daughters and sons of Sarah and Abraham, her consort? When will we celebrate Sarah our mother? (Bennett 1989:63).

The patriarchal grain of the text so overshadows the female characters that it takes some effort to focus on the women and them alone in a positive light. When focus falls on Sarah as the person through whom the given nation comes, the acts of Sarah also get seen in a different light.

A further indicator is the scene between Sarah and Abraham. Sarah's anger finds vocalization in her words spoken against Abraham in Genesis 16.5: *May the Lord judge between you and me* (not between Hagar and me). These words become an indictment of the patriarchal system which pits women against each other (Exum 1985:77).

A feminist reading identifies the fact that both women suffer. The one is cast out and becomes the mother of a great nation that is excluded from the covenant. The other stays within the patriarchal hearth and later almost loses her child to his father (Exum 1985:77).

After the Genesis text, Hagar is again mentioned in Scripture by Paul in Galatians 4. He there uses the rivalry between Sarah and Hagar as emblematic of the contrast between the new and the old covenant. Hagar is even in Genesis a foil who is used to highlight the drama of Abraham and Sarah, and then disappears from view (Thompson 2001:17).

Paul radicalized the story's contrasts problematically in Galatians 4. He makes Sarah and Hagar represent two covenants, one based on faith in the promise, and the other based on observance of the law. Their sons also represent two incompatible destinies namely spiritual freedom and servitude. Both Hagar and Sarah are reduced to seed-bearers and cast to fulfill a whore-madonna stereotype. Sarah and Isaac are exalted while Hagar and Ishmael are despised and rejected (Thompson 2001:19).

The patriarchal grain almost completely drowns out female voices, so that it takes a very close reading to try and find such said voices. Such a close reading is not assumption free, but is in this case a close reading from a perspective upholding a strategy of suspicion and reading against the grain of the text. One cannot be too confident of women's voices elsewhere in the text, especially when it comes to metaphorical language. What evidence do we have that God hears women's prayers? The words attributed to women offer at best fragments in a Bible that is thoroughly androcentric in perspective, author and cultural background. Craven is one among a few who is gathering fragments of women's voices and listing the named and unnamed women and female representations in the Bible (Craven 1999:96).

#### **5.4.11. Hagar Builds a House**

Hagar's story throughout gives ample evidence of an oppressed person's struggle against denial of her personhood. The interesting fact is that God meets her in her endeavors, and blesses her grasps for personal dignity. Hagar also represents modern struggling women who do not have homes, maintenance for their children, suffer displacement, etc. Hagar has the harsh life of a homeless single mother. She also knows the autonomy facilitated by God's presence. This autonomy is manifested in her assumption of a role ordinarily reserved for males in the Ancient Near East. It is Hagar who gets a wife for Ishmael from Egypt (Genesis 21.21) (Clifford 2001:81). This single mother has to take on male roles in the absence of a father figure for her son. She does this with great success.

Hagar might have dealt with the problem of homelessness by founding her own "house" or tribe. Hagar may speak to generation after generation of black women, who validate her story by their suffering. Hagar and her son is also a model for many black families. A lone mother struggles to hold a family together in spite of poverty and marginalization. She goes into the wilderness of ethnic-racial prejudice with only God on her side, and she makes a living for herself and her child (Clifford 2001:81). As a role model, Hagar becomes relevant and inspiring to all women. Her often-skipped tale holds treasures of great inspiration for women and all people struggling to keep their heads above the water.

#### **5.4.12. Hagar the Hero**

Hagar is truly a character of interest to both her readers and to God. The ways in which Hagar is described, should have made her a prominent hero. She was the first person in the Bible to be visited by an angel (Genesis 16.7) and the first to receive an annunciation (Genesis 16.11-12). Sarah, on the other hand, is addressed by God only in rebuke (Genesis 18.15). Hagar is the only woman in the Bible to receive a promise of innumerable descendants (Genesis 16.10). Hagar is also depicted as boldly bestowing a name on God — a power that is not attributed to anybody else in the Bible. Phyllis Trible's astute observations of Hagar's virtues and credits are routinely echoed by the studies that followed in her wake. Sharon Pace Jeanson noted that Hagar was also the only woman who chose a wife for her son. Other feminist writers see Hagar's flight from Sarah as an assertion of autonomy and self-empowerment. Delores Williams calls Hagar the first woman in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures (Thompson 2001:18-19).

#### **5.4.13. Hagar's Story in African Christianity**

Theology in Africa and a written record of reception is a new field. It has not been possible to find African feminist authors or African feminist work on many of the tales that are given attention in this chapter, but in this case, Shisanya has written on the topic of Hagar and drawn lines to her own cultural experience.

In the above a brief overview has been given of the story of Hagar. How does her story look in African Christianity? Does it differ from Western interpretations? In what follows, a summary is given of Hagar's story and its use in African Christianity. It is of course impossible to give attention to all aspects of this tale and how it is used in Africa, but the main points of difference are discussed.

The first Hagar narrative (Genesis 16.1-16) tells how Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl, was handed over to Abraham to conceive a child on behalf of her barren mistress Sarah (v1-3). From a Kenyan perspective, the Abuluhya people interpret Sarah's barrenness as her inability to procreate. Abuluhya men are never blamed for childlessness since close relatives secretly sire on behalf of sterile men. Women, however, are blamed for childlessness and have internalized these accusations to the extent that they equally blame themselves. Unlike Sarah who believed that God was responsible for her condition, Abuluhya women blame witchcraft, curses from

relatives, breaking of taboos and failure to observe rites of passage. They resultingly seek solutions like approaching indigenous healers and leaders of African instituted Churches with healing powers. In some cases, women invite their younger sisters to procreate on their behalf like Sarah did to Hagar. In other African communities, like the Abagusi and Akamba, woman to woman marriages are practiced to enable childless women to get children of their own. Sarah symbolizes African mothers full of desire for children. We have to criticise the Abuluhya emphasis on women's reproductive role which renders childless women incomplete, and also places a preference on male children. This makes too many women bear too many off-spring at the expense of their health (Shisanya 2001:147-148).

The father of Hagar's child is painted as a man of great faith, but he slept with a concubine in search of a son. Some Abuluhya men, like Abraham, engage in extra-marital and polygynous relationships in search of sons (Shisanya 2001:148).

In the desert, the angel of God commanded Hagar to go back to Sarah (v7-9). This is one painful experience that demonstrates the religio-cultural struggles of blind obedience. Among the Abuluhya, widows are expected to keep vigil over their deceased spouses' bodies without taking time off to rest. Widows are threatened with supernatural punishment should they fail to perform their roles, although there is no logical reason for what is expected of them. The command given to Hagar is often quoted to women who threaten to disobey their cultural expectations. As a result, they endure experiences like abusive marriages that sometimes lead to death. One wonders why God gave such a command that makes women suffer. Nevertheless, God's presence shows His support for the oppressed like the Abuluhya belief in spirits with profound influence on the living (Shisanya 2001:149).

The second Hagar narrative (Genesis 21.9-21) tells how Sarah commands Abraham to chase Hagar and Ishmael away so that Isaac could inherit everything (v9-10). Sarah here makes decisions that destroy Hagar's life, by denying her basic needs. Among the Abuluhya, the senior wife may make decisions with similar results, like delaying the harvesting (Shisanya 2001:149-150).

In America, Black theology has also noticed and claimed the story of Hagar. Delores Williams has made a critique of the death of atonement through the blood of the cross. For Williams, the figure of the Egyptian slave Hagar, who was forced to become a surrogate mother and bear children for her childless masters, then to be

cast into the wilderness to find there an encounter with God and hope for the future, stands as a paradigm of African-American women's experiences. These women were made sex objects in slave times. They also fled into the wilderness to find freedom (Ruether 1998:101-102).

#### **5.4.14. Contemporary Grassroots Readings of Hagar**

All readers come to the text with pre-understandings and pre-conceived notions. Every reader has a social location from which she or he interprets the Biblical text. No interpretation is disinterested. In what follows, three interpretations are given of the story of Hagar and Sarah by three groups of untrained readers: white, middle-to-upper-class Catholic and Protestant women living in Northern California; Latina Presbyterian immigrants and refugees from Mexico and Central America living in Northern California; and black South African Protestant women from both rural and urban South African townships in KwaZulu-Natal. Each group was influenced by their social location and interpreted the text in different ways (Simopoulos 2007:63-64).

The Caucasian women, the majority of who had been divorced by their adulterous husbands when they found new mistresses, identified with Sarah's jealous rage towards Hagar. They also identified during their divorces with Hagar's loneliness and desperation in the desert. The Latina women identified with Hagar as an exile from her native country of Egypt as well as an outsider and outcast living in a foreign and hostile land. The Black South African women identified with Hagar's exploitation as a slave and worker under her master's oppression (Simopoulos 2007:64).

##### **5.4.14.1. Caucasian Women Interpret the Text**

These women recognized that divorce was the dominant lens through which they read and interpreted this narrative. Hagar was viewed from two different perspectives:

- I. Hagar is seen from the perspective of Sarah, the privileged but barren wife. In this sense, they identified Hagar as Abraham's mistress. Hagar was seen as an accomplice in adultery who maneuvered her way into Sarah's marriage. Due to Sarah's inadequacy, a younger, fertile and beautiful woman took her place. Hagar became elevated when she became pregnant. These women could identify with Sarah's jealous rage and subsequent ill-treatment of

Hagar. Hagar was a symbol of the destruction of these women's own marriages, and was seen as an opportunist who took advantage of a situation to elevate herself (Simopoulos 2007:65).

- II. The women also identified with Hagar as the outcast or "divorced" woman. As divorced women themselves, these women identified with Hagar's experience of being used and ultimately cast out. She was no longer desired or of any use to her husband, and was served with a sachel of water and some bread just as they were served with divorce papers. During and after their divorces, these women identified with Hagar's desperation and loneliness in the desert (Simopoulos 2007:65).

Redemption was to be found in the fact that God provided the means of survival for Hagar in the desert and for them during their divorce period and afterwards. These women started their own careers as Hagar and her son made a life for themselves in the wilderness of Paran. The God who comforted Hagar is the God who came to them and comforted them, He opened Hagar's eyes to the well, and He opened their eyes to their opportunities (Simopoulos 2007:66).

#### 5.4.14.2. Latina Women Interpret the Text

The Latina women identified with Hagar's experience of exile from her native country, her experience of homelessness and dislocation, and her final resignation to live as wanderer in the desert. The women speculated that Hagar had to flee her native country of Egypt, and started to tell their own stories of exile and flight from their own countries of origin. They pointed out that Hagar, like themselves, must have felt displaced. The group shared their experiences of hostility, rejection and dislocation in their adopted country (Simopoulos 2007:67).

When Hagar fled in desperation she fled towards her native country Egypt. If Hagar managed to do this, she would live out these women's own dream. These women always have the hope of one day returning to their country and family. It was noted that Hagar did not eventually return to Egypt. The dream remained only a dream. Hagar must have realized that she might not have been welcome in her own land (Simopoulos 2007:68).

Redemption in this narrative is similar to what the Caucasian women found: God did not liberate Hagar by returning her to her native country. God did, however, provide a means of survival for Hagar, her son and all descendants (Simopoulos 2007:69).

#### 5.4.14.3. Black South African Women Interpret the Text

The black South African women solely identified with Hagar as oppressed slave and exploited worker. This interpretation comes as no surprise given their social location. These women were products of Apartheid, they received inferior educations, were poor, and had few work skills. Some sold food, others worked as domestic workers, farm workers and hotel maids. These women identified abuse, misuse of power, corruption, sexual exploitation, economic exploitation and slavery as the main themes of the story. The women were outraged at Sarah's cruelty. They concluded that Hagar was forced to sleep with Abraham, and that it could have been a case of child abuse since the text calls Hagar a slave-girl (Simopoulos 2007:69).

The exploitation these women experienced helped them to understand Hagar's hopeless situation. These women's identification with Hagar is not surprising. What is new, is their reaction to God when He tells Hagar to return to her mistress and to submit. The women indicated a passionate aversion to this oppressive image of God. They called God of Genesis 16 a God of the powerful and not a God of the poor (Simopoulos 2007:70). He was also called a God of the rich. They were skeptical that God had her best interests at heart and that He was protecting her (Simopoulos 2007:71).

These women's reaction can be understood when seen in light of their context of a (sometimes violent) struggle against an Apartheid government. These women were conditioned to believe in a God of liberation: the God who supported the black liberation movement and the God who wanted black people freed from oppression. The God who wanted Hagar to return and submit to her mistress is not the God of equality, dignity and freedom they were weaned on. This group found the redemption of the text in an antagonistic reading — the author of Genesis 16 is clearly mistaken in his or her understanding of God (Simopoulos 2007:71).

#### 5.4.15. Questions Asked to the Text

##### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

The characters who assume agency in this narrative are initially Sarah and Abraham. Only later does Hagar assume agency. Hagar's character grows as the narrative progresses. The social and cultural conventions in this narrative encompass the

institution of slavery and the degree to which one human owns another human. The various characters are not of the same class. The tale shows the male head of the household, who is at the top of the hierarchical ladder, his wife who is influential but who does not have his authority, and a slave who occupies the lowest rung on the social ladder. This text has traditionally been presented in the light of the promise to Abraham and Sarah of a son. Anything that blurred this line was painted as suspect and not according to the will of God. The Biblical text itself does not favour Hagar or her son, but does not explicitly show them to be in Divine disfavour either. When asked who has traditionally benefited from the inherited presentation, the answer becomes a complex one in the South Africa of today and the past half century. White males have benefited, being identified automatically with Abraham, the chosen one. White women were identified with Sarah, the chosen wife of the promise, and Hagar was identified traditionally with the black woman in domestic service. The narrative is laden with a political undercurrent for people who live in South Africa. The character of Hagar has been oppressed by the Abraham as well as Sarah characters in the narrative, as well as in real life. The negative attributes are traditionally reserved for the female characters: they belittle one another, are jealous and easily threatened. The male's lack of insight and unsensitivity is never brought up. The stereotype of bickering, jealous women (two dogs fighting over a bone) has been shadowing women for ages. The text is patriarchal, written without any sympathy for the female characters. The text shows women to be unable to work together towards a common good, and in this sense hampers their development towards liberation. Since the text does not problematize the position of the slave Hagar, it does nothing to resist the oppression and subjugation of women in Church and society. "It is God's will that some are slaves", can be the apology given for oppression of a marginal group. The underlying supposition can be that one woman is the one in God's favour, while another may not be — the clear dualism between the chosen and unchosen lines. By identifying this dualism, one can start resisting it. We can wrestle with God for our blessing/promise, and be blessed at the end as Hagar was. The text itself has no empathy for the slave but God does.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is the chosen line of Sarah versus the unchosen line of Hagar, and how this is carried into the personal lives of the women. The grain can be resisted by reading Hagar with empathy, and not allowing the idea that she does not share in the chosen line of God, to cloud one's vision of her. Hagar is a strong, independent woman who wrestles her own blessing/promise from her God. Hagar is



not completely silenced by the text, but by a close reading of her voice, she is given more attention than traditionally. The whole story can be re-imagined from Hagar's perspective, and one can spend time in trying to get to know her motives, fears, angers, frustrations, joys, weaknesses, strengths etc. Hagar is active in some places despite her low status. She flees into the desert on her own volition. Women can be reminded of her power to take her own circumstances in hand and her endeavour to change them. The blessing/promise Hagar gets from God ends her story on a great note of hope. Women can wrestle promises from God for themselves, without the mediation of ministers, pastors, and males.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text, like the one of Eve, is seen as the Word of God, and not just words of men. The text of Hagar is a classic tale of resistance against oppression and subjugation, especially in the loaded South African political climate. The text's inability to denounce the harsh treatment Hagar receives should be and is criticized. This text has a lot to say to people in the modern day South Africa, and in all stations of life where one has to do with either women working together, people working under one's authority, people working in one's household, being sensitive to listen to undercurrents, etc.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This text has great possibilities for being acted out or re-told from different angles, but in my group, time constraints did not permit this. The women did partake lively in discussion of the tale and the various angles it offers for letting Hagar have a more prominent voice. The fact that Hagar takes ownership of her own situation, and leaves, had women admire her resolve and strong character.

### **5.5. GENESIS 22: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE**

This narrative is selected due to its traditional one-sided exegesis which is a typical example of malestream thought in theology. Once a feminist critical hermeneutics is used on this narrative, new insight comes to the fore which has never before been entertained by male commentators.

The story of Abraham poses various difficulties for the modern reader. In this short section attention will only be given to one such an aspect, and that is the problematic offering of Isaac to God. The mentality of offering/sacrificing a child to show one's

faith, is disturbing to modern readers, and few writers have problematized this issue. Why does willingness to sacrifice a child, rather than the protection of the child, show faith?

Gossai also draws attention to the fact that the traditional focus of this text within Christianity has been the complete faith of Abraham and his obedience in the face of this monstrous test. In Jewish tradition, interpretive interest has centered around the binding of Isaac, the *Akedah*. He further agrees that "within the context of religious education over the centuries the concept of faith is so well entrenched that we have been blinded to other critical possibilities within the text" (Gossai 1995:143).

### 5.5.1. Abraham's Sacrifice Problematized

Feminist study of the story of Abraham has failed to focus on Abraham and to enquire into the nature of his centrality to the story (Delaney 1998:137).

Abraham faces a test, and the writer interprets it to be his willingness to sacrifice his son. This will prove his love of God. Is A necessarily equal to B in this story? Is offering something you value comparable to killing someone? These two different meanings of sacrifice cannot necessarily be blended together (Delaney 1998:137).

The nature of Abraham's authority must be scrutinized more closely. How much was Isaac and in what way was Isaac *Abraham's* to sacrifice? It goes without say that God's requests must be obeyed, but the text makes no mention of the fact that the child is a son of both parents — it rather makes the reader think that God only asks one parent for permission — the father (Delaney 1998:137). Other fields' insights are needed to clarify the assumptions made by the writer of the text. In this regard anthropology, and specifically paternity and motherhood, come to mind. The writer makes readers believe that the boy belongs to the father in a way that he does not belong to the mother.

Trible has raised the issue of Sarah's sacrifice as a central theme to this text. Tribble argues that if Laughter (Isaac) is special to Abraham, how much more to Sarah! Sarah claims the child for herself, for "me". The text also does not show a unique bond between Abraham and Isaac as it does between Sarah and Isaac (Gossai 1995:143-144).

It is further pointed out that overarching evidence in Genesis shows that Abraham was not a man of strong attachments. The fact that Abraham was willing to leave without question (Genesis 12.4) might be an expression of great faith or one lacking in strong attachment. While the former has dominated scholarly and lay interpretation, the latter has only recently gained much deserved attention (Gossai 1995:144).

It is furthermore disturbing that no one stands up to act as advocate for the child. This has been problematic from the start, and is evident in the fact that Biblical commentators have suggested from an early age that Isaac consciously consented. The act of sacrificing the son would then rather be seen as self-sacrifice and specifically a redemptive sacrifice. In this story the redemption is at the expense of the son (Delaney 1998:144).

### **5.5.2. Biblical Parental Roles**

Modern readers must again become sensitive of their own assumptions with regards to the text. It is assumed that the meanings of father and mother are obvious and that they refer to biological roles of male and female parents. Delaney points out that these terms are relative and stand in particular relation to a specific theory of procreation — a theory that is not currently popular (Delaney 1998:138).

The story of Abraham places a great emphasis on "seed". The word occurs often and does not simply signify "child", but is used to signify an understanding of procreation. In ancient times the male was seen to be the generator and transmitter of seed. The male had the creative role. Paternity is subsequently a construction of the male role and more than a biological connection. Delaney calls this theory monogenetic since the creative principle comes from one source (the male). She believes it to be correlative to monotheism. The monogenetic theory of procreation also helps to explain the focus on male genitals in Genesis — the covenant of the circumcision (Genesis 17), and the taking of oaths by holding the genitals (Genesis 24.9) as well as all the "begats" in the family lines (Delaney 1998:140).

Although women were seen as necessary in the creative process, (they carried the seed and nurtured it), they were not imagined as the creator or co-creators. Children are exclusively seen as the father's seed. In this theory only sons have the same power, and hence their importance. The sacrifice of a son would have a different

theological meaning from the sacrifice of a daughter (The contrast between Abraham and Jephtah's story (Judges 11)). Sacrificing a son would mean cutting off the line and eventually, the future. Along the lines of this theory the child did belong more to Abraham than Sarah: Isaac was *his* seed (Delaney 1998:141).

This story of procreation also provides justification for a specific family structure. Seed is seen as the essence of the father: the male child is of the same essence. Father and son *are* one. This view coincides with the Christian definition of God (God the Father and God the Son are one yet separate). The same argument is never made about daughters and mothers, which proves the too ready acceptance of fatherhood as *the* generative force.

### 5.5.3. The High Value of Obedience

A further ethic found in the story of Abraham is the one of obedience. Obedience would keep sons in line. Beginning with Adam, obedience and disobedience has also characterized the relationship between God and humankind. Abraham's perfect obedience would now make up for Adam's disobedience. Obedience goes beyond this to also characterize the proper relationship between husband and wife, and between parent and child. It is seen as an expression of love and in the tale appears to mean submission: Abraham is obedient to God and Isaac to Abraham (Delaney 1998:142). Obedience is highly valued even when disobedience would seem the more appropriate response.

One cannot talk about obedience in this narrative without looking at rings of power that are evident in this text. There are fairly well delineated levels of power, and this is especially clear with Abraham who, although he clearly has power, is also called upon to obey commands. Sarah is invisible and voiceless, and Isaac, while allowed the freedom to ask questions, is an object and not privy to the plans for the sacrifice. Voicelessness as a reflection of powerlessness is deafening in this text (Gossai 1995:145).

### 5.5.4. The Result of the Sacrifice

When the angel finally stops Abraham, one wants to shout for joy, but this very act does not build trust and faith, but indebtedness. The language of indebtedness is the language of enslavement (Gossai 1995:156).

By relinquishing some of his paternal power to God, Abraham receives it back multiplied. Patriarchal power flows from God through Abraham, and reaches other people through Abraham. He is pictured as the exalted father, and is to become the father of the nations (Delaney 1998:146).

The narrative also ends on a note of difficulty. Where is Isaac? Abraham returns together with the servants, and the text from here on further seems to infer that after this ordeal, the relationship between Isaac and Abraham is irreparably damaged. Isaac is not mentioned to have returned with Abraham, which may indicate that they separated (Gossai 1995:158). Abraham and Isaac are never in conversation again. When Abraham later gives instructions to his servant to find a wife for Isaac, he never refers to Isaac by name. At the death of Abraham, Isaac is blessed by God, and not his father (Gossai 1995:158-159).

#### **5.5.5. The Result of Female Absence and other Exclusions**

When problematizing this narrative, the obvious absence of women is prominent. Delaney is one writer who theorizes that the Abraham narrative could possibly have derived from women's experience. In this model of faith, women are excluded by their absence. Maybe this exclusion of women is precisely the point the story wants to make (Delaney 1998:135). A late Jewish tradition reports that Sarah uttered six cries and died when Abraham returned and told her what had happened (Von Rad 1972:243).

The absence of Sarah is strange at such a critical moment in the narrative. She is not even listening behind the door! Isaac may be the object of this "test", but this challenge involves Yahweh and Abraham. The politics of exclusion are even evident here, for the text states that Isaac is Abraham's only son. This is not correct, for Abraham has another son. Isaac is unique, however, and carries in him the promise. Yahweh further states that Abraham loves Isaac, and further excludes Ishmael and his memory. Gossai indicates that in memory and inclusion there is life (Gossai 1995:148).

The female aspect of creation is not given any attention in the story of Abraham's sacrifice. In both monotheism and the monogenetic theory, there is just one principle of creativity in both human and divine levels and both are symbolically masculine. It

can be said that there is something divine in Abraham (the father), and something fatherly in God. Maternity is assumed to be self-evident and a mere fact of nature. Paternity on the other hand, is considered more spiritual. It is seen to be more god-like in nature, but the discovery thereof is assumed to mark an intellectual advance (Delaney 1998:147).

Abraham's action is to rise early and depart. The text has the language of urgency. Does this demonstrate his amazing faith, or is it another way for the text to use silence to deceive? Is it possible that by this action Abraham can evade facing Sarah and telling her of what he is meaning to do? The text does not explicitly state that Abraham was moved by religiosity or a sense of urgency of the need to make the sacrifice (Gossai 1995:149)

Abraham moves further and further away from Sarah by moving closer and closer to the place of sacrifice. The sense of separation and distancing leaps out. While the "third day" inference here alludes to the wider Biblical usage of this notion, pointing to the sealing of relationships and the granting of new life, there is the odour of death in this text, the death of Sarah and the death of Isaac. Sarah has been exiled in her own house (Gossai 1995:150).

God makes the covenant with Abraham alone, and does not include Sarah. By this action God gives sanction to the leadership of the patriarch over his tribe and family. The covenant mentions Sarah only as the bearer of Abraham's "seed" (Genesis 17.16). Abraham and Sarah are equally blessed, but the covenant relationship is only with males. A further proof of the covenant community as being exclusively male, lies in the choice of symbol as token of this covenant (Lerner 1986:190) — a symbol that excludes all women.

At the core of this story stand Abraham, gender and generativity. Procreation is imagined as the vehicle for channeling Divine creativity to earth, but only men embody this power. The significance of this story of Abraham lies in the fact that it represents the symbolic establishment of patriarchy — the dominance of the idea that men are (or can be) authors of children as God is author of life in general. Abraham became the father of faith because he obeyed God. God's will then flows through the father to become identical with him. As authority descends, responsibility is shifted upwards; so that each can say that he was only obeying higher orders.

This system, unwittingly, allows the abdication of responsibility by men (Delaney 1998:148).

#### **5.5.6. Questions Asked to the Text**

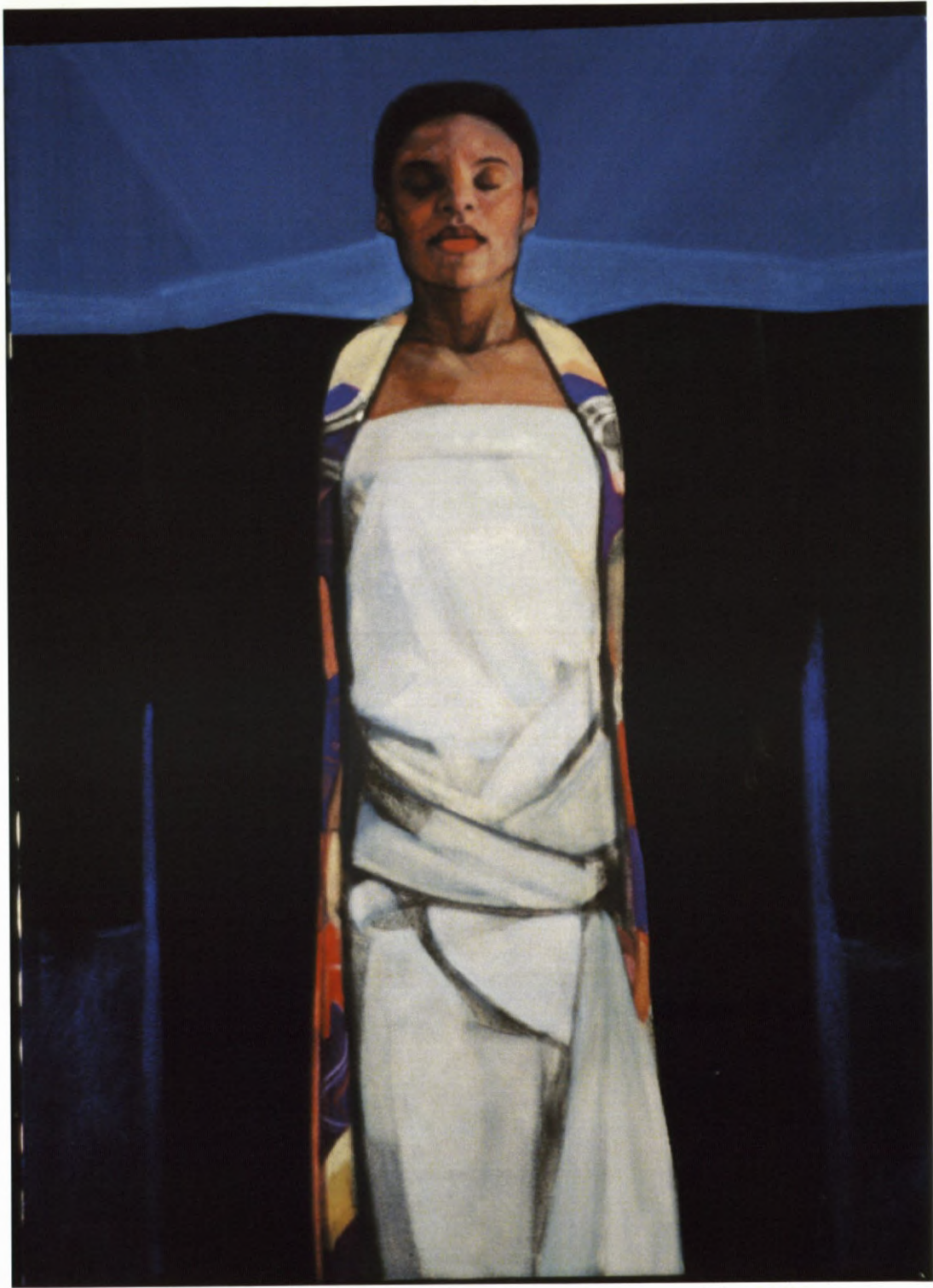
The tale of Abraham offers endless possibilities for interpretation from feminist perspective, as is seen in the sections above. For the sake of brevity, I will not go into each possibility in what follows. A brief description would suffice on the use of the template of questions I have drawn up, when used on this text. Sections on creative actualization are possible to action, but for just one individual, this is not always feasible since the group did not discuss this specific narrative. Reasons for this are listed earlier.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

Abraham is a main character with Isaac and Sarah being acted upon or left out altogether. Once again, the narrative shows the power of life and death to be residing in the hands of the father. Traditionally the text is interpreted and explained in light of Abraham's great faith and obedience. Men have benefited from this interpretation, since it has served as a model for women and children to just remain obedient to the male head of the household, and everything will turn out right. This presentation is not far from the presentation of the Biblical text. Children and women (who have been left out of the picture altogether) have been harmed since an unquestioning obedience has traditionally been expected of them. A stereotype in the narrative is that of the wise father, acting on his own, doing what he does without explaining any of his actions, and making all things work out to the best. In leaving out the female experience, the text manifests its patriarchal slant. By simply leaving out the female character in this important scene when the life of a child is at stake, a statement of the secondary status of women in their own households is made.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is Abraham's obedience to God and his unquestioning actions in sacrificing Isaac. One can read against the grain of the text by questioning the absence of Sarah, the silence of Isaac and Abraham's obedience and hasty actions. Isaac's voice is silenced, with Sarah being bodily removed altogether. These voices can be made audible through creative imagining. In order to include Sarah, who has been left out, a story needs to be written with her as main character, sharing her possible views and actions with the reader. Women do not form a part of this text. God does save Isaac, indicating that He does not wish the child to be killed or



**WOMAN OFFERED 4**  
JANET MCKENZIE



sacrificed, which offers hope in this text, redeeming it from becoming a total text of terror. It is possible to imagine that Sarah might have acted completely different were she in Abraham's shoes with regards to the sacrifice of her son.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

As explained earlier, this text, to me, is the Word of God. When God redeems Isaac and offers an animal instead, this offers some redemptive perspective if one ignores the problematic demand for the offering in the first place. This substitution may be used to empower people in their struggle against oppression — God does not mean for us to always be the sacrifice, and will Himself provide a substitute. The unquestioning problematic offering of a son and obedience to death for something that is difficult to align with God's character should be problematised. This might also be proclaimed to serve patriarchal interests — an unquestioning following is the desire of any patriarchal structure.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

Since the focus group did not handle this narrative and actualization is mostly something that asks the input of more than one individual, I do not go into this aspect in detail. I can, however envision how the whole narrative can, by means of paintings and visual art, be dialogued from a different perspective, highlighting Sarah's reaction and Isaac's questioning.

### **5.6. GENESIS 31: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RACHEL**

This narrative was chosen due to the refreshing new reading that becomes possible when one does a close reading of specifically Rachel's words to her father. A hermeneutics of suspicion brings a breath of fresh air to otherwise stale traditional readings of this narrative.

The story of Rachel is often overlooked within the bigger story of Jacob's life. This woman, when read closely and with attention, shows remarkable courage in resisting the patriarchal slant of the text. Rachel is definitely not a character who silently stands by while she gets buried in the text. Her voice rises time and again, and her actions speak of boldness. Through her intricate double speech she criticizes and shows herself a worthy opponent who can strategize and make use of the few means she as woman had at her disposal for justice in ancient times. Her story does not just start in Genesis 31, but earlier, when she is one of two wives, and the barren

one, at that. The text strives to cast her into the mould previously occupied by Sarah, but her actions soon prove different from those of the well-known matriarch.

### 5.6.1. Motherhood and Female Value

Jacob acquires two wives and loves one more than the other (Genesis 29.30). The situation leads to a variation on the barrenness motif: the favourite wife is initially barren while God blesses the unloved wife with a child. A child-bearing contest begins and once again the androcentric perspective is overwhelming: a woman is valued for her ability to produce sons (Dinah, the daughter, is only passingly mentioned in Genesis 30.21) (Exum 1985:79).

Rachel envies her sister's fruitfulness and vents her frustration on Jacob (30.1). Her anger reminds the reader of Sarah's anger. The woman's dissatisfaction with her position is recognized, but no attention is given to the real source of the problem — the patriarchal system. The only avenue left to the matriarchs is to vent their anger at their husbands (Exum 1985:79). Venting their anger at their husbands, however, does not seem to have too much effect. The men do not change the system, and do not even criticize it.

The story of Rachel furthermore highlights the reification of women and the instrumental use of wives. No place is this clearer than her statement before offering her handmaiden to Jacob: "*Give me children, or else I die*". When God at last opened her womb she again proves this by saying that God has taken away her reproach (Lerner 1986:92).

The focus of the foregoing section on Rachel does not linger on this status crisis through the birthing of sons. In this section, I rather want to move on and focus on the next event in this woman's life: her complaint against her father, and what she did because of it. The short foray into the birthing background is simply done to prove that these two sisters find themselves knee-deep in the patriarchal system where women do not have much say in what happens to them, and to paint the background of Rachel's distrust of Jacob's handling of her problems and acting on her behalf.

### 5.6.2. The Women's Complaint

The story of Rachel must be set within the wider picture of events in the story. The writer focuses on the male characters (Jacob and Laban) and their dispute, which is resolved through a covenant agreement. Yet, this is but one of many disputes in the story. This specific text gives a clear example of other (female) complainants (Rachel and Leah) who do not have access to negotiation, covenant contracts or justice. Vv 14 -16 gives an account of Rachel and Leah who are expressing their complaints to Jacob. Their father Laban has devoured their money. In the story the complaints serve to express the women's willingness to follow Jacob and leave their father's house (Lapsley 1998:235).

The narrative sees the women's complaint as legitimate:

1. Rachel and Leah almost never agree, but on this aspect they unite in their complaint.
2. Laban is painted as a hypocrite who neglected his daughters. He claims to seek a goodbye-kiss from his daughters, while the story shows that he is trying to retrieve his *teraphim* (Lapsley 1998:235-236).
3. The narrative further legitimizes the women's complaint by structuring it similarly to that of the men. All three parties begin their accusations with a string of angry questions directed at the offending party:

Vv26 & 36: Jacob and Laban begin the speech with two angry rhetorical questions.

Vv 14-15a: The women begin their complaint the same way.

The major difference comes when the women cannot and do not address their complaints directly to the offending party. Since their anger is never directly directed to Laban, he cannot and does not respond. This results in the fact that the dispute cannot be resolved the same way as the one between Jacob and Laban. Reconciliation is not possible since the women cannot participate in types of negotiation that result in reconciliation (Lapsley 1998:236). The writer shows that for women, communication and complaint had to go a different route than that of men.

### 5.6.3. Rachel Steals the *Teraphim*

In Genesis 31 Rachel steals her father's *teraphim* (images of household deities/protecting figurines) and smuggles them into her tent to sit on them. When her father

Laban comes looking for them, she says to him *Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for I have the way of women* (v35).

In Rachel's case, her interests and complaints are conventionally understood to be represented by Jacob in the dispute with Laban in so far as they are parallel to his own interests (Lapsley 1998:237). Scholars find various explanations for Rachel's theft. What is clear, is that there is a link between Rachel's theft and her anger towards her father. Interestingly it seems that even after having expressed her anger to Jacob, Rachel apparently fears that he will not adequately represent her interests in any dispute with Laban (Lapsley 1998:237).

From the story it seems that Rachel cannot accuse Laban openly. She therefore gets justice through devious and extra-legal means: she steals what she believes to be rightfully hers. In the story this woman experiences injustice on two levels:

1. She cannot speak within the established structures of the legal system, and
2. Her father has cheated her of her inheritance.

By stealing the *teraphim*, Rachel settles for herself the complaint against Laban, but does she have anything to say about her exclusion from due process? (Lapsley 1998: 238).

#### 5.6.4. Rachel's Double Words

A question arises at this point: Why does Rachel say what she is saying in precisely this way?

Rachel's words to Laban have meanings on various levels: in their most obvious sense (*I cannot stand up before you because I am having my period*) her words are probably deceitful and for that the status of her menstrual cycle is irrelevant. But there is a second level on which her words are true in another way: they reveal the inequity of her own situation in the context of the story (specifically) and that of women in ancient Israelite culture (generally). These words of Rachel do not only have descriptive power, but also embody a discourse of resistance. Rachel's words give an example of subtle protest against the patriarchal discourse and social structures that want to silence her and all women (Lapsley 1998:234).

After the two women tell Jacob of their anger towards their father, the next time Rachel speaks is to Laban himself.

Laban is outraged and frantic when he finds his *teraphim* stolen. He follows Jacob and launches a search. The *teraphim* have been stuffed into a camel's saddle on which Rachel is sitting when Laban enters the tent. She tells her father (she is angry with him) that he must not be angry with her for not getting up, as she has the ways of women (v35). This statement is noteworthy:

1. Rachel's plea that Laban not be angry is ironic since she is angry with him.
2. Then comes the explanation, "I cannot rise before you". In light of her anger and theft in order to get justice for herself, this apology is probably a lie. The truth is that Rachel cannot get justice through conventional channels where one "does rise" to confront an adversary (Lapsley 1998:238).

Gunkel cites Lev 19.32 as the source of the filial duty to rise before the elders. But the three other instances of קָם (qwm lpn') with a person as its object all occur in contexts where confrontation is taking place. In every case except Leviticus 19, "to rise before a person" does not signify politeness or respect, but rather the ability to confront an adversary (Lapsley 1998:238-239).

Rachel's speech is better defined as a "hidden polemic" which is a subcategory of double-voiced discourse in Bakhtin's schema. He describes it as follows:

*In the hidden polemic, however, discourse is directed towards an ordinary referential object, naming it, portraying, expressing, and only indirectly striking a blow at the other's discourse... (Bakhtin in Lapsley 1998:240).*

Rachel's speech is noteworthy because it has a double-voiced character. Her words carry meaning on two levels. On the first level, meaning equals the words spoken. She refers to her lack of right behaviour for not getting up since she is menstruating. On the subtextual level, her words refer to confrontational and juridical procedures (male controlled). By saying what she is saying in the way she is saying it, she is criticizing the structures of society that exclude her from legal process. These words of Rachel carry two ideologies in the mouth of the same speaker (an ideology of servility and an ideology of resistance), but her fascinating way of speaking is that these two ideologies are present in the same WORDS (Lapsley 1998:240).

Three distinct meanings arise from Rachel's speech.

1. Rachel deceives her father by telling him she is menstruating. Ironically Rachel is transforming the restraining menstrual purity laws to use as weapon against her father.

2. Rachel is critically describing the world she lives in: as woman she does not have access to the same legal processes that Jacob and Laban (and all other men) do. An alternative translation clarifies this meaning even more: *The way of women is upon me*. This phrase would better describe the onus of bearing this condition of women in a male-dominated society. On this level Rachel is saying: "I have the condition of women in this society — I cannot dispute with you publicly and legally".
3. Rachel is also saying something about her available options to rectify the injustice done to her. She has chosen extra-legal ways to get justice by stealing the *teraphim* (this would replace her squandered inheritance). The troubling implication in the text is that women have to find other ways of securing justice: *I cannot get justice through your legal means, but I have the way of women, that is, I have unofficial, unsanctioned means of getting justice*. Rachel's way of getting justice is not the way of men (through established process) but the way of women (any way she can).

Rachel's words lashes out against dominant male communication that restricts her access to juridical process (Lapsley 1998:243).

#### **5.6.5. Women's Secondary Status in the Story**

In the text, women and their story clearly have a secondary status. Rachel's story is actually similar to that of Jacob, but due to this secondary status of the female story the female characters are not allowed the same space to develop. Rachel, like Jacob, has ambitions for her own life and the lives of her children, but the story does not permit her the character development necessary for her ambitions to be realized. The fact that female characters largely hamper their men, limits the capacity of their dreams to shape reality (Lapsley 1998:245).

#### **5.6.6. Rachel Fights the Patriarchal Grain of the Text**

Pardes pointed out several instances in Rachel's story where she resists the narrative restrictions to her ambition, although that ambition must ultimately die prematurely, like Rachel herself. Ambition belongs mainly to men in the Bible. Pardes sees Jacob's curse in Genesis 32.32 (his damaged hip) as the means by which the narrative curses Rachel's ambition (Pardes in Lapsley 1998:245).

Rachel remains a woman who fights the odds of the text. When she gives her double-meaning speech to Laban, she comes close to self-representation. She seems to be fighting for personhood and the status of full character before the story cuts her off in the form of her own premature death (Lapsley 1998:246).

#### 5.6.7. Social Shifts Implied by Rachel's Action

The story of Rachel could also offer proof of a time when marriage was matrilocal (the husband resides with the bride's people). The Bible calls matrilocal marriage *beena* marriage. It allowed the woman greater autonomy and allowed her a divorce. Patrilocal or *בַּעַל* (*ba'al*) marriage, did not offer a woman these things. Jacob's courtship of Laban's daughter and his eventual return to his own people could be implying the transition from matrilocality to patrilocality. Jacob was pledged to return to his father's house even before he came to Laban (Lerner 1986:168).

In this light, one can understand why the move away, would be such a loss for Laban. This also throws light on the problem of the theft of the *teraphim*. If they are to be taken as house-gods, they could signify legal title to an estate. In this light, Rachel took the *teraphim* because she believed her father would deny Jacob the legal share in his estate. By also bringing the *teraphim* from her father's house to her husband's house, Rachel further emphasizes the change from matrilocality to patrilocality (Lerner 1986:168).

The actions of this woman speak on various levels and in varying ways — all adding to the richness of this little-read tale of a woman hiding stolen things from her father. In the story of Rachel, it is interesting to note that the text does not keep silent about Rachel's theft, and although it is not condoned, it is not judged negatively either. It almost seems as if the writer let this case stand as reproof against the legal system's inability to listen to women, and as example of the measures women have to go to in their search for personal justice.

#### 5.6.8. Questions Asked to the Text

In this section I will not focus upon the narrative where Rachel and Leah compete with each other for the affection of their husband by having sons. I will limit my comments to the narrative where Rachel steals her father's *teraphim*.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

In this specific section of the narrative Rachel is a main actor, Laban is acted upon, and Jacob is out of the immediate picture. The social convention painted here is that of the honour due to the father when visiting the female tent, and the importance of the *teraphim* when the daughters want to claim their inheritance. Daughters normally have a very low social status, and the father the highest status. In this tale, Rachel does not rise before her father as is due, and Laban cannot exert his will and power over her, as he is used to. This text is normally downplayed against the other narrative of Rachel and Lea in competition for Jacob's affection. This presentation is not true to the Biblical text — this narrative is important of own volition. Men have benefited from the traditional downplaying of this narrative. It serves a male interest to only portray women as being competitive around male attention, and vying for prominence through having children. Women have been harmed in their traditional ignorance of this tale. Laban is given negative attributes in this tale, something that rarely happens. He is shown to be wasteful of his daughters' inheritance. The stereotype of identifying females with wiliness comes to the fore in this tale. This text is not of itself patriarchal in my view, but traditional downplaying of it is. The text is used against women by simply keeping silent about it. This text does not, in my opinion, legitimate women's secondary status, but since so little is made of it, it fails to be used by women as a tale of liberation. An underlying supposition in the text is that women can only gain justice by means of extra-judicial action and wiliness.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of this particular narrative is the justice Rachel gains by unethical means and trickery. One can read against the grain of the text by focusing on what she gains, how she turns the male system on its head, and how she uses laws restricting women to her advantage. Rachel's is not a silenced voice in the text, but more can be made of this tale if it is lifted to the forefront of consciousness and Bible study. The fact that the text does not condemn Rachel's action should serve as great mandate for women and offer them hope and liberation. By remembering Rachel's quick thinking and her clever word use, women can honour this ability in themselves.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. This text can be a great example of the ability of the powerless to turn the tables on those in power by using their own oppressive structures against the oppressors. By smart thinking and wit one can use systems in



a new way, and the fact that the text does not condemn this, offers the oppressed and subjugated a Biblical mandate for such action.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This text does not so much need to be dramatized/actualized differently as much as it needs to simply be proclaimed more. By demanding Bible study on this text more often, and pressurizing the Church to make more use of this text in sermons, a great deal can be done towards working emancipation in hand and empowering women.

### **5.7. GENESIS 34: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DINAH'S RAPE**

Anita Diamant's novel *The Red Tent* opens with the following words in the Prologue:

*We have been lost to each other for so long. My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.*

*This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged.*

*It's a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again. But some did. Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text...(Diamant 1997:1).*

The rape of Dinah is an unsettling tale that creates great discomfort for female readers. A closer look is warranted at this story.

The following reading is based on a literary reading with influence from rhetorical criticism. It divides Genesis 34 into five scenes:

1. The rape (vv1-3)
2. The reaction (vv4-7)
3. The negotiation (vv8-24)
4. The killing (vv25-29)
5. The final conversation between Jacob and his sons (vv 30-31).

In this short study, attention will not be given to other less central aspects of the chapter. Because the first scene is the key for understanding the rest, this

interpretation views only the rape (vv1-3). Three verses describe the immediate events of the rape. Verse 1 introduces Dinah and her activity.

### 5.7.1. Verse 1

1. *And went-out Dinah, the-daughter-of Leah*  
*Whom she-had-borne to-Jacob*  
*To-see the-daughters-of-the-land.*

Two rare things happen in this verse.

1. Dinah as subject goes out to visit other women. This is a rare occurrence in a Biblical narrative.
2. The introduction of a daughter by her mother's name is also rare. It only happens here and in Genesis 36.39. Even in the book of Ruth, Naomi does not name the mothers of her daughters-in-law.

A close literary reading of the text gives the reader insight into the dynamics of Dinah's various relationships. In Genesis 34.1 Jacob is only mentioned in relation to Leah, who rhetorically links Dinah and Jacob. The position of the father and daughter shows distance, which might be an early indication of Jacob's lacking concern for Dinah's wellbeing. Had her father shown more concern, the whole tale might have turned out differently.

Women begin and end this verse. One woman (identified by her mother) is seeing women of another culture and race. If the story had stopped here, women could have remained the main characters. But a man sees Dinah and his action changes everything.

### 5.7.2. VERSE 2a

- 2a. *But-saw her Shechem,*  
*the-son-of-Hamor,*  
*the-Hivite,*  
*the-prince-of-the-land.*

Shechem is a prince, and is later described as someone "most honoured" (v19), which made people listen to him and obey his request. He sees Dinah and as high-born takes what he wants. By his action he prevents Dinah from seeing the women of the land. While she was the subject in v1, Dinah is now an object in v2. The violence begins.

### 5.7.3. VERSE 2b

2b. *And-he-took her,*  
*then-he-laid-her,*  
*and-he-raped-her.*

The events are not delayed by references to time and place. Shechem is the subject and Dinah the object. A combination of three verbs describe the rapid-fire action of the rape. They are attached to three pronouns and they underscore the increasing severity of the violence:

And-he-took-her,  
 then-he-laid-her,  
 and-he-raped-her (v2b).

Where the first verb לקח (*lqh*) means "to take", the second שכב (*škb*) is connected with the object-marker את (*'et*). It describes Dinah as object of the activity. Shechem does not lie "with" her. The marker indicates that he acted without regard to Dinah. Dinah does not consent. Shechem "laid her" without laying "with" her.

The third verb in the *Piel* also poses a problem. Some arguments are that it does not translate to "rape". ענה (*'nh*) does, however, signify an act of violence. Mandelkern offered the Latin equivalent to refer to violent and oppressive action. Francis Brown, SR Driver and Charles A Briggs translated the verb as:

Humble, mishandle, afflict  
 Humble, a woman by cohabitation  
 Afflict  
 Humble, weaken.

Wilhelm Gesenius translated the verb as "to weaken a woman, through rape" (Gesenius 1921:604). These reference books understood the verb to mean a violent interaction, including rape (Scholz 1998:166-167).

The three verbs can also be treated as verbal hendiadys, a feature of the Hebrew syntax in which two verbs are used to describe one activity. They emphasize Shechem's increasing use of violence against Dinah so that v2b culminates in the action of rape.

Despite the increasing force indicated by the words themselves, the text does not overtly disapprove. It does, however, show its disapproval in a less obvious sense. The words indicating increasing violence follow close on each other, giving no time to ponder and catch a breath, or even run from it. Reading these words gives the

reader the experience of being hunted and stalked, just as Dinah must have felt. The action takes place too fast for the reader to act and discuss feelings of unease — the same feelings Dinah might have shared. There is no father to turn to and ask for protection — indeed, there is not time to even ask.

#### 5.7.4. Verse 3

3. *And-stayed-close his-nepes to-Dinah*  
*The-daughter-of Jacob*  
*And-he-lusted-after the-young-woman*  
*And-he-attempted to-soothe the-young woman.*

Three verbs report the immediate consequences of the rape. The first is דָּבַק (*dbq*), combined with the pronoun בּ (*b*) and the noun נֶפֶשׁ (*npš*). The verb is often translated as “to love”. But is this what really happened? Did Schechem grow to love Dinah?

Another translation of נֶפֶשׁ (*npš*) is possible. Brown, Driver and Briggs translated it as the “seat of the emotions and passions: desire”. With this understanding the phrase would translate: His desire remained close to Dinah, and would refer to Schechem’s volitional appetite. This understanding of נֶפֶשׁ (*npš*) describes the sexually objectifying dimension of Schechem’s motives, and it is therefore preferred. The phrase then reads: “His desire remained close to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob”.

Within the context of rape, the second verb of v3, אָהַב (*’hb*) does not mean “to love”. It rather describes Schechem’s intent to treat Dinah as he pleases after the rape (Scholz 1998:168-169). In the context of rape the verb does not refer to mutual intimacy. It indicates his desire as a “lusting after”. In Genesis 34 the verb expresses Schechem’s desire to exert his will for sex over Dinah.

The third verb, דָּבַר (*dbr*), describes Schechem’s attempt to make Dinah compliant. He has to calm her because she did not consent. Where many translations read “he spoke tenderly to her”, George Fischer proposed that it be translated as “to try to talk against a negative opinion” or “to change a person’s mind”. The phrase occurs ten times in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 34.3 and 50.21, Judges 19.3, 1 Samuel 1.13, 2 Samuel 19.8, Isaiah 40.2, Hosea 2.16, Ruth 2.13, 2 Chronicles 30.22, and 32.6.

This phrase always appears in the context of fear, anxiety, sin or offense, when the situation is wrong, or danger is in the air. Someone speaks to the heart of the fearful character to resolve the frightening situation, talking against a prevailing negative opinion. In the context of Genesis 34, it refers to Shechem's attempt to change Dinah's negative opinion and to make her accept his attentions. The phrase then reads: "he attempted to soothe the young woman".

By interpreting Genesis 34.1-3 in this manner, the notion that rape is sexual violence, is affirmed. When rape is accentuated, love talk is not present (Scholz 1998:170-171).

#### **5.7.5. Reading Dinah's Narrative as a Feminist**

What makes this reading a "right" feminist reading?

1. It openly acknowledges an interest in reading the narrative from a feminist perspective.
2. It pointedly chose the stance of the subjugated woman.
3. Interest and stance illuminated the exegesis.

The above statement does not imply that all other interpretations are "wrong". If interpreters could more clearly discuss their interests and stances, other "right" readings would emerge. An ensuing plurality of readings will then generate meanings from a plurality of contexts, and ultimately create better accounts of Genesis 34 (Scholz 1998:171).

#### **5.7.6. The Patriarchal Undergirding of Rape**

Some feminist theologians state that the story of Dinah circles out far wider than just the issue of rape itself. Gerda Lerner identifies another aspect at stake. For her, the story of Dinah highlights another issue: that of slavery. She goes on to show that comments on slavery furthermore follow the same flawed lines as commentaries discussing the narrative of Dinah's rape. Orlando Patterson writes on slavery, but with typical androcentric focus, subsumes female slaves under the generic "he" and thereby ignores the historical priority of female enslavement. He misses the different experiences of slavery between men and women (Lerner 1986:80). The same applies to rape. Men and women cannot possibly have the same experience of rape, and exclusively male comment on the topic borders on the absurd.

In the case of war, rape plays a special role. By raping the women of the conquered people, two meanings were achieved: it dishonoured the women, and served as symbolic castration of their men. Patriarchal men who are unable to protect the sexual purity of their females, are truly impotent. From the second millennium BC until the present day, it has been practice to rape the women of a conquered group. This practice has been resistant to "progress" to more ethical conduct. Gerda Lerner explains that the reason for this resistance is because it is built into the structure of patriarchy (Lerner 1986:80).

Men link their honour with the ability of autonomy and self-decision. Women under patriarchal systems do not dispose of and decide for themselves. Their bodies and sexuality belong to the men in their lives. As such, women do not have "honour". In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC the concept that a woman's honour lies in her virginity, was not yet fully developed. The sexual enslavement of (captive) women was a step towards the development of patriarchal institutions with the sustaining ideology of female "honour" in chastity (Lerner 1986:80).

The various laws against rape all incorporate the principle that the injured party of a rape is the husband or the father of the raped woman (Lerner 1986:116).

Jewish law forced the rapist to marry the woman he had raped, and specifies that he may not divorce her. This implicitly forces the woman into an indissoluble marriage with her rapist (Deut 22.28-29) (Lerner 1986:170).

Patriarchy relies on rape, albeit unconscious. The fear of rape keeps women in check, and makes them controllable. If reason fails, one can always resort to the utmost form of coercion —rape— in a patriarchal society condoning such practices. In a society with one of the highest rape statistics in the world, and an AIDS pandemic almost unheard of in other parts of the globe, rape takes on a meaning of its own. Women of all races, classes and ages are getting raped in the South Africa of today. Older women are raped because it is believed that sex with an old woman can cure of AIDS. The same reasoning applies to raping children. Women can definitely not wander out alone, at any time of the day or night. Women visiting other women today, wander out at their own peril.

### 5.7.7. Blaming the Victim

Some commentaries marginalized the phenomenon of rape by blaming Dinah for what happened. Friedrich WJ Schroder stated that it was wrong for Dinah to visit the other women. This familiarity was inappropriate for a daughter of Israel to do with the daughters of Canaan (2 Cor 6.17). It is also given as explanation for why the punishment followed soon. He supported his view with reference to the NT and to his understanding of nature:

*Dinah is dishonoured violently because she roams about more freely than she should, leaving the father's house. She should have stayed at home, as the apostle orders (Tit 2.5) and nature recommends, because virgins, like wives, should be keepers of the house (Scholz 1998:156).*

By blaming Dinah, the rape is marginalized. Scholars of forensic medicine and the Bible unfortunately do not seem to treat rape as an issue worthy in itself (Scholz 1998:156).

By blaming the victim in commentaries, distrust is created among female Christians. Where should a female rape victim turn if even the Church is experienced as all too willing to blame her? If not this story in the text itself, then at least unsympathetic commentaries about it should give an indication of the great need in society for a sympathetic handling of rape victims.

### 5.7.8. Rape in Western Society

Feminist scholars on the other hand, understand rape as societal violence. Liz Kelly did a lot to demonstrate the significance for understanding rape as part of heterosexuality. According to Kelly, there is no clear distinction between consensual sex and rape, but a continuum of pressure, threat, coercion and force. The connection of rape and sexual behaviour demonstrates that the Western gender hierarchy produces only a difference in degree, not in kind, between rape and heterosexuality. Rape emerges as a societally and culturally institutionalized expression of violence present in gender dynamics (Scholz 1998:161).

MacKinnon agrees with Susan Brownmiller that women's gender status is a function of rape since the threat of rape benefits all men. Rape is a man's act, and being raped is a woman's experience. To be rapable, defines what a woman is. Sex

makes a woman a woman. Sex is what women are for (McKinnon in Stratton 1995:187).

The tale of Dinah stands as stark painting of the reality of the raped woman. By dusting off this narrative and offering it for discussion and preaching in the Church, a great step is taken towards taking a sympathetic stance towards women and other "rapable" people. Due to the fact that the raping of men is so often covered and hushed up, it is difficult to even find statistics on this phenomenon. I would think that a raped male goes through the same agony as a woman, but with unique male experiences which would need to be brought to the open by some other study.

In South Africa, rape statistics are fluid due to the fact that often, rape is not even reported for various reasons. A Church that openly takes a sympathetic stance, should prove to be a welcome refuge for such hurt parties. Together with such a stance, should fall the exercise of a programme of human dignity and healing offered to such victims.

#### **5.7.9. Questions Asked to the Text**

The context of South Africa as a country rife with rape and violence against women makes this narrative very relevant to our times and situation. This narrative was not discussed in the focus group, and I henceforth only briefly offer answers to the question-stencil I developed.

#### **QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION**

Shechem is a main actor and he acts his violence out on Dinah. The tale represents those ancient social conventions surrounding rape — that of a woman having to marry her rapist, the repayment to the woman's family etc. Shechem is a ruler and Dinah has the lowly status of being a daughter. This text, once again, is one of those which are not normally presented to children or adults. It is astounding to find out how few people know this tale. By simply never proclaiming it, patriarchal ends are served. Since women do not know about this tale, they have very little to find in the Bible as far as sympathy goes when rape is mentioned. This lack of knowledge is extremely harmful. When traditional interpreters blame Dinah herself for being raped, they perpetuate further violence against the victim and serve the ends of patriarchy and subjugation of women. The underlying supposition to be found in traditional interpretation would seem to be one of women putting themselves in



## AIN'T I A WOMAN?

Sojourner Truth

That man over there say

A woman needs to be helped into carriages

And lifted over ditches

And to have the best place everywhere.

Nobody ever helped me into carriages

Or over mud puddles

Or gives me the best place...

And ain't I a woman?

Look at me,

Look at my arm!

I have plowed and planted

And gathered into barns

And no man could head me...

And ain't I a woman?

I could work as much

And eat as much as a man —

When I could get it —

And bear the lash as well...

And ain't I a woman?

I have borne thirteen children

And seen most sold into slavery

And when I cried out a mother's grief

None but Jesus heard me...

And ain't I a woman?

That man in black there say

A woman can't have as much rights as a man

'cause Christ wasn't a woman.

Where did your Christ come from?

From God and a woman!

Man had nothing to do with him!

If the first woman God ever made

Was strong enough to turn the world

Upside down, all alone,

Together women ought to be able to turn it

Rightside up again.

Sojourner Truth in Clifford 2001:158

danger when they venture outside the boundaries of their homesteads and domestic lives. This could be a strong ideology in the text, which is not true to reality. The text neglects Dinah's experience by keeping silent about any of her feelings and not offering her any chance of speaking for herself or gaining justice for herself.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be the fact that Dinah puts herself in danger when she ventures outside her domestic life. It is a case of: she brought this on herself. By reading on the syntactic level one starts to see that the text itself might be giving negative commentary on what is happening. Dinah's silenced voice can be given speech by creatively imagining what her reactions and motivations might have been. Women need to be taught that violence should not be a natural occurrence if one ventures out. Women seeking the company of women should not meet with violence from men. By pointing out the text's negative outlook on what transpired, women can be given affirmation that the Bible itself does not blame the victim.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. By working with this text, the Church can start to offer the rape victim sympathy and a safe place to heal. The Church should denounce the slant of the text whereby a woman venturing out on her own, meets with violence. The Church should affirm women's ability and mandate to seek the company of others without any fear. By focusing on that affirmation, women are also given a mandate to meet with other women without being ostracized.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

Anita Diamant has written a novel called *The Red Tent* which offers a story and creative re-imagining of the life of Dinah. This story gives Dinah a voice and imagines her life from birth to death. In this tale, Dinah becomes a midwife who lives for assisting others by bringing life into the world.

### **5.8. GENESIS 38: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT TAMAR**

The reason why this text is chosen is because this little-known tale is very important for women in their search for Biblical mandates of subjected females bettering their lot and taking the course of their lives into their own hands. In order to introduce this narrative to a wider audience and make it more known among especially a female audience, attention is henceforth given to this text.

Genesis 38 is placed as break into the Joseph story (Genesis 37-50). A short summary of the story is henceforth given. Judah separates from his brothers and marries Batshua. They have three sons called Er, Onan and Shelah. Er marries Tamar, and for some reason is eventually killed by God. Judah tells Onan to be a levirate to Tamar, but he does not live up to expectations. He too, is killed by God.

Judah concludes that Tamar is the cause of the death of his sons and he sends Tamar home to wait until Shelah grows up. From the context, the reader knows that he has no plan to give her his last son to marry.

At this point of the story, the key analogue to the law in Deuteronomy 25 is found. One son remains to be married to the widow of his brothers.

Judah and his friend go to Timnah for sheep-sheering. Tamar is informed of this and sits by the road waiting for her father-in-law. Judah thinks she is a harlot and propositions her. She becomes pregnant, and when Judah wants to have her burned, she produces proof that he himself is the father.

He declares her more righteous than him. Judah never sleeps with her again, and the sons Perez and Zerah are born.

This account does not follow exactly the prescriptions of Levirate marriage as in Deuteronomy 25, but does presuppose something similar. Much of the narrative's impact derives from the variations, and challenges the expectations generated by Levirate Law.

Tamar's motives when she sits by the road are unclear, but the result is the engendering of the progeny that is the goal of the woman in Deut 25.

Nel points out that Tamar secured an offspring for herself through unethical means, but that her deed was justified in terms of the talion principle, since Judah had deprived her from having an offspring. By her deed she additionally secured Judah's offspring (Perez) who would play a major role in the dominant family line of David (Nel 1994:23). The narrator makes it evident that the important family line of Judah was seriously threatened, but that it was secured by a judicial order that allows equal

retaliation (talion), despite the fact that the deed cannot be morally approved (Nel 1994:23).

Tamar comes to “an authority” for judgment. Here the irony is that she forces Judah to declare her right and indict himself.

In Matthew 1.3-5 Ruth and Tamar are associated with Bathsheba. The text may reflect awareness of the topos of women who go to extreme lengths to protect and maintain the Davidic line. Ruth and Tamar are associated with Levirate while Bathsheba is associated with the first two women. The last element of the story of Judah tells of the birth of Perez and Zerah, whose names also appear in the book of Ruth (Lyke 1997:96).

For a feminist reading of the story, it is necessary to identify the patriarchal ideology of motherhood as found in the tale of Moses. To read the story in light of Tamar's desperation for a son in order to ensure the Davidic line, is to misread the way in which the writer is almost having a joke at the expense of Judah. The explanation of these women's desperate attempts to ensure the Davidic line, is furthermore just too pat and simple. The text shows much more varied richness than just one such an explanation.

### 5.8.1. The Hebrew Widow

The most informative law on the אִלְמָתָא (*'almattu* — widow) comes from a clay tablet dating from the time of Tiglat Pileser I:

*If a woman is still dwelling in her father's house and her husband is dead and she has sons, she shall dwell in a house belonging to them where she chooses. If she has no son, her father-in-law shall give her to whichever of his sons he likes...or, if he pleases, he shall give her as a spouse to her father-in-law. If her husband and her father-in-law are dead and she has no son, she becomes a widow; she shall go where she pleases (Hiebert 1989:128).*

From the above, an אִלְמָתָא (*'almattu*) is a woman without males who are responsible for supporting her (Hiebert 1989:128). In the Biblical text it is tradition that a woman whose husband has died, keeps on being called his wife. Ruth is called “the wife of the dead man” (Ruth 4.5) and the “wife of Mahlon” (Ruth 4.10). The Levirate law also refers to the woman as “wife of the dead man” (Deut 25.5-10). Even though death

has ended the relationship between Tamar and Er, it has not ended the relationship between Tamar and Er's family with the mutual rights and obligations that both parties had to keep (Hiebert 1989:129-130).

Since Tamar has been married, she no longer belonged to the authority of her paternal kin. Proof of this lies in Judah's sentence of burning on Tamar despite the fact that she dwelt in her *bet-'ab* (בֵּית־אָב, *bet-'ab* — house of her father) (Hiebert 1989:130).

The Hebrew *almanah* (אַלְמָנָה — widow) existed on the fringes of society, without the benefit of kinship ties that give identity and protection. The *almanah* (אַלְמָנָה) had the double burden of living in this zone as a woman; she was bereft of kin on the one hand, but was also without a male who traditionally afforded a woman access to the public sphere (Hiebert 1989:130).

To be a widow in Israel, without sons or direct male kin, was one of the most marginal positions in society. There was little social sympathy for such women, and their economic circumstances were more often than not extremely dire.

### 5.8.2. Tamar's Action Defined

Can Tamar be called a harlot when she sits at the gate and propositions her father-in-law? Was she not perhaps just offering conversation or hospitality? Fornication and prostitution are two classes of activity designated in the Hebrew Bible with the same root *znh* (זָנָה). Tamar's action was not innocent. The words used makes this clear. At the same time, the text starts playing with the word *znh* (זָנָה) to point out the various inconsistencies in the handling of sexual freedom.

Judah first embraces a woman whom he identifies as a *zonah* (זֹנָה) (Genesis 38.15). Later on, he condemns to death a woman whose activity is called *zanah* (זָנָה), a daughter-in-law who has played the harlot. The irony of the situation is that the two women are one, and so is their actions, but the first instance is acceptable to Judah, while the second is not. In the first instance, *znh* (זָנָה) describes the woman's profession and thus her status as prostitute (tolerated though ostracized). In the

second instance זנה (*znh*) paints the activity of a woman whose socio-legal status as daughter-in-law makes this same activity a crime (Bird 1989:77-78).

### 5.8.3. Female Ingenuity Towers above Patriarchal Convention

The Lex Talionis holds that the end justifies the means. The law is on Tamar's side, and this is admitted by Judah at a later stage. There is no need to go to a court, and Tamar has a 100% proof that Judah is the guilty party. If Judah refuses her the right law, she has the right by law to help herself.

Tamar is a resourceful and cunning woman, and uses the means available to her by hook or by crook. Even the strict laws concerning illegitimate children and harlotry are obscured by her radical actions. The tale could stand in the light of the ability of the female marginal person to obscure strict patriarchal structures by radical, cunning, and ingenious action.

The interesting factor to the ending of the tale is that it almost seems as if the writer has to grudgingly give head. The woman proves stronger than convention, and, can it be said? It seems that God favours her actions even above the (male interpreted and given) laws of the land.

### 5.8.4. Is Tamar a Trickster?

The folkloric trickster narrative is a genre that is not unique to Israelite folklore (Jackson 2002:31). The Hebrew Bible has many trickster characters, among them Jacob as probably the best known male. But tricksters as females are also often found (Jackson 2002:31). When one works with the definition of a trickster as given by Susan Niditch, the first clue is the name itself. The trickster is a fascinating and universal folk hero, and brings change in a situation via trickery. The trickster has a low or lower status, which makes advancement through other means available to others, impossible. A trickster does not have power or might, but rather employs wit and cunning in devising a plot towards achieving their desired end (Niditch in Jackson 2002:32).

Engar points out another three characteristics unique to female tricksters in particular:

1. She uses her intelligence and thus shows a greater understanding of her family's and nations' needs than her male counterpart.
2. She understands God's purposes more closely as a matter of faith than her male counterpart.
3. In sexual matters she is not a passive sexual object, but determines when and with whom she will have sex and bear children (Jackson 2002:32).

Tamar is a trickster like Lot's daughters and Queen Esther. She has little status and has to use the means at her disposal (cleverness and sexuality) to secure her future. She devises her plan, waits until she can execute it, and acts flawlessly at the right moment (Jackson 2002:34).

#### 5.8.5. Ironic Wordplay in Tamar's Narrative

The story of Tamar abounds with irony, which is further heightened by the shape of the text itself.

1. Judah does not know (יָדַע — *recognize*) Tamar by the side of the road. He "knows" her in private when he has sexual relations with her. At the end, and after all is revealed, the reader is told that he does not ever "know" her again.
2. Tamar waits by the Enayim gate, which literally means "opening of the eyes" (פֶּתַח עֵינַיִם v 13). The implication is that Tamar sees (רָאָה) that Judah will not keep his promise. Judah sees her at this opening of the eyes gate, but does not know her.
3. Tamar, who has been denied her levir, discusses what Judah must give her when conducting their transaction (נָתַן).
4. Judah sends (שָׁלַחְתִּי) Hirah with his payment to pay his debt and reclaim his pledge, with no success. Tamar later sends (שָׁלַחָהּ — v25) Judah his pledge to obtain what she wants, and has success (Jackson 2002:39-40).

#### 5.8.6. Who Plays the Fool to the Trickster?

If ever there was a fool in a trickster narrative, Judah seems to be it. He has two sons who displease God and are killed at God's hand. Judah sends away a cunning woman who will return to "unravel" him. He does not recognize Tamar, his own family member. He refuses to fulfill his promise to his daughter-in-law, but keeps his

promise to a prostitute. He leaves proof of his presence with a prostitute after using her services, but is not man enough to return himself to pay her and obtain his possessions. Judah's final foolishness is to pronounce the judgment for a "crime" in which he himself has participated (Jackson 2002:40).

The men in this particular story appear to be acting as if they were in charge while all the time they were making fools of themselves. They are wrongheaded and irresponsible. They are shown up by Tamar, who is the only one who sees correctly and causes Judah to eventually open his eyes to reality. Genesis 38 allows the reader to smile in the face of patriarchy (Jackson 2002:40).

### **5.8.7. Feminist Theology in Tamar's Narrative**

What did the writer have in mind with this tale? Why is it in the Bible when it is so obviously a criticism of patriarchal dominance and thought? Why does it make such wonderful comic fun of the system?

One possibility is that the writer of this tale wanted to record a story that reveals iniquity and envisions a new reality. This is indeed comedy in a higher key, viewed through the lens of faith and inspired by God. The legacy is a world full of doorways to a transformed world. The writer invites the reader to step through this doorway and dream and live in a world turned upside-down from the norm. In this reality, patriarchy is not the status quo, since men are seen as fools when they think they are in total control, and women are valued not just for motherhood but also for intelligence, courage, inventiveness and creativity (Jackson 2002:46).

In choosing to criticize the patriarchal system in this way, the writer questions the base assumptions of the social order and envisions a completely inverted reality where there are no tricksters because there are no underdogs. It is possible, when seen in this light, that the writers of these trickster/patriarchal narratives were indeed the first feminist theologians (Jackson 2002:46).

### **5.8.8. Questions Asked to the Text**

Tamar's story has a lot to offer the modern female Christian. This tale shows how a woman without a voice and powerless against the societal structures of her time, is shown by the Biblical text to be more righteous than her father-in-law.



### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

In this narrative Tamar starts out as a character acted upon by Judah, but later takes justice into her own hands and acts it out on Judah. The social conventions shown in the tale refers to the *Levirate* and the *Lex Talionis*. The widow without a son's position is one of the most precarious in Israelite society — Tamar is truly a marginal figure. This text has been told more often than some of the others I have listed until now, but not much was ever made of the fact that Tamar turns Judah's injustice against himself. Traditional presentation does not necessarily harm women, although it does not necessarily affirm them, either. Judah is painted as someone who does not keep his word, while Tamar is painted as a woman living off her wits. The one stereotype I see is that of the woman having to ensure a progeny for herself in order to be of any worth and in order to secure her own future. In this sense, the text is patriarchal. The text depicts women's helplessness without the protection of males in their lives — be they husbands or sons. The underlying supposition is that women need men to give them validity. This text does not give the reader any insight into the way Tamar thinks or her motivations.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be the urgency with which Tamar needs to ensure her own future and security by either getting a husband or having sons. It is almost as if she has no value apart from males in her life. One can read against the grain by focusing on her ability to think out a plan of action and her cleverness in turning Judah's unrighteousness against him, rather than the outcome of having sons for the Davidic line. Tamar speaks remarkably little for someone who has such a huge case to settle. Could this be a case of actions speaking louder than words? One could also read this suspiciously by criticizing the text for downplaying her words so that the point is maybe not driven home too much! Women must be reminded about this text and taught that the Bible seems to condone cleverness and action in the cause of righteousness, even when it means exposing the powers of the day. The text seems very positive about the powerless widow getting the moral upperhand against her powerful father-in-law. Women can draw great strength from this in their fight against oppression and subjugation.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. It shows a classical case of the Bible being on the side of the underdog. People can use this in their emancipation. What should be

denounced, however, is the patriarchal thrust of the tale where Tamar's worth seems to reside in her ability to produce a male heir for the Davidic line.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

Francine Rivers has written a novel about the life of Tamar called *Unveiled* (Rivers 2003:13-118). It does not claim to be a feminist critical work, but there is much within this novel to offer women by means of the creative imagining of the woman Tamar. Too little is made, however, of Tamar's creative solution to ensure justice for herself in view of the ancient times she lived in. This woman showed truly remarkable fortitude for her times.

### **5.9. EXODUS 1-2: THE WOMEN IN THE LIFE OF MOSES**

This narrative was chosen due to its popularity since youth. All women in Judaism and Christianity grow up with the narrative of Moses in the basket and the roles his sister, mother, the midwives and Pharaoh's daughter played. What women have never experienced before, is a critical reading giving acclaim to these roles, and problematizing the patriarchal handling of women by firstly the text itself and traditional interpretation secondly.

One way of looking at the life of Moses is through the methods applied by JC Exum. Exum used a form of New Criticism to analyze her selected texts, which amounts to roughly the same as *close reading* and *rhetorical criticism*. New Criticism investigates the story in its present form, and assumes that the literary forms of the story will clarify the meaning thereof. This method led Exum to focus on stylistic characteristics like narrative arrangement, key words and phrases, the paralleling of characters, as well as tropes such as irony and unusual details like the fact that the names of two midwives are reported in Exodus. Exum found that all these devices work together to create the important role of women in the life of Moses. Exodus 1.8 - 2.10 was divided into two parts with three movements.

1. In the first part (Exodus 1.8-22) the Hebrews face grave danger. In the story, the structure shows that the Pharaoh ultimately yields his central position to women, and these midwives change the course of history by defying his command to kill the Hebrew male babies.
2. The second part (Exodus 2.1-10) deals with the danger facing Moses specifically. In this story, many women appear while men are strikingly absent or passive. The speech and action of women in Part 1 also shape the contours of Part 2.

Little attention is normally given to the roles various women played in the life of Moses and the exodus of Israel. They seem to get shadowed under the light shining on the central character of Moses himself. But are they really so insignificant, and can they be hailed as great examples of faith once the focus of exegesis falls on them from such an angle? In what follows, attention will be given specifically to women in the life of Moses.

The women of Exodus are also called the Mothers of the Exodus because of the great role they play in the life of Moses. One must also keep in mind that the Exodus has three figurative mothers:

Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who do not kill male Hebrew babies, and Moses' sister who became a great leader of the Exodus in own right (Exum 1985:80).

#### **5.9.1. Women Act from the Start**

The opening books of Exodus offer more female characters than many other places in the Old Testament. Although the hero of the bigger story is Moses, he is surrounded by six women and owes his life to them at various points in time (Schuller 1989:178).

The story begins with the actions of a daughter of Levi (Exodus 2.2-3). Moses' mother acts, but does not speak. Action and speech come from his sister Miriam as well as Pharaoh's daughter. Verse 4 has a small role assigned to Miriam, Moses' sister. The next scene shows activity by Pharaoh's daughter (v5-6), followed by Miriam's vital speech (v7). Miriam is crucial to the development of the story, and though she has little action and only one speech, she is the linking role between the two daughters (vv 4, 7). All three women are involved, and the action of the story moves quickly between them (vv 7-10) until an unnamed daughter gives Moses his name (Exum 1996:84).

Moses starts his life in the cradle formed by the care of various women. These women act right from the start of the book. Exodus does not portray women as passive receivers of circumstance, typical patriarchally-painted women whose role it is to bear what is placed on their paths. The women in the beginning of the book are active and strong. It is of interest to note that Moses' father is not even asked for advice with regards to possible actions to be taken to save his son. The women act

independently of men, and yet, while with seemingly no contact with each other, also in perfect harmony towards a common goal — the saving and security of the babe.

### 5.9.2. The Beginning of Moses' Story

The story of Moses' beginning has three movements (1.8-14; 1.15-21; 1.22-2.10). Moses' beginning is linked to and concerned with Pharaoh's attempt to curb the Hebrew population growth.

1. In the first movement, Pharaoh determines the action.
2. In the second movement, Pharaoh has to share narrative space and action with the midwives.
3. In the third movement, Pharaoh disappears from the story after issuing the decree to kill male Hebrew babies. The main characters are now a mother, sister and daughter whose initiatives determine events.

In the above three movements, the reader finds an increasing concentration of women. It must be considered that ancient Israelite storytellers gave women a crucial or even central role in the initial stages of this major event in their history (Exum 1996:85).

In Moses' initial story, key terms like "son" and "daughter", are very important, and are placed at specific and strategic points in the tale. The semantic range of בֶּן (*ben* — *son*) is narrowed down as the focus shifts from the *sons of Israel* as a people, to one specific son, *Moses*.

The occurrences of בַּת (*bat* — *daughter*) indicate the important roles played by daughters in this story about a famous son. Pharaoh's last words *every son that is born, you shall expose on the Nile, but every daughter you shall let live* (Exod. 1.22) are immediately followed by the introduction of a *daughter of Levi* (Exodus 2.1) and soon afterwards (Exodus 2.5) by the *daughter of Pharaoh* himself. Both daughters defy his edict, and his own daughter raises the boy Moses as her own. The same emphasis is given to male and female role players.

Interesting also are the parallel characters of the *daughter of Levi* and the *daughter of Pharaoh*. Sometimes the story uses the same words to describe the care they give to the baby (see, take)(2.2; 2.5; 2.9-10). By the end of the story these two daughters have a son in common.

The writer of the tale embedded a deep irony within the structure of events. The Pharaoh wants to kill boys, but killing girls is the most effective way of controlling a population. In the events of the story it becomes clear that daughters are the real threat, and not sons. Various literary devices in the story depict female characters in a good light — the women in young Moses' life seem enterprising and active (Exum 1996:87).

The liberation of Israel begins with the courage of women and their actions of disobedience. These women refuse to cooperate with oppression and relied on wisdom to foil the designs of the Pharaoh. By their actions, life is brought out of threatening situations (Exum 1985:80).

The midwives Shiphrah and Puah thwart Pharaoh's plan to kill babies at birth; his biological mother gives him birth and afterwards fashions the ark that will help him survive; his sister ensures that the mother will also be the nursemaid; his adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter, takes him as son; his wife Zipporah saves his life when the Lord meets him and wants to kill him, and his unnamed Cushite wife is mentioned as well (Schuller 1989:178).

The fact that the midwives, apart from Moses himself, are the only named characters in the first chapter, is significant. Not only do they defy Pharaoh, but when challenged, they make up a clever explanation (Exodus 1.19). These midwives refuse to be used as women against women by the Pharaoh, and choose to be agents of life rather than death (Schuller 1989:179).

Moses' mother is never named although she is central to the first part of the story. Other matriarchs are barren, but this woman immediately conceives. She hides her baby for three months and devises a plan and makes an ark once she can't conceal him any longer. The baby is dependent on his mother for his life. The mother makes all the decisions while the father is only mentioned as a man from the house of Levi (Exodus 2.1). As his wetnurse, his mother continues to nourish him (Schuller 1989:179).

There are also similarities between Moses' mother and the matriarchs. Although the actions of the mothers determine the future of Israel, this future is played out mainly by sons. Women have a great role, but the main event is the birth of a son who will

be the great leader. This leader will later once again be saved by a woman (Exodus 4.24-26), but Moses will be central to the story even to the point of almost overshadowing God. The text holds the paradox: no exodus without Moses, but no Moses without the women (Exum 1985:81).

The mother of Moses is simply called Levi's daughter (Exodus 2.1). Likewise, the daughter of Pharaoh is also left nameless. Yet these two daughters show subversive actions by openly disobeying the Pharaoh's command to drown male infants. Pharaoh's daughter stands as the female counterfoil to her oppressive father — she does the opposite of her father by taking a baby out of the Nile (Exum 1985:80).

Moses' mother does not speak in the narrative, but her actions show concern for her child. She hides him and later builds him a little ark. The only other ark in the Bible is Noah's, and the text shows a subtle play of saviours who are themselves saved. Noah's ark saves humanity from destruction, while Moses' mother builds an ark that saves a future leader who will deliver Israel from bondage (Exum 1985:80).

Moses' mother shows a lot of activity in Exodus 2.2-3. She does not wait for a saving miracle but sets the stage for something miraculous to happen. From the text it seems that all her actions are done without the help of her husband (Exum 1985:81). Exodus 2.1-2 does not name Moses' sister, but later tradition identifies her with Miriam. She watches the baby over a distance and approaches the princess with a suggestion when he is found. Throughout this story of Moses, God's providence is not found in direct Divine intervention, but in the resourcefulness of women (Schuller 1989:180).

Moses' sister shows rhetorical ability when she suggests fetching a nurse for the child, thus appearing to be making the suggestion for the princess' sake. The princess also gives Moses an Egyptian name, which in Hebrew means "*the drawer out*".

The final rescuer of the baby Moses is the Egyptian daughter of Pharaoh, who embodies compassion that goes beyond the lines of her own culture (Exodus 2.6). Moses becomes her son as well (Exodus 2.10). There is another foreign woman who later on also saves Moses' life. Zipporah is the woman he marries after he fled Egypt. The passage where she saves his life is difficult and often obscure, but it seems that God wanted to kill him after speaking to him at the burning bush (Exodus

4.24). Zipporah quickly acts by circumcision, and thus saves Moses' life (Schuller 1989:180).

Pharaoh's daughter sees the ark while bathing in the Nile. She has compassion for the crying baby. In this regard the text shows motivations that move women to action:

Moses' mother and sister act to save their own flesh and blood. The midwives act out of a desire to live according to God's will (they feared God). Pharaoh's daughter is moved by compassion that crosses ethnic boundaries. She knows the child to be Hebrew, and hires a Hebrew woman to nurse him through the clever intervention of his sister. A wonderful irony comes into play when Moses' mother is paid to nurse her own child. The princess claims the child as her own, and thus offers protection in the house of the oppressor to the future liberator of his people. He becomes her son and she names him Moshe (the drawer out) that also plays into the future when he draws Israel out of Egypt (Exum 1985:81).

### 5.9.3. Moving Towards a Feminist Reading

The one problem with this type of literary analysis is that it puts constraints on feminist criticism. By focusing solely on the surface structure of the text, it limits us to describing, and thus to reinscribing, the text's gender ideology. Exum sees this method as confining and representing or at least serving the phallogocentric drive to control and organize reading (and reality) into clearly defined categories. If women and men read according to the ideology of the text that is given in the surface structure, they are left with the ancient (male) author's views of women and men. The reader should always interrogate the ideology that motivates the text (Exum 1996:88).

To help in this task, a few helpful questions that should be posed to the text, are listed:

1. What does this text tell women about how to view themselves and how to behave?
2. What does this particular message imply about the people who produced this text?

In the following paragraphs, an application of these questions should help to clarify hidden agendas in the story and aid the reader in a critical reading of the text. Looking at Exodus, the following questions arise:

1. Why does the story start with tales of women?
2. What effect do these stories about women have on the way we read the Exodus as a whole?
3. Why are women so important in the early chapters of Exodus?

Patriarchy depends on the complicity of women in order to maintain itself. Force, threat and fear are often used to keep women in their place. By rewarding women for their complicity, patriarchy achieves a level of cooperation that force of threat cannot guarantee. The women in Exodus 1-2 is rewarded by playing a decisive role in the future deliverance of the Israelite nation when they act in the service of male power (Exum 1996:93).

The hermeneutic of suspicion comes into play when one keeps in mind that even in the Biblical text itself, sacred history is retold without mention of women. In other texts the Exodus tale is celebrated as God's activity alone, without any human agency (Pss 105, 106, 135, 136, Neh 9). Moses and Aaron are also remembered without the third leader, Miriam (Ps 105.26 as opposed to Mic 6.4) (Schuller 1989:182).

#### **5.9.4. Women Used in a Patriarchal Text**

The writer of Exodus tells women how important *mothers* are, and proposes that the domestic sphere can be a place of valour. Patriarchy grants women honour and status for their assent to subordination and their cooperation in it. In patriarchy, one of the few roles in which women can achieve status, is that of mother. Motherhood is patriarchy's highest reward for women, and is at the same time painted as the one thing women desire most. This ideology of the high status of motherhood is a powerful ideological strategy used very successfully by the patriarchal system (Exum 1996:94).

Why do women want to identify with the women in Exodus 1-2? They are heroes, they fear God, have compassion, determination and cleverness, and they show that women can contribute significantly to the lives of their people. This story greatly emphasizes the saying that *the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world*. The



message to women is: Stay in your place and domestic sphere, so that you can quietly achieve important things there. Sayings like the above and stories like the above are meant to make women feel important, while they serve an androcentric agenda by suggesting that women should be satisfied with their (manipulative) power behind the scenes. Tales like the one of Moses' early life wants to compensate women on the domestic front for the role denied them in the larger story of the exodus. It has something to hide — the fear of women's power that makes it imperative to domesticate and confine it (Exum 1996:95-96).

In the text, it is important to represent women as using their powers in the service of patriarchy. Even in this story surrounding Moses, women do not often interact or speak to one another. Patriarchy has historically relied on class and ethnic divisions (among especially) women, to prevent them from forming alliances that might further the cause of their sex. In Exodus 1-2 the reader gets a glimpse of the formidable threat women pose to male authority when they cooperate across class and ethnic lines (Exum 1996:96).

One way of managing and restricting women's power is by diffusing it. In Exodus 1-2 this is done by having three "mothers" rescue Moses, instead of one. Imagine the power a single female person would have had! The women's power is also diffused by keeping them nameless. Moses' mother and sister are only named later in the narrative, when he is grown and powerful on his own (Exum 1996:97).

Women in the Bible almost always yield their power and their stories to their husbands and sons. Thus, almost immediately after having been rescued by *daughters*, Moses in his turn rescues *daughters* (Exodus 2.16-22). In Exodus 4.24-26 a foreign woman, Zipporah, saves Moses' life. She typically disappears and is only mentioned again in Exodus 18.2-5 when Moses sends her away.

#### **5.9.5. Women Refuse to be Silenced by the Text**

How is the critical reader to view women disappearing and reappearing in the text? It could be interpreted as the struggle of women who refuse to step out of the light. It might also be a symptom of a guilty narrative conscience (Exum 1996:97).

While women are not given too large a role in the tale of the Exodus, they do appear in other ways despite the attempts of the androcentric writer to silence them. The



**EPIPHANY**  
JANET MCKENZIE

feminine resurfaces in Numbers 11.12-14 when Moses uses female metaphors to describe his position towards the nation (Exum 1996:98).

In the Biblical text itself, women play an essential role. One should, however, keep in mind that reading the book of Exodus has not been the only way men and women read and heard these stories. When these stories were told and retold in subsequent centuries, the women were sometimes ignored (Zipporah and the Cushite wife) or their roles were diminished (Moses' father is the hero and not his mother) (Schuller 1989:181).

During the Second Temple period, the communities of the time did not draw their religious and social understanding from the Biblical text only. Other works were accessible and they also served to shape the thought of the community (Day 1989:9). Biblical retellings of the opening chapters of Exodus can give an indication of the power of the female character. Were their tales retold in subsequent literary works and did these powerful women come across as such in later times?

The role of Moses' father became embellished at the expense of the women who are credited with this action in the Bible. Moses' wife Zipporah is omitted entirely. The midwives disappear in all but Josephus' text, and there they are painted as Egyptian women doing Pharaoh's bidding. Some incidents did survive, but the overall appraisal is that the strong female presence in the Bible has been muted in other texts of the time. The result is that these female characters lost their ability to influence the lives of people since (Day 1989:9-10).

It is disappointing that the narrative in the Biblical text itself so quickly moves from a woman's story to a man's story. Despite feminist eagerness to seize the women in the tale, it cannot be ignored that being a hero's mother is just not enough. The exception to the story is Miriam, who later commands enough authority to challenge Moses (Num 12, Micah 6.4), which places her on an equal level with her brother. She shares the designation of prophet with Deborah, as well as a very famous victory song (Exodus 15). Miriam deserves a lot more attention than is normally given her (Exum 1985:82).

Women refuse to be silenced by the text, but the overall view of the main character in the text remains that of Moses. Moses commands such an overpowering central position that he almost seems to overshadow the activity of God. In light of this, it

might be said that the position given to women is abnormally progressive, keeping in mind that Moses commands all other attention.

#### 5.9.6. Miriam a Prominent Woman

The character of Miriam gives proof of the androcentric slant of the text. This remarkable woman has to be rediscovered in the folds of the text, and almost in-between the actions and reports of and on Moses. Miriam also offers proof of the female refusal to be silenced in the text. It is almost as if the writer grudgingly has to give her her due every now and then. Her impact has to be mentioned, but then the text quickly moves on before the reader can take in what the significance of her role was. As a last look at the women involved in Exodus, a closer scrutiny of the character of Miriam is needed.

Miriam is hailed as a prophet and leader in Exodus 15.20. In the book of Micah she is listed along with Aaron and Moses as God's messenger responsible for the Exodus (Micah 6.4). Miriam so listed suggests that the three formed a leadership partnership with God in making the Exodus happen (Clifford 2001:75).

Toni Craven rephrases the question of Miriam, "*Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?*" (Num 12.2) to "*Has the Lord spoken only to the likes of Moses?*" Psalms, and specifically Psalm 121 give scarce explicit indication that God listens to women's voices, which is not surprising when the androcentric context and text of the Bible is considered. Psalm 131 shows a mother taking her child in her arms, but even this picture cannot give certainty that the Psalm offers a woman's prayer. It cannot simply be assumed that Psalm 131 was originally uttered by a woman (Craven 1999:95-96).

The sister of Moses is called the prophetess after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15.20). The title does not fully explain her role. It is possible that Miriam had a much more prominent position than the text allows, since the people refuse to go further on their trek without her (Numbers 12.15). Her death is also arranged to coincide with one of the last stops in the wilderness, like that of Aaron and Moses. Later prophetic tradition paints her as one of the leaders given by God to Israel as a mark of Divine favour (Micha 6.4) (Schuller 1989:180-181).

In the celebration after the exodus from Egypt, three people are called God's shepherds: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Zechariah 11.8, Micha 6.4). The Bible does say a lot about Miriam. She led the people in song after the crossing of the Red Sea. Her song in Exodus 15.2-21 is, however, overshadowed by the long song of Moses which incorporates her song. Scholars write that the song of Miriam probably originated at the rejoicing in Israel after its escape, but that the song of Moses was probably written later (Bennett 1989:63).

Miriam taught the people and disputed with an arrogant Moses. There is a Jewish legend whereby Miriam restrained Moses from making war against the people of Canaan. The start of such a war started by Moses, immediately after the death of Miriam, gives credence to the legend. Miriam may well be an ancient symbol of the female representative of Freedom and Justice (Bennett 1989:63-64).

For such a remarkable woman, the tradition is very silent in keeping her memory alive. She is seldom mentioned in the course of Church life, and children are only taught about her in the role as the little sister who sent for her mother to nurse Moses after Pharaoh's daughter lifted him from the water. What image of Miriam do you have? Should Miriam not be celebrated alongside, or as much and often as, Moses? (Bennett 1989:64).

#### **5.9.7. Questions Asked to the Text**

The tales of the women in the life of Moses give a good example of women who refuse to be silenced by the text, as well as patriarchal silencing of dynamic female voices. I henceforth give a brief set of answers to the questions stencil as used on these narratives.

#### **QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION**

In the early life of Moses women are the most active characters. Though Pharaoh's daughter and Moses' mother remain nameless, they act on their own. Moses as a babe is the focus of all this activity, but he is initially acted upon or on behalf of. A social convention in this tale is the whole experience surrounding motherhood and the rearing of children — this is exclusively the work of women. Women live in all the ranks of society — from princess to (slave) mother. Traditionally this text is a favourite when presented to children and in popular religion. The text remains focused on Moses' beginnings and main events in his life. Traditionally, after

pausing at the role of women in the early life of Moses, the popular presentation moves away from women altogether. The Biblical text does not ignore women but on a narrative level one could identify an endeavour to silence women as Moses gains more prominence in the narrative. Men have ultimately benefited from traditional presentations since the narrative encourages women to work around central male figures. The narrative also encourages women to live their lives with domestic interests making a central theme. Women are painted positively as active people able to make their decisions apart from males. The stereotypes in the narrative remain that of motherhood being the highest good a woman can offer life. By grounding all activity around the male babe, the text reveals its patriarchal interest. The text could be used against women struggling for emancipation since it shows such a strong picture of women, domestic interests, and motherhood. Once Moses reaches more maturity the women in his life disappear, or remain unnamed. The text nowhere ponders female motivations or ideals.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is the hero Moses and how he is saved from doom. One can read against the grain by making more of the female roles surrounding him and highlighting the actions of these brave women who ensure his life. A silenced voice in the text is that of Moses' mother, who does not speak but only acts. By highlighting the women who do actually speak, much more can be done to lift female voices to the front. In this text it can be pointed out that men like Moses' father and Pharaoh are completely left out — the women have good control over the situation. Women need to be reminded of these amazingly brave and independent women. They acted and made plans, and their actions ultimately resulted in the saving of their nation. This tale should be recounted in order to give women a mandate of action in bettering their own lives.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. The women in ancient times were seen and treated as voiceless objects more often than not, but these narratives show them to be intelligent, resourceful and obedient to God. Their actions led to the exodus of Israel. By showing oppressed people the resourcefulness these women displayed, they can be inspired and motivated within their own circumstances of oppression. The narrative also shows God's saving hand to work through the ingenuity of women. They did not just sit around and wait for a miracle — they helped themselves, and this should be pointed out to oppressed parties. The silencing of the women as

Moses becomes more independent should be criticized as serving patriarchal interests. This tale is taught to children in Sunday school, but more should be done to proclaim the women as marvels and heroes in own right.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This tale is actualized often in children's Bibles by means of pictures and telling the story. Children often act this out in Sunday school. By identifying the women in the tale as heroes in own right and not just ordinary women saving an extraordinary child, they can be given a more worthy place in the story. Focus should shift from the cute baby in the ark to the brave women who ensured that God's plan is successfully put into action.

#### **5.10. JUDGES 4-5: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DEBORAH**

This narrative was chosen because so few women seem to know it. When asked, women seem unaware that there was a prominent female prophet/judge in Israel and that the Bible offers a glimpse of this remarkable woman.

The reader is introduced to Deborah in Judges 4.4 as a woman, a prophetess, a charismatic woman, and a judge of Israel. From the information in the text, she is the only judge in Israel who is also a prophet. In the same manner that Moses "sat" to judge the people (Exodus 18.13), so Deborah also "sits" and the Israelites come to her for decisions (Judges 4.5). She is the only judge before Samuel, and is recorded for being sought for her judgment (Bledstein 1993:39). She judges while sitting beside a palm tree and sends for Barak to appoint him to lead a battle against the enemy (Judges 4.4) (Bronner 1993:78-79).

Deborah is introduced as prophetess and אִשָּׁה לַפִּידוֹת (*ešheth lappidot*) (woman of *lappidot*). Many commentators took this to mean that she was married to Lappidoth and translated it as "wife of Lappidoth". Recent study has brought the possibility of *lappidoth* rather meaning "flames" or "torches" and that this identifies Deborah rather as a woman of flames. Such an epithet would be fitting since Deborah was an inflaming woman (Bronner 1993:78). The designation might also be translated as "fiery woman"/"spirited woman", which fits her very well. The narrative is oddly quiet about her supposed husband, if he is such (Exum 1985:85).

The translation of Lappidoth as meaning that she was the wife of Lappidoth, is a good example of a word unclear in meaning, translated as having a specific meaning, but translated according to a patriarchal pre-supposition of the translator. To be true to the text, would be to call Deborah a fiery woman, who might have been married or not.

#### **5.10.1. Deborah the Exemplary Judge**

When one compares the female judge Deborah with her male counterparts, she does seem to show a lack of their character flaws. Is this highlighted in the text and commentaries, or did male commentators on the text choose to gloss over her solid character?

Deborah is depicted as an exemplary judge. She trusts in YHWH despite all the odds against the nation. She is versed in the law, she instructs people and makes decisions (Bledstein 1993:42). The book makes it clear that Deborah had greater control of the land than any other judge before or after her. Unlike the male judges, she did not fall into sinful action. Despite these fine points, the midrashic literature does not dwell on these aspects of the woman. Was it perhaps difficult for male rabbis to admit that a female judge outranked the males? (Bronner 1993:79). It may seem so from just looking at commentaries.

#### **5.10.2. Who Wrote Deborah's Story?**

In her song, Deborah makes a satire of the tribes with ambivalent faith, and from this Bledstein gleams the possibility of a female author for Judges who ridicules the men of Israel for seeing themselves, instead of YHWH, as the deliverers of Israel (Bledstein 1993:53).

The traditional view has been that Judges was written by the Deuteronomist (D). Who was D? It is told that in Josiah's day, the prophetess Huldah "sat" while the Israelites came to her for instruction (2 Kings 22.14-20; 2 Chronicles 34.22-28). WE Phipps makes the interesting remark that it is possible that Huldah was consulted instead of Jeremiah due to her literacy. Huldah had to interpret the Scriptures. Jeremiah needed a scribe (Baruch ben Neriah) to write his message down. In general, the prophets were also seen rather as speakers of oracles than interpreters of scrolls. Is it possible that the woman Huldah was the Deuteronomist? (Bledstein 1993:53).



The song of Deborah may support a female author's view. Bledstein has opened the discussion of a female author and this may lead to interesting insights in the future. Despite the identity of its author, the song of Deborah provides a view on Deborah that paints her as strong and idealistic, having no qualms about acting on her moral conviction — indeed a fiery woman.

### 5.10.3. Wordplay in Deborah's Song

The song of Deborah shows an interesting play on words. This song celebrates Jael's killing of Sisera and the victory that was achieved by her hand.

Deborah sings her song in Judges 5, and in verse 27 gives an interesting parody of the warrior who rapes a woman in the tent: Sisera sank between the feet of Jael. This phrase is repeated. The people who spoke doom against Israel are cursed while Jael is blessed. Where normally a woman would be raped in a tent, the great warrior is now killed in the tent and sinks between her feet — not to rape her, but in death.

The song of Deborah gives another interesting contrast: the-woman-in-the-tent is placed in contrast to the-women-in-the-palace. Sisera's mother is shown as awaiting news of the conquering hero and his return in her palace, and the women attribute his delay to his dividing the spoils. The text uses the word רחם (*rhm*), which is translated by Bledstein as *cunt*. Her translation then goes: a cunt or two for each man, and embroidered cloths around the neck (Bledstein 1993:41).

The women waiting in the palace are unaware that one of the "cunts" had killed the hero in his neck. Bledstein refers to Alter's note that the cognate רחם (*rhm*) is sometimes an epithet for Anat, the warrior goddess, which would lead to more conservative translation and which would refer to the fierce goddess in Jael (Bledstein 1993:41-42).

### 5.10.4. Patriarchal Efforts to Fashion Deborah a Husband

Patriarchal handling of the text and interpretation is nowhere clearer than in the efforts to fashion Deborah a husband. Male interpreters could not let her stand in

such a high position without connecting her to a man who would ultimately be her superior, albeit in the privacy of domestic life.

The sparseness of the rabbinic account of Deborah's story is surprising. The rabbis take for granted that she was married (and go into long speculations about the husband), as well as that she had a tendency towards arrogance (Bronner 1993:79).

The rabbinic attempt to fashion a husband for Deborah is more fanciful than factual, and stems from their need to supply a female character with a husband where the text neglects to give her one. They even argued over whether Barak might have been her husband, as in *sefer Eliahu Rabba* (Bronner 1993:80-81).

#### **5.10.5. Deborah the Leader**

The Song of Deborah is seen as one of the oldest segments in the Old Testament (Judges 4-5). It is one of only five instances in the narrative where a woman is shown to be a leader and a hero. Deborah is described as prophetess and judge who inspires Barak into warfare. Judges 4.8-9 reports the conversation between her and Barak where she is assuming leadership over men. This event is quite exceptional in the Old Testament (Lerner 1986:165).

Deborah's general is Barak, and a few commentators manage to downplay her role while accentuating his. Some commentators call him a judge while the Biblical text does not, and some state that Barak led the troops, whereas the text indicates that Deborah merely summoned him (Exum 1985:84).

Deborah's actions and person might be compared to another great judge and prophet: Samuel. Samuel anointed Saul and sent him to fight the Lord's battles (1 Samuel 10-15). Deborah commissions Barak. She summons him with a message from the Lord in her capacity as prophet, and sends him into battle with a promise of victory. Barak seems to be accountable to Deborah in the same manner as Saul to Samuel (Exum 1985:84).

Deborah also shows interesting similarities with the Canaanite war goddess, Anat. This goddess also had a subordinate carry out her commands. Be mindful that Barak refuses to go into battle unless Deborah accompanies him, which she does

(Judges 4.9,10). Deborah also prophesies that the victory will not bring glory to Barak but to a woman (4.9) (Exum 1985:84).

#### **5.10.6. Questions Asked to the Text**

West writes that the group does need and want the input of a committed biblical scholar (theologian/facilitator). In this narrative, the group found the academic input which gave background to the tale of Deborah very helpful in understanding the narrative and in asking critical questions. Though one strives to steer away from the dominating position where an academic gives information to a lay following, this instance was a valuable chance to give input from the historical background of the text without influencing the critical questions the group asks.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

Deborah is a main actor, and despite the text's effort to try and paint Barak as a main character, he seems to remain the one acted on. Deborah assumes agency. The narrative writes that a female is asked her support by a male, which is a complete unknown for the times. Traditionally women were seen as passive, while men were active. Women were not supposed to have or be asked for their opinion on matters, while this tale sketches a man who is unwilling to go to battle without the female's help. The text has not been presented in any specific way the group can remember since to them it was not such a familiar narrative. They chose it in order to study this neglected text. No one has ever drawn their attention to it specifically. The lack of presentation itself benefits the patriarchal order. The fact that women's attention was never drawn specifically to this text is harmful since women were not allowed to identify with this strong female. Women's sheer lack of knowledge about and exposure to Deborah is harmful to their religious self-image. Deborah is not given a negative attribute in the text, but attendees were amazed to hear about the efforts of commentators who have strived to paint a less positive picture of her. This narrative is a classic example of a text itself that is not patriarchal, but interpretation and tradition being thus. This tale works with stereotypes but turns them around — the man is the weak one and the woman the strong one. The text itself was seen as more neutral than patriarchal. The text itself cannot necessarily be used against women's liberation; perhaps that is why simply silencing it/ignoring it is the way it is used to amplify women's forgetfulness and lack of knowledge. In the interpretation of the text the supposition that women cannot be allowed to be active and strong has been criticized. In this case there is a clear difference between the reality of the text

and the interpretative history thereof. The text is positive about women taking control, and having positions of leadership in society. The text itself does not neglect women's experiences, but the interpretation tries to stifle it.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is about a woman taking leadership and this not being a problem. In this case it was not deemed necessary to strictly read against the grain. The silenced voices were identified to be the lack of knowledge of authorship. Maybe Deborah wrote, and it was simply silenced to death. Deborah's voice can be amplified by assuming and creatively imagining her abilities as author, and by giving her due with regards to authorship. The story does not leave Deborah out, but the brevity of the whole section leaves women wanting to know more. The historical clues about the text have been handled earlier in this section and the group found them to be important pieces of the puzzle of understanding this woman and the times she lived in. This text has to be read and told to women in order to strengthen their religious self-images. The fact that this text does not condemn a strong woman taking leadership/being a leader gives women much hope. It also gives them a mandate for leadership in their own contexts.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text was seen to be the Word of God, and what makes it eagerly accepted as such, was the positive picture painted of a woman in a leadership role. Group attendees were happy to learn that they have a Scriptural authority and mandate for leadership in their own lives. Since this text was experienced as having such a positive outlook on female leadership, it was experienced as extremely empowering in the personal lives of the women who studied it. The tendency of interpretation in the past to downplay Deborah and make her less than what the text allows her to be, was fiercely denounced. This text can be women's letter of approval for assuming agency in life.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

The group members could see this narrative being a play of some sort, though there was no time for them in the specific course to develop it into such an actualization. As a play, it could be brought to the attention of many people who would see it, male and female, and thus open up a whole new world of dialogue about the mandate for women's leadership.

## 5.11. JUDGES 4-5: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT Jael

This narrative was chosen due to its natural link with the narrative of Deborah and the way they complete each other. A critical feminist reading of this narrative furthermore brings to light new and revealing aspects of the worlds of men and women colliding.

The Bible depicts Jael in a positive light. Despite the fact that she is a Kenite woman, she is called a savior of the Israelites, and acts independently and courageously. Her name means "wild goat" and is indicative of her daring when she slays a warrior. Many modern scholars see her as treacherous and cruel rather than daring, and note that she violates the laws of hospitality which were central in her time. It seems that their moral judgment is offended by the Bible's lack of criticism for her. The Jewish midrash follows the Bible in approval of Jael, and even enumerates her among the judges of Israel (Bronner 1993:87).

The prophesy of Deborah comes true when Jael lures Sisera into her tent and kills him. The passage in Judges 5.24 is remarkable in its celebration of female strength being both moral and physical (Lerner 1986:165). Perhaps the origin of many negative comments about Jael springs from a deep-rooted fear of female power. Jael is an interesting character in the Bible, since her female power goes unrestrained and is written up by the author without any censure. The writer paints her female autonomy in a positive light, and as such the text stands as a bane for the positive attitude towards female autonomous action.

### 5.11.1. Two Worlds Mix

An interesting angle comes from a study by Athalya Brenner when she draws attention to the sphere of milk and female activity and the sphere of water and male activity. These worlds are distinct and different from each other. Yet they run in a parallel line in the text. The female sphere is maternal, private, and a-political, but the military conflict can only be resolved by a mixture of the two spheres. The female principles intervene (sex and motherhood – Jael and the milk she serves) in the male world of battle. The male principle is present in the flood caused by rain in the public life. Both worlds are necessary for the victory. The roles are separated into two groups that have to penetrate each other in order to be effective (Brenner 1993:105).

### 5.11.2. Sexual Tones in the Tale

Robert Alter finds in Judges 4 nuances of Jael as mother, lover and killer. This is in line with his view that every attempt to reduce the text to a zero degree of meaning finally collapses because it is always possible to conceive meanings beyond the zero degree (Alter 1992:89). Jael offers food, protection and warmth, and comes to Sisera secretly (Judges 4.21) invoking a sense of mystery and romance the same way as Ruth came to Boaz. Jael then kills. Judges 4 contains the nuances of seductress, while the sexual nuances of the manner and place where Sisera dies (between her legs) form a parody of the soldierly assault on women of defeated foes. Sisera is lying between Jael's legs as a possible ironic glance at the custom of rape (Niditch 1989:46).

An irony also exists between the place of death (between her legs) and Sisera's mother's hopes for female booty (literally "wombs" in the text). The reader is challenged to side with various parties: the mother hoping for the safe return of her son, the woman warrior defending her people and all women of her nation, and the polemic against rape (Niditch 1989:46).

Alter gives a very good translation of the text, showing the sexuality thereof (Niditch 1989:47):

#### Judges 4.25

*Between her legs he kneeled, fell, lay*

*Between her legs he kneeled and fell*

*Where he kneeled, he fell, destroyed*

According to Alter, analogy plays a more important role in Biblical narrative than in most other kinds of narrative because the art of the ancient Hebrew tale usually avoids explicit commentary by the narrator and instead invites the reader to see connections and evaluative perspectives through an awareness or intuition of correspondences between one part of the story and another (Alter 1992:103).

Judges 5.27 paints a scene of eroticism and death. Translations of "at her feet" obscure the sexual quality of the imagery. "Legs" or "feet" are used in Hebrew Scripture as euphemisms for sexual organs (Isa 7.20 refers to pubic hair, while 1 Samuel 24.4 refers to urinating). In a birthing context, the afterbirth comes out between the legs (Deuteronomium 28.57) (Niditch 1989:47-48).

The translation of "kneeling" in Judges 5.27 has connotations of defeat and death, but is also used in other places in a visceral sexual context (Job 31.10; Isa 47.2). Susan Niditch offers the following translation of

Judges 5.27:

*Between her legs he knelt, he fell, he lay*

*Between her legs he knelt, he fell*

*Where he knelt, there he fell, despoiled* (Niditch 1989:47).

Sisera falls, slain, in the posture of a would-be lover, a vulnerable petitioner (see Esther 7.8, 2 Kings 4.37, 2 Samuel 1.4).

The word used for "he lay", שָׁכַב (*šakab*), is most often used in a context of illegitimate relations in rape, incest, ritual impurity, adultery etc (Genesis 19.32; Genesis 34.2; 2 Samuel 13.11; Leviticus 15.24 etc). Apart from the aforementioned, שָׁכַב (*šakab*) also has associations with death and defeat. The dead are those who lie in the grave, as does Sisera after being killed (Niditch 1989:49).

שָׁדַד (*šadud*) means despoiled, devastated, to be dealt violently with. This word is often used in the context of cities destroyed. The prophetic texts also use the term intertwined with images of harlotry and unfaithful people (Niditch 1989:50).

The whole verse is full of double meanings of death and sexuality. He is defeated at her feet, he kneels between her legs in a sexual pose. This one verse holds an entire story. Sisera is despoiled and destroyed. The woman Jael becomes not the object of sexual advances, but herself is the aggressor (Niditch 1989:50).

### 5.11.3. Jael from Feminist Perspective

Does this unique painting of Jael lead to a different understanding of Jael as woman? What does it reveal about the author and the audiences of the tale? Is this tale feminist in any sense?

Levine has suggested that the composer of Judges 5 was a woman who composed a polemic against rape. It is also possible that this text manifests a man's fear of both death and his own sexuality. Another option is that the author identifies with her (Jael) in the face of Israel's vast outnumbering by the enemy. Israel is Jael, and she

becomes an archetype or symbol for the marginal's victory over the establishment. Having the woman Jael doing the womanizing of a man, despoiling the man in a position of sexual seducer, makes for an especially powerful portrait of the victor. Jael also offers a challenge to the traditional understanding of the "female" and femininity. Jael stands as symbol of self-assertion, a force of change, and one who breaks free from oppressive forces. She is the power of the masculine, and by no means the passive power ascribed to the feminine. She is also not the hero's helper, but is herself the hero (Niditch 1989:53).

Jael when read today offers an alternative symbolism. The tale is rich in directed action, self-assertion, and consciousness on the part of the underdog. This tale can be a powerful model for all marginals (Niditch 1989:53).

#### **5.11.4. Questions Asked to the Text**

Here follows a few brief answers to the questions stencil used on this text.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

Jael is a main actor as is Sisera, but Jael eventually kills Sisera. Social and cultural conventions of concern in this narrative are those of female bounty when a foe is defeated, rape, and spoils of war. One also sees the female domestic world merging with the male world of war. Normally a woman is of very insignificant status where the war picture is concerned, but in this case Jael, the woman, becomes a heroine during the war. Traditionally the text is presented as one finds it in the Biblical text, although it is not the stuff one is learned during Sunday school. If I think back on the way this text has been presented to me, it has not been specifically painted to picture the woman in a negative sense in any way. I have encountered the tale as it is found in the Bible. In cases where traditional commentators would censure Jael for her actions (inhospitality) one would be dealing with negative attributes given to the woman while the text itself does not condemn her. The stereotypes one might identify are those of the mighty warrior and the sly woman who leads to his fall. The text itself does not seem to follow a pure patriarchal slant — it rather seems to be giving negative commentary on the issue of rape by turning the tables on the traditional perpetrator of this crime. Where Sisera's mother was waiting to see him conquer foreign women, it is a foreign woman who slays him and saves her own people (women). In normal tradition little is made of the issues surrounding rape in



this text and the play on words. By keeping silent about these issues, tradition neglects women's experiences and their possibilities of self-affirmation.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be the woman Jael luring Sisera into a trap and killing him. One does not necessarily need to read against the grain, but one does need to resist traditional interpretation that would condemn Jael's actions. A close narrative reading and New Criticism would highlight many hidden aspects of the text. Where women are usually the victims and spoils of war, this tale stands out since a woman is the hero in rescuing her people, and acting as a mighty warrior herself, thus saving the females of her people. Women need to be taught that Jael is not just given male attributes — she is herself a mighty and brave warrior. Jael's actions bring not only deliverance for herself and females of her clan, but for all the people of her nation. Truly such a woman should be celebrated, and this story needs to be told to women all the time.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. Women who are afraid to stand up for themselves can be empowered by studying the life and actions of Jael. She is hailed in the text and by her people, and women can from this own for themselves the mandate to act mightily in their own defense. It is no longer expected of women in oppressive situations, especially situations of violence, to just sit tight and bear it out. They may act and react mightily and violently in their own defense.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

Painters through the ages have produced painted interpretations of this narrative. Names like Cigoli, Carlo Maratta, Palma the Younger and Artemisa Centilechi come to mind. The role these paintings have played is to plant in the reader's head a firm image of what transpired in the tale. Perhaps a painting interpreting Jael as a warrior-type instead of a seductress-type could offer a new take on this subject. Modern women need to know that it is not Jael's seduction of Sisera that is celebrated by the text, but her overpowering him as the stronger while she is the weaker.

## 5.12. JUDGES 11: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

This narrative was chosen due to its problematic example for women. I learned this tale as a child — it was in my Children's Bible, and it has never ceased to disturb me. I could never verbalize my discomfort with this daughter being sacrificed while Isaac was saved, but reading feminist criticism on this tale helped me understand that this uneasiness was always there.

The story of Judges 11 is set against the backdrop of two overarching questions:

1. What was the power of the father in ancient Israel?, and
2. Was there any religious rites among women that the Bible does not mention?

Answers to these questions are not easy to come by, and are never just a simple reply. The story of Jephthah's daughter keeps on troubling modern readers in its acceptance of a sacrifice which a father vows to make, but which a daughter has to honour by ultimately giving her life.

In the earliest period of ancient Israelite life it is clear that the patriarch had undisputed authority over all members of the family. The wife called her husband *בַּעַל* (*ba'al*) or master, and he was the *בַּעַל* (*ba'al*) of his field and house. Exodus 20.17 lists the wife among the man's possessions. This period also allowed men to sell their daughters into slavery or prostitution, which only later became forbidden. By the later time of the monarchy, the father's power over life and death of the family was no longer unlimited. This brought a marked improvement in the lives of daughters (Lerner 1986:168). The exact quality of the father's rulership is not clear. Despite the term *בַּעַל* (*ba'al*) having a negative connotation in modern life, it is not clear that such was the meaning in ancient times. From just a term it is difficult to ascertain whether power of life and death literally was used every day in the running of the household, and whether the Bible may perhaps show some extreme examples of this power in practice as a form of critique. What cannot be contested, is that the father was the highest authority in the household, and that a vow made by him was binding on everyone associated with the household, in whatever way.

The second question about the existence of private women's rites is difficult to answer as well. It is virtually impossible to measure domestic religious practice in ancient Israel, and it is only mentioned in the Biblical text in as far as the domestic practice countered the officially accepted modes of religion. It is possible, however,

In 1968 our progressive Jewish youth movement hosted a group of young Czech Jews for a conference near Edinburgh... We studied some Bible texts and they were incredibly good at understanding them, picking up all the nuances very quickly. I was surprised as they had never studied the Bible before. "It's easy," they explained. "You see, in Czechoslovakia, when you read a newspaper, first you read what is written there. Then you say to yourself, 'If that is what they have written, what *really* happened? And if that is what really happened, what are they trying to make us think? And if that is what they are trying to make us think, what should we be thinking instead?' You learn to read between the lines and behind the lines. You learn to read a newspaper as if your life depended upon understanding it — because it does!" Sometimes the same applies to the Bible, you just have to learn how to read.

Rabbi Jonathan Magonet in Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:14

that some religious activities like a female puberty rite (Judges 11.39-40) or harvest dances (Judges 21.20-21), or even rites of childbirth (Leviticus 12.6-8), that were exclusively female in nature, might have existed, either unknown or unmentioned by the male Bible writers (Meyers 1987:161). For lack of sure information, they remain the objects of speculation, albeit informed speculation.

### 5.12.1. The Daughter's Ritual

The verse that introduces the daughter shows her most important characteristic: her total obedience to her father. From a patriarchal point of view, this is a most welcome character trait (Fuchs 1993:121).

When Jephthah tells his daughter about his oath, she comprehends the situation and is not taken aback by his projecting of the fault onto her (you have become my troubler) (Judges 11.35). The daughter requests a two month stay of her execution in order to make some meaning of her death. She and her companions will go to the mountains and bewail her בְּתוּלָה (betûlum — virginity). This young woman will be cut off from her people before she had the chance to become a mother and have progeny. Her loss is personal as well as communal. The potential of generations to follow ends with her life being taken. Her response to this horrible thought, is a ritual. In this ritual she involves her "sisters" in initiating a rite that will become a tradition in Israel. For four days every year, young maidens will "recount for celebration" the life of Jephthah's daughter (Bledstein 1993:46-47). This shows correlation with the feminist ideal of telling "herstory".

Ester Fuchs identifies the trend in the text to avoid all sympathy for the daughter in the narrative. The pace is too fast to evoke empathy and the main characters hurdle towards their destinies at a pace that almost leaves the reader behind. The text does not give information on the manner in which the daughter mourns. This too would have created sympathy for the daughter. Jephthah's granting of her request for respite gives the reader a chance to catch a breath from the horror in the text. The daughter returns at the end of two months of her own free will, without being forced. She cooperates with her father in this irrevocable act. Jephthah's willingness to let her go tells the reader that he does not wish to harm her, but that he indeed loves her (Fuchs 1993:127). Once again, the narrative does not dwell on the feelings of the

father either. The reader has to fill in the gaps and imagine all human feeling, but the story hardly leaves time for contemplation.

Traditionally the daughter's virginity has been the object of much speculation. Modern feminist theologians have pointed out that the fact that she was a virgin does not seem to be the crucial matter, but rather her transition to physical maturity (Day 1989:58). What did the daughter do during her two months with the other young women? The RSV translates her action as "bewail my virginity". The thought is more and more that *בְּתוּלִים* (*betûlim*) does not mean "my virginity", but that it rather signifies an age group. The true meaning seems to be closer to "adolescent", but then referring specifically to a female during puberty. Day translates *בְּתוּלָה* (*betûlah*) as a female who has reached puberty and who is potentially fertile but who had not yet given birth to her first child (Day 1989:59-60, 69).

In later years, Israelite women told the story of Jephthah's daughter in the context of a rite of passage from immaturity to adolescence. The daughter should be understood to represent the adolescent phase of female development. Carol Gilligan studied women's moral development and noted that there is an adolescent stage of complete self-sacrifice that precedes mature recognition that they must take their own well-being as well as other's into account when making decisions. The daughter of Jephthah can serve as reminder that it is important to abandon adolescent morality along the way if full maturity is to be reached (Day 1989:66-67).

### 5.12.2. Resistance to the Text

How must the reader react to the text? If the ambiguity of the text serves Jephthah, then critique and resistance is in order rather than mourning (Fuchs 1993:118).

What makes feminist studies about Jephthah's daughter different from other studies, is their use of a hermeneutic of suspicion whereby one attempts to discern and critique the often unstated agenda or ideology of an author or text. Ester Fuchs describes one way to apply a procedure to Judges 11 by understanding that literary strategies work here in the interests of the patriarchal ideology of male supremacy. This understanding calls for a resistant reading of the Biblical text, a reading attuned to the political implications of omissions, elisions and ambiguity, and above all, a reading that resists the tendency of the Biblical narrative to focus on the father at the

daughter's expense. The problem with focusing on the father, says Ann Tapp, is that atrocious events can be glossed over as unfortunate but necessary for the good of the hero (Thompson 2001:101-102).

The reader is lured into identifying with the father whose actions otherwise would be condemned as unethical. Feminist criticism has as crucial goal the exposure of this hidden agenda for what it is (Thompson 2001:102).

The text shows clearly Jephthah's lack of faith despite God's assurances that His spirit is with him.

Even the debate about whether or not the daughter was indeed sacrificed, is part of the strategy to defend the father at the expense of his daughter. The narrator strives to counterbalance the daughter's horrid end with the postscript about her annual mourning. In this tale we find literary strategies at work in the interests of patriarchal ideology (in this case, male supremacy). Once we understand this, we are to read the text with resistance, careful and alert to omissions, elisions and ambiguity (Fuchs 1993:130).

It must be kept in mind that the text of the Bible by no means gives the full picture. Anthropologist Edwin Ardener noted that men and women in a given culture generate, interpret and appropriate symbols and rituals in distinct ways. The problem with the Biblical text is that a male fieldworker is the only source of information, telling us about the beliefs and rituals of both men and women. On the surface, the writer seems to give a full description, but in the final analysis it becomes clear that women are missing from the total picture (Day 1989:67).

Resistance to the text in light of the above would also involve an active endeavor to hear the silenced voices of the women, and to find their ritual and actions despite the omissions in the text. If historical and archeological evidence is so lacking as to make this impossible on one level, then the act of creative imagination can be utilized to make herstory heard.

### **5.12.3. Multiple Sacrifices of the Daughter**

The daughter is sacrificed in more than one way, when one starts to consider the text critically. The question of whether she has been physically sacrificed at all only

serves to take attention away from the tragedy of the tale. What really happened to Jephthah's daughter? Sacrificialists argue that Jephthah has kept his vow, while non-sacrificialists argue that he let her survive. The ambiguity of the text on this matter is typical of the whole story. This story is an example of suppression, expression, presenting and erasing of the daughter. The ambiguity serves the role of apology, a subtle justification for Jephthah's actions. By suppressing details about the sacrifice, the narrator makes it possible for the reader to deny the event of the sacrifice.

A second sacrifice happens when focus shifts to Jephthah. Though the tragedy belongs to the daughter, Jephthah gets away with being painted in the light of victim of the circumstances. In this story, the daughter is sacrificed in more than one way, because Jephthah continues to be the center of attention (Fuchs 1993:116).

#### **5.12.4. Jephthah's Perfect Daughter**

Jephthah's daughter does not question her father. She justifies her submission by her reminder to her father that keeping his vow is just as good a deed as done by YHWH in defeating their enemies. The daughter owes as much obedience to her father, as Jephthah owes to YHWH (Fuchs 1992:125).

The daughter appears not only willing to obey, but also to justify the father. This daughter is the supreme role of the perfect daughter whose submissiveness is limitless. She is not presented as servant of YHWH, but as obedient daughter to her father. The narrator does not even give us a howl of grief from her part, for this would focus attention on her tragedy. By her calm acceptance, all focus remains on the father's grief (Fuchs 1993:126).

Jephthah's daughter submits to his authority. His word is not countermanded but rather postponed. She encourages her father to fulfill his vow, and so subordinates her life to the communal good. Paternal authority goes unchallenged in this tale (Exum 1993:137).

#### **5.12.5. The Text Shields Jephthah**

The way the story is presented shields Jephthah to a certain extent. When the victim starts sharing the blame, the perpetrator is protected by the text. The daughter

participates in her own demise to a degree. Her death is the collaboration of her actions plus her father's. The narrative does show that Jephthah made a fatal mistake, but does not go as far as to unmask him as a brutal sacrificer of his only daughter. In the Bible, a father is never shown to be the direct reason and perpetrator of his daughter's demise. He is rather shown as a helpless victim of circumstances. In Judges 11, the daughter comes out to meet her father by her own accord. This gives the narrator the scope to show that she too, is responsible for her end (Fuchs 1993:121-122).

The reader is not told everything that happens, and a great deal is left undisclosed. The gaps in the narration should alert the reader to the possible justification and shielding of the father. The narrator uses the technique of selective disclosure to tell us what was done to the daughter. We are only told that he did to her the vow he had vowed. The text says nothing more. What exactly did he do? (Fuchs 1993:129).

The narrative keeps our focus on the view of the father, and the various elisions in the description of the daughter's inner life suggest an attempt to mitigate the horror of Jephthah's behavior (Fuchs 1993:129).

The daughter's death is placed as a scene in the unfolding of Jephthah's character: should he break his vow or keep it and sacrifice his daughter? He is not shown to ponder too long about his dilemma, but does stay her execution (Day 1989:58). In the end, even the fact that the daughter goes unnamed, gives proof of the focus remaining on the father. Any disclosure about the daughter's turmoil would stop shielding the father, and the text does not allow that.

#### 5.12.6. Patriarchy Steals the Daughter

The daughter is not claimed by women as a banner for their actions — not even in modern times. Rather, she is claimed by patriarchy. It is interesting to note the way in which patriarchal ideology coopts a women's ceremony in order to glorify the victim. The androcentric message of the story is: Submit to paternal authority, and you will be remembered even if you lose your life. This may give the reader a clue as to why we are not told her name: she is not remembered for herself, but as a daughter. Cheryl Exum further suggests that וַתְּהִי חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל (*wattehi hoq beyisrael*) be translated as "*she became and example in Israel*" (Judges 11.39) rather



than "*it became a custom in Israel*". This new translation would further show how she was of value to a patriarchal system (Exum 1993:139).

Cheryl Exum identifies the androcentric message of the story as submission to parental authority despite the possible loss of your own life, in order to be remembered and celebrated for generations to come. Judges 11 exalts the "dutiful daughter" as a paradigm and ideal, urging all daughters to be similarly selfless and noble in placing themselves at their father's disposal regardless of personal cost (Thompson 2001:102). The Church has made good use of this powerful role model of female submission the daughter provides. Her story has also resulted in a degree of modern female guilt — who is such a good and submissive daughter today? The text's failure to censure and condemn Jephthah serves as mandate for this story in being the ultimate example of what a good daughter should be willing to do and go through, and, for that matter, all ideally and correctly submissive female members of the faith.

#### **5.12.7. Problems with Jephthah**

There are three main problems thrown up by the story of Jephthah, and with which especially female readers battle:

1. This story is very different from the one in Genesis 22 where Abraham has to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's was a test of his faithfulness to Yahweh, while Jephthah's sacrifice of his only daughter stands in the contrasting light of his demonstration of unfaithfulness and misguided conscience (Clifford 2001:84). Isaac is saved by the intervention of a merciful God, while this blameless victim has to be sacrificed as fulfillment of a vow which does not even please God.
2. The text of the book Judges offers no direct disapproval of the happenings to the girl, but the juxtaposition of this narrative with so many other dismal stories could not be taken as an endorsement. Female readers struggle with this lack of disapproval. It seems little consolation that the placing of the story can be seen as censure.
3. Any attempt to evaluate the story is complicated by Jephthah's appearance in the so-called "roll of heroes" in Hebrews 11, where he is listed among the faithful pilgrims of the Old Testament from Abel through to the prophets. In Hebrews 11.32 Jephthah is listed together with Gideon, Samson and Barak,

who seem to the modern reader hardly paragons of faith (Thompson 2001:100).

#### **5.12.8. Laments of the Modern Age**

In the modern context, it is sad to have to admit that the sacrifice of young girls continues, albeit in different circumstances. One such a social context is highlighted by Gallares, who writes about the modern-day lament and mourning which is in order for the sacrifice of young maidens.

Gallares points out that the lament for the sacrifice of young women continues today in the Philippines. She writes that, when Jephthah sees his daughter first, he immediately puts the blame on her and not on himself. He seems to mourn only for himself and not for his daughter (Clifford 2001:84).

This story is open to multiple interpretations. Gallares's context colors her interpretation with the reality of young girls in the Philippines forced into prostitution because of their poverty. God's word of outrage speaks in the different locations of any woman inhumanly oppressed due to her gender and class (Clifford 2001:84-85). In the modern world, this tale still moves the reader to outrage, and feminist theology encourages conscious readers to help change such circumstances.

#### **5.12.9. A Feminist Reading of Jephthah**

Feminist readings of this story pursue a twofold program:

1. The men in the text along with the text's androcentricity are critiqued, and
2. The story is read anew from the perspective of its female characters and hearers (Thompson 2001:102).

Feminist critics have pointed out that Jephthah is one of a series of judges in Israel who seem to yield anything but justice — power yes, but no justice. Jephthah is often celebrated for his faithfulness to his vow, even as his daughter is celebrated for her obedience, but Renita Weems finds this telling of the story highly deceptive. For her, honor, integrity and obedience are noble traits, but are often corrupted in the hands of extremists, one of them Jephthah. Jephthah is also one of many men in Judges who treat women as property to be controlled. He is full of flaws. He bargains with God with a vow after being anointed with the Spirit (Judges 11.29) and blames the victim when he accuses his daughter to have caused him trouble (Judges 11.35) (Thompson 2001:102-103).

Feminist theologians concede that Jephthah may have loved his daughter, and some feminist critics have even speculated on his own abused upbringing as the outcast son of a prostitute (Thompson 2001:103).

As part of the text's androcentricity, one has to consider Divine complicity. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter is much like Abraham's offering of Isaac in Genesis 22, and also shows correspondence to Saul's hasty vow that would have cost his son's life but for the intervention of the people of Israel in 1 Samuel 14. Why were Jonathan and Isaac saved and not this girl? Where are the people who stayed Saul's hand? (Thompson 2001:103).

Phyllis Tribble writes that God says nothing throughout the whole tale, and writes that the absence of Divine judgment implicated the Deity. Fewell also states that the sacrifice of the daughter indicates that sons are more valued by God and society; but it is also possible that the rottenness of society is shown by the death of the girl, the silence of God, and the absence of the people (Thompson 2001:103).

Feminist critics wish to affirm the daughter's independence. She receives more sympathy than her father, but not all of it. Many critics wonder why she offered no protest. Renita Weems wonders "if only the young woman has screamed, kicked, fought, cursed, even fled...anything...but surrender". Alice Laffey reflects on the people's intervention on Jonathan's behalf: the sons of Israel and the daughters of Israel...one response leads to life; the other to death...There is no penalty on the people for saving Jonathan...may we also conclude that no penalty would have ensued had the girl's companions showed the courage to challenge Jephthah? (Thompson 2001:104).

The daughter is worthy of modern attention. Tapp observes that the only other Biblical character who is sacrificed by a patriarch for the good of his people is Jesus — an interesting contrast to the burnt offering of the nameless virgin daughter (Thompson 2001:105).

### 5.12.10. Questions Asked to the Text

This problematic tale holds few positive notes for women and daughters. By using the questions stencil on this text, one might get some answers as to how one should go about handling this text in the community of believers.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

Jephthah's vow puts him in the limelight as a main character, and his daughter meeting him puts her in the light as well. She, however, is the one acted upon in later events. Israel did not have a cultural convention of sacrificing daughters or any children. This is just one of the facets of this narrative that makes it so problematic. As stated elsewhere, this narrative is situated within a whole section of tales with terrible events, and this is of itself criticism offered by the text. Daughters normally have a low social position and this daughter is no exception. The text was traditionally presented to valorize the daughter's obedience, but commentators in the past have shown their discomfort with the tale. Traditional interpretations with the daughter praised for her obedience to death served the interests of a patriarchal system whereby women are encouraged to keep silent and do what men expect them to do, even if it costs their lives. In religion, women were encouraged to remain submissive unto death. This text is patriarchal to such a degree that even male interpreters have struggled with it in the past (Josephus, Augustine, Luther etc). An underlying supposition when seen from a patriarchal angle would be the encouragement of females in the faith to remain subservient, while their reward is listed as women remembering them. From a textual perspective, it seems almost as if the text itself has difficulties with the events, since the tale is situated in a list of tales of horror. Is this some inherent criticism? By keeping the daughter silent, the text ignores women's experience. It does not offer the reader her thoughts, fears, or trouble with this oath. She remains a silent lamb.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is a father who swears an oath, and a daughter who falls prey to this vow. She then goes to the slaughter like a lamb – without any struggle. One can read against the grain of the text by criticizing the silence of the daughter who almost too eagerly acts out her father's vow. One can also criticize traditional commentaries in the form of writings and paintings where she is hailed for her obedience. Even the cases where she is depicted as actually comforting her sad father should be criticized. The daughter's voice is a silenced voice and is ultimately silenced in the

most brutal manner by sacrificing her. She can be given a voice by imagining her wailing, struggling, kicking etc as Renita Weems suggests. Women's part in this text seems to offer no resistance to the malestream offering of their lives. The daughters of the land remember this girl and have a feast, but they do not revolt, they do not save her or kidnap her or come to her rescue. The text paints an almost numb acceptance of fate. Women's experience of this text is one of horror and shock. How could God let this happen? Why didn't anyone interfere? The fact that this girl met her death brings women to an intense faith struggle with regards to their view of a caring God and the interpretation of the text as Word of God.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is, in my own view, the Word of God. I realize how problematic such a statement is in light of the text's narrative slant and keeping in mind the tenets of feminist criticism. This text is very problematic for use in the struggle against oppression. It is possible that only by critique of the text is something to be said in this regard. I fail to find even the feast of remembrance by the daughters of the land to offer a perspective of liberation. The whole slant of the text serves patriarchal interests. The daughter is hailed for her obedience to death to an oath she had no part in. Her unquestioning attitude is a worry since it serves to further stamp home the patriarchal interest in female submission. I do not find this text to be very well known among my peer group. It is difficult to measure its importance in contemporary culture. It has, however, had a great influence on the inherited piety of women who are encouraged to show an unquestioning religious submission even it costs them their lives. By identifying this daughter with Jesus, as some commentators have done in the past, the text is redeemed to a degree by having women identifying their suffering and finding that Jesus himself has suffered likewise.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

The scene between the daughter and her father has been portrayed in paintings by a.o. Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini and JE Millais. It is especially for the painting by Millais that women should show their condemnation since the daughter is portrayed as basically soothing her grieving father, while the opposite should be true. The painting serves as a great indication of the unproblematized patriarchal understanding and interpretation of the text. By painting a scene that depicts the father's horror at what he is about to do, or showing the girl at least to be kicking and screaming as Renita Weems puts it, one can claim a voice for this young woman and claim her back from patriarchy. The gust of the story is not supposed to show how a

good daughter obeys unto the end of her life, even. By showing the daughter to struggle against this oath, she can be a voice against the one-sidedness of patriarchy and its considerations. I also think of the possibilities of writing a poem of outrage or a literary work pondering her outrage at her father's lack of insight and forethought. The daughter relies on modern women's actualization to give her the voice of outrage the text has stolen from her.

### **5.13. JUDGES 16.4-22: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DELILAH**

This narrative could not be ignored due to its importance in the self-understanding of women, and its strong influence in keeping women in religion in check. Few other female characters in the Bible are as memorable and well-known as Delilah. This woman has become a definition of how a female can bring about a man's downfall, and is upheld throughout generations as the example to be avoided. The name Delilah is overdetermined. This name is synonymous with treachery and deceit. Delilah has become a symbol of the *femme fatale* (a woman fatal to man). She is seen as being sexually irresistible, fascinating, frightening and eventually, deadly. As a cultural symbol she is probably rivaled only by two others: Jezebel and Judas (Exum 1996:176). Delilah's place as temptress even in popular culture is well established.

#### **5.13.1. What Do We Know About Delilah?**

A closer reading of the textual information about this fascinating woman reveals that a reader tends to assume information about her that is not necessarily stated. When one remains true to textual information, Delilah steps out of the text and becomes a mysterious woman in many aspects. Of the women Samson were involved with, only Delilah is mentioned by name. The other two women in his life remain unnamed (the woman from Timnah in Judges 14, and the harlot at Gaza in Judges 16.1-3).

Delilah lived in the valley of Sorek, which was situated between Israelite and Philistine territory. Though it is commonly assumed, it is not stated whether she is a Philistine. She seems to be independent since she is not identified in terms of her relationship to a man. She appears to have her own house, but how she came by it remains obscure. Immediately this mystery woman is intriguing: Is she a wealthy widow or a harlot, or maybe a wealthy foreigner? Even her heart remains inscrutable

under the light of the writer: He is unable to tell her feelings toward Samson, though he mentions that Samson loved her (Judges 16.4) (Exum 1996:181).

Her mystery might later on serve to make the reader hostile towards her.

### 5.13.2. Delilah Exploits Samson

In Delilah we find a complex mixture of resourceful woman, possible heroine to her own people, and the ruse of using a man's love to bring about his downfall. The narrator writes as if it is expected of women to use men's weaknesses, yet finds fault when this power is used against men (Klein 1993:66).

Delilah openly has her relationship with Samson. Due to the seeming public nature of the relationship, the Philistine elders offer her money to betray Samson, and she accepts it. Her motives come under question. Is she inspired by greed? From the text it does not seem so, since capturing Samson is not her own idea. She is contacted, and does not offer her services of herself. Her actions show her to be persistent — she is skilled in using rhetoric and nagging to break down Samson's resistance. It is unclear what is meant by the Philistine rulers' instruction to "entice" Samson (לְעִנּוֹתוֹ *patti* in v5). She does, however, exploit Samson's affections (v15) and she knows him well enough to be able to distinguish when he at last tells the truth (v18).

It is unclear who ultimately cuts Samson's hair. The verb in v19 is third person feminine singular, but just before it the text reads that she had him sleep on her lap and then called to the man. Is this man Samson (to make sure he is asleep) or another man (a waiting barber)? After cutting Samson's hair, Delilah begins bullying him (לְעִנּוֹתוֹ — *le'annoto*) and Samson's strength leaves him (v19). This same term is used in v5 where the Philistines want to know his strength so that they can subdue/humiliate/bully/torment him. The exact meaning remains unclear. It is not certain whether Delilah is just hitting him or poking at him, or whether the term signifies something more harsh (Exum 1996:184).

### 5.13.3. Delilah Exploited by the Patriarchal Writer

Delilah as character is exploited and used by the narrator in various ways. On the one hand lack of information about her leads the reader towards hostility, while the

few facts that are communicated, are given in such a way as to further paint her in dubious light.

The story of Samson and Delilah poses more questions than providing answers. From the woman's point of view, she disappears from the story as soon as she has accomplished her mission. If one critically looks at the writer using this female, it seems that Delilah is only important to further the plot, and that the narrator is not interested in her characterization (Exum 1996:184).

Delilah is firstly identified with the term נַחַל (*naḥal*) which refers to the *wadi*. This term refers to the torrents that come down during rains. A second term used in her identification is שֶׂרֶק (*soreq*) which refers to a choice of wine grape. Delilah is immediately associated with the loss of control identified with wine. She is mixed with uncontrollable "torrents" and control-eroding wine, and all terms suggest of overwhelming passions. Delilah is not identified through relation to a male kinsman. She is unattached, and such women are usually depicted as seductive, and potentially leading good men astray (Klein 1993:61-62).

The depictions used by the narrator to describe her dwelling place, further serve to associate her with passion. The reader is once again led to infer a lot of information. Despite this, the text gives no indication that she asked a price for her companionship, while the whore of Gaza is specifically called as such (Klein 1993:62). The writer is at work exploiting the woman — not giving her explicitly wicked names in the text, but also not giving enough information to point the gaze of the reader in another direction.

#### **5.13.4. Delilah Exposes the Reader's Presuppositions**

The tale of Delilah, more than most others, confronts the reader with her/his own perceptions and ideologies. The lack of closure in the Biblical narrative should remain unsatisfactory. Why did she do it, and what happened afterwards? Did she have remorse, or maybe live a long life as national hero? When we confront our own ideologies, it becomes clear that as readers, we are unwilling to draw the conclusion that she lived long and successfully afterwards. It also exposes our tendency to read with the ideological flow of the text, which also privileges Israel over Philistine. In metatexts Delilah is brought back. The temptation to see Delilah killed along with the



spectators in the Philistine temple (Judges 16.27) is so overwhelming that even some Biblical commentators entertain it (Exum 1996:212).

On yet another level the tale of Delilah confronts the reader with own prejudice. We are generally reserved when confronted by the notion that Samson must forgive Delilah for betraying him (he will be blind and later killed). In this case we seem to be taking the part of the victimized party and even the sympathy of female readers goes to Samson. But is it less unreasonable to ask that an abused wife forgive and reconcile with her abusive husband? We do not expect it of Samson, but most certainly expect it from women in the faith. In the prophetic literature, one finds that commentators on the relationship between God and Israel did not find the idea of reconciliation repulsive, unrealistic or unreasonable. Why then should it be unimaginable in the case of Samson? The double standard works effectively to privilege the divine and male point of view (Exum 1996:215), and even female readers and women in faith unknowingly support this standard which serves only to oppress them. It seems that, as far as we read and understand, there are different rules for men and women, and that God's sympathy seems to lie with the male point of view.

The tale of Delilah can furthermore point out how much is assumed in the reading process, and how this influences the interpretation of a text.

Two assumptions about Delilah is that she is a Philistine and that she is a prostitute — neither of which are stated in the narrative. Only one of the women with whom Samson becomes involved, is depicted as being a Philistine. Samson marries this woman of Timnah with disastrous results for all concerned (Judges 14.1-15.6). The harlot he has a relationship with later, is not necessarily Philistine, though she lives in the Philistine city of Gaza (16.1-3). Why is it generally assumed that Delilah is a Philistine? When considering one's own preconceptions, in honesty we might admit that we dislike the idea of an Israelite woman turning against the hero of her people (Exum 1996:185). The assumption of Delilah being a harlot is based on her way of life (independent), the fact that she and Samson are lovers but not wed, and because Samson fell for a harlot once before. These reasons are not definitive. The man and woman in Song of Songs are not married either, but it is clear that they are lovers. Yet this woman is not seen as a harlot. The reader is not told that Delilah had other lovers beside Samson. Why this identification? (Exum 1996:185-186).

This text is a classic example of the conclusions readers draw, which are neither confirmed nor discouraged by the writer. The writer and his implied androcentric audience share a conspiracy against women, and this is betrayed by the text of Delilah as well as the text about Bathsheba. When the reader simply reads *with* the flow of the text, the view of women encoded in the text is accepted (Exum 1996:186).

#### 5.13.5. A Feminist Reading of Delilah

When one reads the story as critical feminist, looking for clues of Delilah's being "set up" by the writer, some interesting signs come to the fore. The reader is maybe firstly influenced by the placing of Delilah's story. It comes immediately after the story of the harlot, with only the clause that "*it happened after that*" to separate the narratives (Judges 16.1-22). Though the text does not say that Samson and Delilah had a sexual relationship (it only states that he loved her) the reader supplies the sexual dimension by naturalization. Josephus was one of the earliest writers to describe a morality to the narrative, in that yielding to feminine temptation is a result of human (male) nature. His interpretation has been echoed through the centuries. This moral of the story however, addressing male morality, does not address women at all, except to depict them as temptations (Exum 1996:188).

When read from feminist perspective, the ideology of the text must be "named and shamed". By drawing into this study of Samson and Delilah the concept of dualism as practiced on defining women, it becomes clear that Samson's story has place for two kinds of women: good and bad. This is just another version of the age-old division of women into types: the venerated woman (virgin, mother) and the fallen woman or whore. This story has both elements: a good woman, Samson's mother (Judges 13). The other women in the narrative are depicted as "bad" women whose sexuality leads Samson astray (Exum 1996:186).

By having this critical look at the story of Delilah, the (female) reader is taught to be aware of the pitfalls of unquestioning attitudes towards the Biblical text. As females especially, women seem to be bombarded from all sides with the ultimatums: you are either a good virgin/wife/mother, or a loose woman with a shady character. We so want to be associated with the positive side that we never stop to examine the processes by which a woman gets typed as a "bad" woman. This is exactly what is happening in the tale of Delilah.

### 5.13.6. Is Delilah Really the Central Problem?

What is achieved by making Delilah into the type of a prostitute? As a prostitute, she commands no respect, and in that case, the blame of Samson's downfall comes to her. Casting her as such is also a way to control her possible danger. A prostitute is less of a threat since sex with a prostitute is sex without commitment and obligations (Exum 1996:197).

But is the woman *per se* the problem? In the one instance where Samson is clearly involved with a harlot, the Philistines set a trap for him but he escapes with the city gates. In that incident, the woman was not even involved, and this may be the reason why Samson remains unscathed. The Biblical account does not consider the harlot a threat. The instances where Samson was threatened are the instances where he was involved with women whom he loved, and his love made him disclose his secrets. The story seems to warn more of the dangers of love than the dangers posed by women *per se* (Exum 1996:197).

The nature of the tale invites the reader to scorn Delilah for using Samson's love for getting what she wants from him. Yet this seems to be a given role for women: manipulating men with sexual favours even within marriage. Delilah never states her love for Samson, which at least shows a sort of integrity on her part (Klein 1993:63).

### 5.13.7. Delilah's Problematic Betrayal

Throughout the ages, people have struggled with understanding Delilah's motives for betraying Samson. The act of her betrayal itself stands in stark contrast to other betrayals. Delilah differs in her approach from others. She is completely direct. She pressures Samson over days until she wears him down, but the text never suggests that she is devious. She says exactly what she wants, namely the secret to his strength (Klein 1993:64). Perhaps this central act is what makes readers so uncomfortable: the woman is not devious, and the hero gives his secrets away (seemingly very) easily.

The attempts to arrange the text in such a manner as to make more sense of the betrayal on the one hand, and the relationship between Delilah and Samson on the other hand, serves as proof of the uncomfortable fit of traditional explanations for this betrayal. In some metatexts, Delilah is cast as Samson's wife. There is no more



**THE KEEPERS OF LOVE**  
JANET MCKENZIE

proof of this than her being a harlot. Casting Delilah as Samson's wife is more an attempt to rehabilitate Samson than Delilah, and immediately shows something about the loyalties and morality of the person doing so. But what happens to Delilah when she becomes a "respectable woman"? She by no means becomes less dangerous. The Biblical Delilah betrays Samson for money. This simple motive has proven unsatisfactory through the ages. Attempts to explain her motives have traditionally been avarice, patriotism, jealousy and revenge. In some versions Delilah is even painted as unknowing of the betrayal, and even her sister is once shown as the betrayer. The painting of Delilah as harlot makes giving her motives easier, since paying a prostitute for betrayal is as easy as paying her for sex. No one expects fidelity from her, since she is disloyal by nature (Exum 1996:199).

We seem fascinated in what made this woman commit the acts she did. The common assumption that Delilah is a Philistine offers another motive. This then makes her a patriotic Philistine. But if she is patriotic, why the bribe? Delilah's secrets remain her own, as do her motives. Perhaps she cares for Samson, or is interested in him sexually. Perhaps she is loyal to her people and the bribe comes incidentally (Exum 1996:200).

The text offers Delilah no recognition or honor. The Philistines sing that their god has given Samson into their hands (Judges 16.23, 24). Even when noted that the narrative is told from Israelite perception, it is obvious that Delilah's compatriots do not praise her. Is Delilah really of no importance, or must she be ignored to underplay her importance? (Exum 1996:202).

These unanswered questions make this text an intriguing story filled with many twists in the plot. Readers should be allowed to discover some of these possible answers for themselves, but with the knowledge of the influence of prior assumptions and past interpretations that have been handed down.

#### **5.13.8. Questions Asked to the Text**

Nowhere is the reader so confronted with her/his own suppositions than in the tale of Delilah. This tale can serve as excellent tool in teaching the reader about the power of suppositions that are not echoed by the text, and the role these play on one's experience of and interaction with a Biblical narrative.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

Delilah is a main actor, as is Samson. Delilah stands out as a character who acts on own volition. She does not ask advice of anyone else, and her true independence must be seen as remarkable. Normally women during those times would be linked to a male, but this woman does not need anyone. Traditionally this text has been presented with Delilah being a seductress and Samson being in her clutches. Normally, Samson's lack of restraint and his history with the women prior to Delilah are subsumed under the weight of the Delilah story. The Biblical text does not subscribe to Delilah a role of seductress. This interpretation is truly a construct of the reader's imagination. Traditional presentations have enabled men to categorize women into two main categories: virgin/mother and whore/seductress. Any sign of independence has been frowned upon in light of this categorization. Women were incredibly harmed due to this, especially strong-willed, independent women. Delilah is riddled with negative attributes — not all of them springing from textual information. The Bible does not call her a harlot or a seductress. She is not even truly manipulative since she confronts Samson directly and wears him down with time. Delilah is a typical stereotype of the loose, manipulative, seductive woman. She can cause an otherwise moral man to fall into sin. The text is patriarchal to such a degree that one is never in a position of having sympathy for Delilah. Despite Samson's life of reckless abandon, the reader still sides with him. The text is used against women in the struggle for liberation by simply slotting an independent woman into a category of seductress and *femme fatale*. No woman wants to be typed as such, and this manages to constrain women despite their inner being wanting to break free of patriarchal constraints. The underlying supposition of the reader with regards to Delilah is so strong that not even a lack of textual evidence can sway the reader's mind about her. By becoming aware of such strong notions, one can be made to start reading the text closely and critically, and slowly lose one's suppositions. The text nowhere ponders Delilah's motivations. Her actions remain problematic since one does not know what moved her. Did betrayal come easy to her? Was she bitter? Did she have a score to settle? The text does not even give one a glimpse of her feelings towards the tragic hero. Delilah remains a silent, mysterious figure.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is the tragic hero unwittingly falling for the evil seductress, and then being betrayed by her. By becoming aware of one's own suppositions about the text and starting to read the narrative in a critical fashion, a lot can be done to start

reading against the grain of the text. Delilah has a silent voice since the text never shows us what is going on in the mind or life of this woman. By reading critically and no longer ascribing to her what is presupposed, one can already start imagining a voice for her. The life of Delilah may be a good starting point in lessons about forgiveness. As was stated earlier, women are often expected to forgive their male oppressors/perpetrators etc, but nobody ever expects Samson to forgive Delilah. This woman brings us to stand before a mirror and takes the veils from our faces. We have double standards, and women are at the short end of the stick, so to speak.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. Delilah can be used as not just a model of what women should not be, but as a model of an independent woman living on her own. She does, however, make unethical life choices and have to bear the consequences. I do not ever envision Delilah becoming a positive role model for women — the cultural tradition surrounding her might just prove too strong. The aspects of tradition and reading the text with preconceived notions should be criticized and the reader should be taught the folly of reading in this way. This tale does hold a lot of potential as an instrument of teaching people about reading strategies, and reading without being objective, through cultural lenses. To this day this tale carries cultural weight to such a degree that women are still called Delilah's when associated with eroticism, temptation, manipulation etc.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This text has been dramatized on film numerous times, and the role of Delilah has been played by Hedy Lamarr, Rosalba Neri, Elizabeth Hurley and Belinda Bauer. She is portrayed in paintings by Tintoretto and Van Dyck, to name just two. The occurrence of her name in popular songs stands at a count of 28. This woman truly is depicted often, and all the time in a negative way. I think the narrative of Delilah is one example of the tradition surrounding the character being so strong that the real Biblical text may have trouble breaking through the myth. Women still live in a dichotomy of either being extensively good or extensively bad with no neutral middle ground. By telling the tale from a feminist perspective and highlighting the way in which this woman is used to create and strengthen the stereotype, women can become more sensitive towards the effects of such stereotyping in their lives, and possibly be independent without feeling guilty.

## 5.14. JUDGES 19-21: THE LEVITE'S WIFE

I chose to give attention to this tale because it is so disturbing. Commentators through the ages, like Josephus, Augustine, and Calvin, to name a few, have wrestled with this narrative, and have proved themselves to be as disturbed by this tragedy as I am.

This disturbing tale in the Old Testament is often skipped and usually does not even form part of the curriculum for Sunday School education for children in Christianity. Gerda Lerner identified the core assumptions in this tale. According to her, the basic assumptions in this text correlate with assumptions found in the law texts of Hammurabi:

1. Male kin have the right of disposal over their female relatives.
2. A man's wife and children are part of his property to be disposed of as such (Lerner 1986:90).

The story of the Levite's wife may possibly be the most disturbing tale in the most disturbing book of the Bible. The final redactors of Judges probably intended it so, in as far as anarchy stands as the book's apologetic for Israel's later monarchy. One of the great peculiarities of the story is the silence with which it has been greeted (Thompson 2001:217). Ruth Bottigheimer has traced the frequent excision of Lot's offer and that of the Levite from children's Bibles over five centuries, but in the case of the Levite, even *The Woman's Bible* is mute (Thompson 2001:218).

### 5.14.1. How Do Feminist Theologians Explain and Exegete this Tale?

The work of feminist theologians on this text mirrors the feminist ideal of varied response from different experiential angles and viewpoints of interest. Phyllis Trible applies a feminist hermeneutic to the story in Judges 19-21. She focuses on the power dynamics men have over women, and illustrates the powerlessness of the female victims at the hands of uncaring powerful victimizers. This is not the only power dynamic to be found in this story. Koala Jones-Warsaw points out that this story has limited use for women of colour if only handled in such a one-sided way, since women of colour experience various types of victimization (Jones-Warsaw 1993:172).



Phyllis Trible brings out the plight of the concubine by separating chapter 19 from the rest of the unit (Judges 20-21). But the story offers greater degrees of victimization and suffering (Jones-Warsaw 1993:180).

Several feminist scholars have alerted us to the fact and danger of setting up a dichotomous system of analysis, which is itself a patriarchal pattern of thinking. By doing this, the very ideology that needs to be avoided gets reinforced. The dichotomy of wicked men/innocent women as used by Phyllis Trible sets up a thought pattern which ignores the interrelatedness of everybody's fate. Males in the story are also victimized, and this occurs in increasing levels from individual to family to clan to tribal confederacy (Jones-Warsaw 1993:180).

#### **5.14.2. Criticism of Feminist Theologians' Exegesis of this Tale**

In the field represented by this tale, various theologians criticize the work of each other. This is in accordance with the ideals held by feminist theology, where a plurality of voices and a critical view can better lead to inclusion. The criticism seems to be from the side of feminist theologians of colour towards their European counterparts, and not across gender lines as one would expect. Jones-Warsaw is very critical in her appraisal of the work done by Phyllis Trible, while Delores Williams further points out the exclusion of Afro-American women.

Jones-Warsaw states that Trible manages to reduce the story to female victimization, which is a gross oversimplification of the problems that were current to that ancient society. The people inhabiting the world of the text were living in chaos. Trible herself falls prey to reductive oppression — by reducing victimization to gender in its totality, she victimizes all the other characters with a silencing technique comparable to the one the narrator uses (Jones-Warsaw 1993:181).

It may be argued that the whole story represents the views of the dominant classes who were in favour of kingship, but Trible's feminist perspective is itself stemming from a background of a dominant culture, and a middle-class lifestyle, which adds to her ability to not acknowledge other types of victimization different from that which white middle-class females experience (Jones-Warsaw 1993:181). Such a feminist approach must broaden to encompass all the various levels of oppression and victimization that took place.

In response to such criticism I add that it is indeed valid, but would like to counter with a few questions: Is it humanly possible to make a study and remember every possibility? Are we not bound by our own experiences and cultures? Is it even possible to cross this gap? Is it so unacceptable to say that we do not view from the same angle, we do not live in the same places, and thus we do not have the same problems, but that we are willing to talk and hear despite this? Criticism such as the above, valid as it may be, must keep in mind the limitations of the human effort in itself, despite ideals of inclusion.

Delores Williams raised the question of the appropriateness of Afro-American women uncritically accepting the idea that "patriarchy is the major source of all women's oppression". Williams shows that white females have also oppressed black women or contributed to their oppression. Locally, Christina Landman has written about the way in which White women missionaries have transferred their negative piety to Black women (Landman 1999:88). This point stresses the necessity of creating Biblical hermeneutics that speak to various interest groups. For Black women, a hermeneutic is needed that will empower those who are victimized, help them create new solutions, and end victimization (Jones-Warsaw 1993:181-182). Feminist theologians of colour display their ability to add to the discourse and bring critical perspective to the fore with criticism such as the above, but should also beware of falling prey to race-motivated, subconscious anger that might be misguided and misdirected. Is the problem in the field White feminist theologians, or is the problem the limits of human endeavor? By pointing out the pitfalls and gaps in an exegesis of this tale, positive and constructive work towards inclusion is undertaken, but it could be broken down by race-motivated criticism if left unchecked.

The plurality of voices and critical tones add to the varied nuances in exegesis of this troubling text, and should add to the richness and possibilities thereof, the chance to avoid such atrocities in future, and the opportunity to make the female voice (of any race and social position) heard once and for all. Never again should a female victim — but for that matter, any victim, be left unheard and unnamed.

The story of the Levite's wife is bound up with the story of Lot's daughters in Genesis 19, where Lot offered his daughters to a frenzied crowd of Sodomites, from whom the daughters were saved when angels intervened. Both tales are consistently used to shed light on each other. In what follows, exegesis will play between the two tales (Thompson 2001:180).

### 5.14.3. Six Major Developments

The tale has six major developments.

#### 5.14.3.1. One

The first major development is the opening scene where the wife flees to her father. The status of the Levite's wife is problematic. The term *pīlegeš* (פִּילְגֶּשׁ) is usually translated as "concubine", but is challenged by some interpreters. What the text furthermore means when it describes the woman as "playing the harlot" (זָנָה — *zanah*) against him, is also unclear. The Septuagint holds that she became angry with him. A woman who has actually committed adultery is unlikely to run to her father's house, and it is also unlikely that the Levite would go to her father's house to woo her and bring her back. There is also no mention of legal consequences (Thompson 2001:180-181). Koala Jones-Warsaw, a womanist critic, speculates that the reference to harlotry might represent the Levite's accusation that his wife was not a virgin at marriage. In such a case, the woman's father would figure as a defender of her innocence. Feminist critics are, despite lack of consensus, not willing to accept easily the accusation of infidelity (Thompson 2001:181-182).

#### 5.14.3.2. Two

The second episode involves the Levite's errand to the house of his father-in-law and the strange scene of enforced hospitality. The Levite's intention to speak to her heart seems upstaged by all the days of feasting. Trible describes this as an exercise in male bonding, but womanist responses demonstrate that feminist criticism also corrects itself. Mieke Bal explains that the scene is not concerned with hospitality, but rather shows the competition between the two men with the woman caught in the middle. The Levite as guest seems to be in a powerless position (Thompson 2001:182).

By stating that the father offered hospitality to the Levite and not to his daughter (male bonding), readers might be made to feel angry towards the men in the text. But was the daughter really a guest in the house? The text states that she has been there for four months, which hardly makes her a new guest. The woman might in this light not even expect hospitality. The father-in-law's extended hospitality was also

not necessarily for the comfort of the Levite, but might have been offered in order to restrict the Levite's movements until the father achieved his goal. To accept hospitality is to accept subordination of power, which does not necessarily entail abuse (Jones-Warsaw 1993:180-181).

#### 5.14.3.3. Three

The third scene is the catastrophe that occurs on the way home. The scene closely follows the events of Genesis 19 when Lot offered his virgin daughters to the mad crowd. In Judges there is no angelic intervention and the Levite forces his wife out the door where the crowd rapes her until the morning.

Several unanswered questions pop up here. Cheryl Exum disagrees with Mieke Bal on many points, but agrees that the story is meant to punish the wife for her earlier display of autonomy (Thompson 2001:182-183).

The scene remains problematic, especially in light of a later written section of Leviticus 19.29, which forbids a father to such action — he may not profane his daughter or make her into a harlot (Lerner 1986:174).

#### 5.14.3.4. Four

The gang rape has a long and disturbing sequel. The Levite stumbles upon his wife's body at the threshold the next morning, and the tale proceeds to her dismemberment and the ensuing civil war. The Septuagint assures us she was dead, but the Hebrew text is silent. Was she alive when the Levite tied her to the donkey? The Hebrew text leaves open the possibility that the Levite was also his wife's butcher. She is carved into a dozen pieces. The Levite's act is seen by Bal not as a protest against her rape, but as a participation in it. Dismembering her body is a desacralization as well as an erasure of her remaining humanity. The man is trying, in overdoing the violence already done to her, to retrospectively affirm *his* mastery over and against the mastery of the rapists over the woman (Thompson 2001:183). Even after her death the men compete. Exum states that the dismemberment further punishes the woman's autonomy (Thompson 2001:184).

In this event, every event is repeating or being repeated and reversing its meaning, as seen in the Levite's publication of the crime by sending the pieces of the woman to the tribes. The mutilation by the Levite repeats the mutilation the Benjaminites did to the same body. Another repetition can be found in the act of sending the pieces

around the country as one would send a representative or delegate. By sending her pieces to be delegates in his stead, the Levite repeats the action of sending her out to the Benjaminites in his stead. Representation becomes a crime. The Levite publicizes his crime and sends a self-accusatory message (Kamuf 1993:201). The woman's flesh becomes a message (Bal 1993:223) not only against others, but seems to almost be unwittingly self-incriminatory.

Mieke Bal points out that narrative as a mode of representation is a tool of manipulation and a figure of rhetoric (Bal 1993:209). This woman is the object of the body-language of rape, but her body is afterwards used as language by the very man who exposed her to the violence in the first place (Bal 1993:223).

#### 5.14.3.5. Five

The Levite's subsequent explanation for his deed is also faulted. He seems shrewd in evading the question of his own culpability, and Bal complains that most commentators (like the tribes of Israel gathered here) are taken in by him. Tribes senses that his "crime of silence" is being protected by the narrator, while Exum finds the Levite's self-serving speech rather a sign of the narrator's disdain (Thompson 2001:184).

#### 5.14.3.6. Six

The narrative is followed by the Israelite council demanding the surrender of the Gibeon culprits, the Benjaminite refusal to surrender them, and the ensuing Benjaminite war. The crime seems to be inhospitality and the despoiling of the Levite's honour, rather than the crimes committed against the woman. The Levite's attitude towards the concubine (the Masoretic texts alternatively refer to her as his wife) is an eager willingness to surrender her to gang rape, and thereafter sleeping peacefully. The text nowhere censures him or his host who offered his virgin daughter. The text rather assumes that no explanation is further needed for this behaviour (Lerner 1986:174). Tapp lumps the tale together with the stories of Jephthah's daughter and the daughters of Lot as sharing the single ideology of "virgin daughters are expendable" (Thompson 2001:184-185).

Another angle on this problematic text is offered by David Bakan, who interprets the theme of the Benjaminite war as a conflict of the victory of patrilocality over

matrilocality. The concubine's crime was to remove herself from her husband's house. This evil is rectified by the later moving of four hundred virgins of Jabesh-Gilead to their husband's homes (Lerner 1986:175).

The final sequence of events are the civil war, the sack of Jabesh-Gilead, and the abduction of the young women of Shiloh. The supposed quest for justice by the Levite for his wife, is ironically the reenactment on a massive scale of the Gibeonite's original crime, visited now upon the abducted women of Jabesh-Gilead and Shiloh (Thompson 2001:184).

An interesting angle comes from Fewell, who compares the narrator to the women in Judges 11.40 who commemorated Jephthah's daughter. Fewell points out that the act of "writing the wrongs" implicitly signifies an act of self-critique (Thompson 2001:185). Yani Yoo sees signals of the narrative's intention to condemn violence against women (Thompson 2001:185).

Jones-Warsaw feels that a womanist reading is able to move beyond Tribble's dichotomic approach: the trouble of Judges 19-21 is not just that women are victimized. To restrict the problem to issues of gender effectively silences other characters, also victims, such as the men of Jabesh-Gilead. There are other kinds of suffering here besides sexism and other kinds of evil besides patriarchy (Thompson 2001:185). This insight can lead readers into empathy for the unmentioned other victims in the text, and not just the most obvious one.

#### **5.14.4. Questions Asked to the Text**

The horror this woman faced makes this text truly a text of terror, as Tribble named it. In what follows I make use of the stencil of questions I have developed and use it on this narrative.

#### **QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION**

The Levite's wife may have been an active character at the outset, but she soon becomes one acted upon by the men in her life. The Levite becomes the man closest to her who is supposed to protect and cherish her but who betrays her in the most shocking way. He later becomes a main character when he uses this woman as a message to send throughout the land. The social conventions in this tale might have to do with matrilineal and patrilocal marriage, as well as the wife being the

possession of the husband to dispose of as he pleases. Another consideration would be that of rape, and eventually, revenge and retaliation. The Levite's wife seems to have no social position at all. She is thrown out to a mad mob and later cut into pieces with the Levite never even blinking an eye, it seems. The Levite in his turn is painted as someone who seems to have the right to do what he is doing. This story has a very limited traditional presentation. It is normally left out of children's Bibles with the result that very few people are acquainted with it. One cannot necessarily simply call this text patriarchal. To me, it is so horrific that any patriarchal considerations are actually overshadowed in light of the sheer violence in the tale. The text can be seen as critique in itself. The fact that something like this was recorded (writing the wrongs), seems to be a great outcry against such deeds.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be the Levite's ability to do with this woman as he pleases without having to give any explanation and without being censured. One can read against the grain by condemning his actions and making an outcry against the events of the text. The woman's voice is silenced in the text. This voice can be made audible by scrutinizing the other ways in which she speaks: her fingers on the door speak clear and loud and accuses her husband of murder. The picture of her body on the donkey speaks of an ongoing humiliation. Later, when her body is cut into pieces and sent through the land, apart from the utmost desecration and humiliation, this body speaks yet again. The text does not offer much by means of hope and liberation. Its main contribution can be said to make the audience aware of the horrors of such violence, and the ability of humans to commit such actions against each other. This woman must be remembered and her tale told so that women do not forget the victim.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text too, is the Word of God. I cannot see this text lending itself to use in the cause of liberation, but I do see it being used as a tool to explain and make clear the horrors of human rights violations and the consequences if violence is allowed to literally bleed a nation to death. From this tale can go out a strong outcry against violence done to subjugated and weaker parties. The repeated humiliation of the female body should not go uncriticized but should be denounced in the strongest terms.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This text almost reads like a modern cinematic drama. Along the lines of this genre, a movie like *Tears of the Sun* comes to mind which in places depicts the utter pointlessness of violence for the sake of violence, and what happens when power is unchecked by morality. This narrative should feature as a warning against society's tendencies towards anarchy. Women should be reminded not to let this woman's fingers on the door ever be forgotten.

### **5.15. RUTH: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RUTH**

Women in Christianity grow up with the narrative of Ruth. This tale is depicted in most Children's Bibles and the picture of Ruth as a modern day Cinderella is firmly entrenched in (at least) the female mindset. But when one looks through lenses coloured by a hermeneutics of suspicion, it becomes clear that this tale is patriarchal to the core in its representation, and that a new light should be cast on the characters from a view of feminist criticism.

In order to bring a critical analysis to the book of Ruth with the ideal of using it to liberate women and other oppressed parties, focus is placed on relationships that exist between people of the same and opposite gender. The book of Ruth gives ample room for the problematizing of traditional understanding and expectations of gender roles, and the way the sexes relate to each other. Same-sex relationships in the Bible does not only look into sexual orientation, but rather focuses on the strong bonds between two people of the same gender that may range from deep and abiding friendship to homosexuality. Opposite sex interests refer to interpretations that want to accentuate heterosexual relationships at the expense of the bond between people of the same gender. In the book of Ruth, this would, for example, result in the romanticizing of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz. It does not ask whether a heterosexual relationship exists at all, but assumes that it does, and rather focuses on the intensity thereof. The issue here is not which side is right. What will be pointed out in the following, however, is that same-sex as well as opposite-sex relationship advocates lay claim to the story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz. By giving attention to all the options of such relationship studies, a better understanding is gleaned of the relationships in the book.



### 5.15.1. Ruth's Oath Has a Life of its Own

The problematic starts with Ruth's oath in Ruth 1:

*Entreat me not to leave you*

*Or to return from following you,*

*For where you go, I will go,*

*Where you lodge, I will lodge;*

*Your people shall be my people,*

*And your god, my god.*

*Where you die, I will die,*

*And there I will be buried.*

*May Yahweh do to me and more also*

*Even if death parts me from you (Ruth 1.16-17).*

This statement of commitment is extraordinary, and has a life outside of the text. Ruth's expression has become household words. It has taken on meanings of its own, and has been used in varying ways and circumstances.

It has in some places been taken as part of the wedding vow, and when used in an application to heterosexual marriage, it has lost the original meaning of Ruth. By taking these words spoken by one woman towards another and using them between a man and a woman, this extraordinary and special bond between women is erased (Exum 1996:135).

Feminist criticism wants to point out that this extraordinary vow is not a heterosexual vow between a woman and a man. What makes it so very special, is the deep level of commitment and loyalty it shows between two women. This vow does not throw a light on the (exact sexual) nature of the relationship between the women, and although one might play with different possibilities, in the end the reader should return to the basic tenets of the text itself. By laying claim once again to the vow as a vow from one woman to another, and making it a vow for women to women, it has powerful possibilities for creating bonds of loyalty, safety and freedom between women, and may ultimately work liberation and the end of oppression in hand. As a tool amongst support groups and groups of women who share a liberation ideal, this vow should once again be emphasized and given a central position.

### 5.15.2. Ruth's Commitment to Naomi Scrutinized

The word *דָּבַק* (*dbq*) is translated as “cling” or “cleave”. In Ruth 1.14 the narrator states that Orpah turned and left, but that Ruth “clung” to her mother-in-law. The word *dabaq* is most often used in relation to God in the Hebrew Bible, but when used in relation to people, nowhere else does it describe the act of a female. In Genesis 2.24 the word *dabaq* describes the husband leaving his parents and his “clinging” to his wife. This “clinging” refers to love and marriage and possibly sexual relations. *דָּבַק* (*dbq*) refers to the male role in initiating marriage. When Ruth then *דָּבַק* (*dbq*) Naomi, she takes the male initiative in a relationship of formal commitment that simulates marriage. Ruth adds a male role of “clinging” to Naomi in the way a husband “clings” to his wife (Nadar 2001:165).

When the lens is turned to same-sex and opposite-sex relationships in the book of Ruth, it invariably also turns to the way in which relationships are commented on or transformed through cultural appropriation (Exum 1996:136). By delving into the nature of Ruth's relationship to Naomi as expressed in firstly her oath and secondly her actions, readers can learn a lot about the underestimated nature of female commitment, female faith and the underplayed bond that can spring up between women.

What features from the book of Ruth are used to affirm same-sex relationships?

1. Ruth makes an oath of loyalty to Naomi, and eventually gives up a lot for Naomi's sake. This even surpasses the leap of faith Abraham made!
2. Ruth reverses sexual allegiance. One female chooses another female in a context where life depends upon men. In light of the ancient context, it is hard to imagine a more radical decision (Exum 1996:137).
3. Ruth's commitment is a life-long one. She swears that nothing will ever separate them (by implication this includes marriage to a man). This bond will not be broken.
4. Other language in the book also suggests the intensity of her devotion to Naomi. Ruth “left” her father and mother (2.11) and “cleaved” *דָּבַקָהּ* (*dabeqah*) to Naomi (1.14). This is the language of Eden, where it is stated that a man will leave his parents and cleave *דָּבַק* (*dabaq*) to his wife (Genesis 2.24). In this case terminology normally reserved for marriage is used to describe a bond between

women, with the result that same-sex appropriation would be a logical exercise (Exum 1996:138).

The writer does not state whether Naomi returns Ruth's affection. Should this fact help in interpreting the nature and the mutuality of the relationship? Even in light of this lack of mention from Naomi's part, the tale generally stands as an illustration of mutual concern and loyalty *hesed* (Exum 1996:138-139). The strong bond between the women cannot be ignored, and even commentators praise it. It is necessary to note that this bond is made in the absence of men.

### 5.15.3. The Influence of a Man on the Bond

Can this oath/bond remain focal even when male absence is breached? What happens when a man comes along? The female oath and allegiance is moved into shadow, and the man becomes a center of interest. Suddenly the book of Ruth is not about how two women make a life in a man's world, but rather about the continuity of a family, and this requires a male presence (Exum 1996:144). When Ruth marries Boaz, her symbolic marriage to Naomi is not negated, but must share importance with this new bond.

Commentators seldom mention the connections between Genesis 2.24 and Ruth 1.14 that lend the women's relationship its marriage-like quality. Could this be an oversight or does it attest to a deeper heterosexist bias? (Exum 1996:145).

As in the case of Naomi, the text is silent about Boaz's affection for Ruth. Traditionally, his affection has been inferred from his actions. He notices Ruth in his field and advises her not to leave. She can drink from the workers' vessels and is invited to eat with them. Why the unusual interest in the foreigner? Has Boaz fallen in love with Ruth? Readers also infer Ruth's desire from the way she talks to Boaz "*you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant*" (Ruth 2.13) (Exum 1996:151-152).

Not only is the oath made by Ruth shifted from focus by the entrance of Boaz, but by giving the scene on the threshing floor (Ruth 3.6-13) romantic qualities, it is privileged above the emotional climax of Ruth's oath. This scene is traditionally interpreted as the culmination of a beautiful romance. By singling out this scene as a central

moment, the scene between the two women that inspires same-sex readings is shifted from central importance. Once again the relationship between women has to be overshadowed by the relationship between a woman and a man (Exum 1996:153). “The place of his feet” מְרַגְלֹתָיו (*margelotaw*) that Ruth lies beside (3.8,14) is almost certainly an euphemism for the lower part of Boaz’s body, if not specifically his genitals; and the word for “lie down” שָׁכַב (*šakab*, 3.4, 7, 13, 14) is frequently used for sexual intercourse. Whether Ruth uncovers “the place of his feet” or whether she uncovers herself is another tantalizing question. If she is naked, her request that Boaz “spread your skirt over your maidservant” makes better sense. In either case, the scene is full of sexual innuendo (Exum 1996:154).

#### 5.15.4. Naomi’s Complex Roles

Naomi is a main character, and as such refuses to be written out of the story once the goal (Ruth’s marriage to Boaz and birth of Obed) is achieved. Why is she still important? Why is the writer unable to simply make her disappear into the woodwork? She stands as a problem: she represents the third person and the triangular nature of interpersonal relationships in this Biblical tale. The third person is a surplus in any romantic equation. One possible explanation for Naomi’s presence is given by Cheryl Exum, who suggests that the figure of Naomi is sexually ambivalent (Exum 1996:169). On closer inspection it is revealed that relationships in this book are more complex than analysis in terms of patterns of bonding reveals. Gender roles are blurred (specifically sexually determined roles such as husband, father, wife, mother) with Naomi symbolically holding all these roles (Exum 1996:169).

In Ruth 4.17 the women of Bethlehem exclaim that a son is born to Naomi. This phrase “a son is born to...” is always used in connection with fathers — never with mothers alone. Naomi is symbolically in the position of father to Obed, and as such, she is also symbolically husband to Ruth (Ruth 4.15). Naomi “set the child on her breast” (Ruth 4.16) and became his nurse אֹמֶנֶת (*’omenet*). How can Naomi, who claimed to be too old to have a husband in 1.12, nurse a child? Commentators traditionally answer this question by referring to אֹמֶנֶת (*’omenet*) in a wider sense as foster-parent or guardian. In Numbers 11.12 it is used to mean a wet-nurse. This word in combination with her placing of the child on her breast reinforces the symbolism of Naomi as mother to Obed. As Obed’s mother, Naomi is also

At a time when my country had a woman in the highest office of state, women were still not admitted to the lowest order in the Church, that of deacon.

Daphne Hampson in JL Sprong 2002:ix

symbolically Boaz's wife (Exum 1996:169-170). Both Naomi and Boaz call Ruth "my daughter" (2.2, 8, 22; 3.1, 10, 16, 18). This makes Naomi symbolically a mother to Ruth, but this epithet places both Naomi and Boaz as symbolical parents to Ruth and reinforces the symbolic husband-wife relationship between Naomi and Boaz (Exum 1996:170). Naomi is also symbolically represented as a wife to Ruth, for Ruth leaves her father and mother and cleaves to Naomi as a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife (Genesis 2.24).

Naomi, in summary, holds the following symbolic positions:

1. Husband to Ruth
2. Wife to Ruth
3. Mother to Ruth
4. Wife to Boaz
5. Father to Obed
6. Mother to Obed.

From this it is clear that the character of Naomi represents a radical blurring of sexually defined roles (Exum 1996:171).

This plurality of roles played out by each character serves to make the text more intricate, with more possible layers of meaning, while at the same time serving a liberative purpose with regards to traditional understanding of gender roles. By emphasizing this characteristic of the text, groups can work towards freeing mindsets of preconceived and long-ingrained, culturally determined ideas around gender roles.

#### **5.15.5. Ruth's Complex Roles**

Not only Naomi, but also Ruth seems to be ambivalent. She is Boaz's wife and Obed's mother (4.13). She too, stands in the position of both husband and wife, daughter and son. As Naomi's "husband" she leaves her father and mother and cleaves to her "wife", and as mother to the son born to Naomi, she stands in as Naomi's "wife". Naomi refers to her as "my daughter", but Ruth also fills the role of son in two aspects:

1. She provides for Naomi after the death of her sons when no *גֹּאֵל* (*go'el*) was in sight, and
2. By being "more than seven sons" (4.15) by virtue of her role in perpetuating the family line which is determined by and traced through sons (4.18-22) (Exum 1996:171-172).

Ruth uses wordplay to get Boaz to act on behalf of Yahweh. Boaz told her in the fields that he wished her the reward of Yahweh under whose wings she sought shelter (2:12). *קַנָּפֶיךָ* (*kanap*) is translated as wings, and Ruth uses this same word to ask Boaz to spread his wing over her. Ruth is challenging Boaz to act on behalf of Yahweh. Since Boaz is portrayed as a deeply religious man, Ruth reappropriates his religious language and challenges him to be the blessing to her himself. Her act is more daring than the seduction Naomi advised her to stage (Nadar 2001:168-169).

Despite Ruth's willingness to take on the role of seducer, her request to Boaz ensures that she does not have to take this role. Her request to Boaz to spread his wing over her uses ambivalent language, which can mean either an appeal for marriage and security, or sex, or both. The choice of interpretation seems to be left to Boaz. This risk is another measure of Ruth's courage. The ambivalence of her discourse shows the power of her words: Boaz can either have sex with her and in so doing take her for a wife, or he can act as *yabam* (redeemer) and in this way marry her (Nadar 2001:170-171).

Ruth is also seen through the lens of the foreign woman. She calls on an Israelite man as a foreign woman to accept a responsibility that he does not need to answer. Her act ensures her change in status from outsider to insider (Nadar 2001:169).

#### **5.15.6. Boaz's Complex Roles**

Even the roles of Boaz are blurred. Boaz is father to Obed to such a degree that the book ignores the Levirate law according to which Obed would actually be Mahlon's son. He is also in a position of father to Ruth as he calls her "my daughter". Boaz is a husband to both women. Literally, he is married to Ruth, but symbolically he is husband to Naomi who sets his child to her breast and nurses him as if she were his mother.

#### **5.15.7. The Text and the Law**

By focusing on the Levirate law as described in the book of Ruth, the uncomfortable relationship between strict law and praxis is highlighted as in Genesis 38. It seems that these stories want to point out that there is a deep-seated paradox between

praxis and law. Law as seems to be prescribed by men, paradoxically seems to get blurred in the practical application by women. The book's broader understanding of the Levirate law is evident in Naomi's words that her daughters need not wait around for another son of hers.

Once again it should be noted that there does not seem to be any judgment passed on this looser interpretation and application from the side of the writer. Do these texts maybe represent a world where literally the man makes the law, but the woman determines the day to day running and application? The book of Ruth only loosely follows the prescriptions of Deuteronomy 25. Perhaps these stories (like Genesis 38) do not know the law. They could serve as an illustration that law has a rather loose fit with real circumstances.

#### **5.15.8. The Text does not Escape Patriarchy**

Naomi conspires with Ruth (ch 3) to set in motion a plan that will make Boaz redeem Ruth and provide the women with the desired progeny. Ruth comes to Boaz to initiate the relationship that will eventually bring the offspring that still remains the goal of the narrative (Lyke 1997:97). Boaz will take Ruth as wife and maintain the estate. Nel writes about the talion principle in OT narratives and states that an act which may seem repulsive is justifiable in terms of the talion principle. Boaz is guilty of neglecting his responsibility as redeemer. Naomi was certain of the outcome of the action despite the possible grave consequences for Ruth, and her certainty was based on the legal grounds in terms of the talio. By her unethical action, Ruth restored justice. Boaz resultingly acted in accordance with his plight, took Ruth as wife, and ensured an offspring for Naomi (Nel 1994:25). Naomi is the one who gains a son (4.16). God's provision in this story takes the form of the talion principle (Nel 1994:25). The elders declare their hope that Boaz's house be like Perez's, whom Tamar bore to Judah (v12). The book poses certain correlation with Genesis 38. Like Tamar in Gen 38, Ruth ignores her short-term self-interest and does what proves to be in her, the Israelites' and David's long-term interest.

Despite other aspects like relationships between genders and blurring of gender roles, as well as a more relaxed praxis of the Levirate law, the book of Ruth does not escape a central theme of patriarchy — the race to ensure the progeny of the dead husband and in so doing, the security of the family. All of the Levirate texts tell of this central theme. The widow's motivation is typically depicted as striving to particularly maintain the deceased's name and legacy in Israel among his brethren. All the



Levirate texts share the topos of "woman with a cause" and share key elements within that topos (Lyke 1997:99).

#### **5.15.9. Female Characters Resist Patriarchy**

Womanist Scholar Renita Weems mentioned that the friendship between Ruth and Naomi is a welcome contrast to the many other Biblical narratives where women are portrayed as competing against each other for status, power and men: Hagar and Sarah, Rachel and Leah, and, among others, Miriam and her sister-in-law (Kanyoro 2002:35). In the book of Ruth the patriarchal writer might have laid aside this age-old plot line, and offered a refreshing tale of women working together, and not against each other.

The attention to the birth of a famous son is a sign of patriarchy manifesting itself in the midst of this particular story of female partnership. The narrator does note, however, that the women of Bethlehem declare that God has restored the fortunes of Naomi by giving her a daughter-in-law whose love is of greater value than seven sons (Ruth 4.14-15). In patriarchal culture, this is a startling declaration. The book of Ruth shows the Biblical tradition, characterized by patriarchy and androcentrism, undergoing modification. In the book of Ruth, women of warring tribes freely choose to bind their lives together in a partnership of mutual support and loving concern (Clifford 2001:75). The book of Ruth stands as example of women's independence, solidarity and commitment to each other. In such a sense, it is a book of liberation (Kanyoro 2002:35).

Despite patriarchal interests, these tales are filled with women and their actions. Even though the son is ultimately born to serve patriarchal interest, he is declared to be born to the woman Naomi. On one level these tales seem to be a struggle for power between the androcentric writer with patriarchal ideals, and the women characters who will not submit freely to this self-serving writing. Though Ruth stands as a woman with a cause (to ensure progeny), it is Naomi who strategizes the whole event, beginning in chapter 3. The women of the town even suggest that the crowning achievement of Naomi is the marriage between Boaz and Ruth. They declare that Ruth's son is born to Naomi (v17) (Lyke 1997:99). Though the son is the means by which progeny is ensured, it is the sons of both Naomi and Judah who die and the daughters-in-law who act to ensure future families (Lyke 1997:98).

Ruth's actions in the fields further show her resourcefulness. The narrator summarizes Ruth's actions in the fields before Boaz arrives as

וַתִּלְקֹט בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֲרֵי הַקְצֹרִים (*wattēlagget bassadeh 'ahāreg haqqosrīm*), which is literally translated as “she gleaned in the fields behind the reapers”. The implication from this is that Ruth already asked permission of the foreman to start gleaming behind the reapers even before Boaz arrived (Nadar 2001:166).

Despite Ruth's telling Naomi she will do as Naomi says, she does not do it. In Ruth 3.9 Boaz asks Ruth who she is, and she answers that she is Ruth, his maidservant. She immediately asks him to spread his wings over her since he is the redeemer. Naomi told Ruth to go and lie at his feet and wait for him to tell her what to do, but Ruth does not wait. She takes charge of the situation and tells Boaz what she wants him to do (Nadar 2001:168).

The strong female action depicted in the book gives clear indication of the female characters' unwillingness to become complete pawns in a patriarchal-orientated text.

#### 5.15.10. The Levirate Law Criticized

In the time of Ruth there existed a strong patriarchal control over clan property and this had a great impact on Israelite women. Descent was reckoned patrilineally. Sons and their wives lived in the father's household until his death. The father arranged marriages for his children. Wealthy daughters' dowry gave them some form of protection against abuse since the return of dowry in case of divorce would not be in the interest of the family she married into. Poor daughters' only consolation from the monarchic era onwards, was that they could not be sold into slavery (a lot reserved for foreign women). The slavery system in Israel was more lenient than in surrounding nations, with the Deuteronomic law assuring the female slave's release in the seventh year (Deut 15.12-13).

All Israelite women were expected to marry and passed from the father's control to that of the husband and father-in-law. If the husband died before his wife, his brother or another male relative assumed control over her and married her. Though the Levirate was interpreted as a “protective” device for the widow, it speaks most strongly for the male concern of preserving patrimony within the family (Lerner 1986:169-170).

The concept of the Levirate shows a complex development which is not traceable in this study. It should, however, be mentioned that it once again confirms a "class" distinction among women — the woman who had borne sons enjoyed more security and privileges than the woman who had only daughters, or no children at all. Women were sadly assigned higher status on the basis of their sexual activities and procreative abilities (Lerner 1986:119).

#### **5.15.11. The Story of Ruth in African Culture**

In many African cultures the practice exists that requires widows to marry their dead husband's brothers. Women and the Church in Africa sometimes see the story of Ruth as endorsing this cultural practice. African women do have different experiences sourced from the story of Ruth than that of white women. Women should stay with this story longer and rescue the characters from cultural bondage (Kanyoro 2001:105).

Women's concern with this text should not just be the condemnation of their cultural trappings, but to seek tools from the text that enable women to criticize culture while reaching out to women who are in bondage to culture. What does the message of Ruth convey to different women from different races, classes and language backgrounds in this specific country? It is possible that the story of Ruth serves a purpose of encouraging women to succumb to cultural pressure and expectations? What message does the book bring to women who want to be different? The story of Ruth is silent about Orpah. Likewise, women who choose to act in the way Orpah chose to, have no models of blessing in the Bible. How do we as women support Orpahs? What blessings can we imagine for Orpah, especially when compared to the blessings that befell Ruth when she succumbed to certain cultural practices (Kanyoro 2001:106). How do women imagine the life of Orpah? What blessings and problems accompanied Orpah? Is it possible for you to be an Orpah? How does an Orpah mobilize collective solidarity? How does Orpah face communal criticism? Questions should also anew be directed to Ruth and Naomi (Kanyoro 2001:106).

Musimbi Kanyoro workshopped the book of Ruth with 150 rural women from the Bware village. They divided into smaller groups and were assigned various tasks:

Group 1: A mixed group of younger and older women.

Task: Read the whole book and retell it in a story using their own words.

Group 2: Composed of mainly older women.

Task: Study Naomi and present their interpretation of Naomi.

Group 3: Composed of mainly younger women.

Task: Study Ruth and present their interpretation of Ruth.

Group 4: Composed of mainly younger women.

Task: Study Orpah and tell her untold story.

Group 5: A mixed group of younger and older women.

Task: Retell the story of Ruth and Naomi back in Bethlehem upon their return (Kanyoro 2002:39-40).

The groups struggled for two days, preparing their presentations and going about their tasks. They had morning and evening worship, accompanied by one lecture in the morning and one in the afternoon, all lasting an hour (Kanyoro 2002:40).

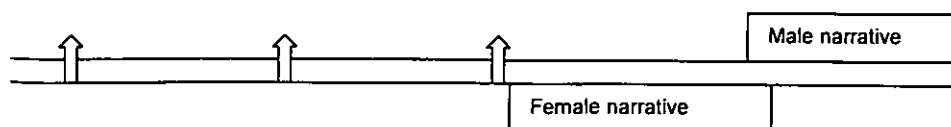
Musimbi Kanyoro herself was not assigned to a group but rather acted as consultant to all groups. The questions referred to her were not textual, which surprised her. Nobody asked about the meaning of the text, or the use in the original language or culture. She states that *unlike the Bible translators, these particular people felt that they understood the text, that it was written for them here and now* (Kanyoro 2002:40). The questions they did ask, were contextual and cultural in nature (Kanyoro 2002:40).

#### **5.15.12. Questions Asked to the Text**

##### QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION

The book of Ruth has complex characters. Ruth is a full character who assumes agency, as is Naomi. Boaz is not initially a full character. One rather gets the feeling that he is acted upon by the women, but later he does act. The narrative seems to be mainly concerned with the way it came about that Boaz marries a foreign woman through the Levirate Law, and how it was that Naomi has a son at the end. The social positions of the characters vary. Boaz is a wealthy Israelite male, at the top of the social hierarchy. Naomi is a childless widow who is very low on the social ladder, and Ruth is a foreign woman without husband or child (also a widow), so low as not

to be even worth mentioning socially. The women are also very poor. Traditionally the narrative is popular since childhood. It is presented in almost every Children's Bible, and the women in the group grew up with this tale. Ruth is depicted as a beautiful woman. The tale makes little about the women's socially low position. It is a rather romantic tale since the beautiful heroine eventually gets her man, the good-looking, wealthy Israelite. This presentation is not true to the text. The women's deplorable position is downplayed, and the lengths they had to go to in order to scrape together a living are ignored. The way everything could easily have turned out for the worse, is ignored. The traditional presentation has benefited males and the patriarchal order. Nothing is made of the women's solidarity and Ruth's oath towards Naomi. By downplaying the solidarity between the women, and highlighting the romantic ending between Ruth and Boaz, women's solidarity is robbed of the main thrust of the story. Women have been harmed by this downplaying of their foremothers' solidarity. We are not reminded that women can work together towards a common goal quite successfully. The narrative does not necessarily paint the women or the man with negative attributes. Naomi is said to become bitter, but this seems to be more a neutral statement of her mental state than a negative statement about her character. The stereotypes in the narrative are the ones of the beautiful young girl and the rich, single male finding each other. This seems to be classic "Mills and Boon" stuff! A further stereotype at first glance is the female notion of having to rely on a male to make all things right. It is only when one starts to read deeper into the text that one becomes aware of the women's scheming, and their plan being laid and acted out in minute detail. The text is patriarchal since its main concern seems to be the birth of a male heir and how this is brought about. The text is not used actively against women's struggle for liberation, but the fact that the women's solidarity is underplayed in order to give prominence to a union with a male, is subversive to the feminist ideal of women supporting each other. The text's main concern with patriarchal issues like the Law and the birth of an heir seems to be challenged by the plans and actions of the female characters. It is almost as if you have a male story line running horizontally, and a female text running just below it, with vertical spikes piercing the male storyline every so often.



### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text seems to be the birth of a male heir, and the Law of the Levirate. It may also be identified as the male coming to the rescue of the females. One can read against the grain by closely noticing the actions and words of the women in the tale — they make plans to save themselves, and are not just helpless victims of circumstances. Ruth's voice seems to be remarkably silent. She can say much more. The same can be said of Orpah, but this study did not focus on her at all, and her story is seen as a separate entity, and not just a small part in the tale of Ruth. The silent voices can be amplified by creative imagination. Women can play around with various ideas and suggestions of things Ruth could have said and thoughts she might have had. The ancient Law of the Levirate and cultural roles for childless widows gives one some background information against which to read the context of the women in the narrative. Women must be made to realize that the central moment is not a romantic link between Ruth and Boaz, but the amazing oath Ruth swears to Naomi. This is the real highlight women must always proclaim. The fact that women can love each other with such unselfishness and disregard for social convention, and show such solidarity towards each other, brings hope to women in this modern age. The story of Ruth should be told in light of this to future generations of women. We do not need to always be portrayed to be in competition with each other.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is seen as the Word of God. This text can be used to empower women in their relationships with one another when it's example of Ruth's oath to Naomi is highlighted. The text can also empower people to never give up in poor circumstances, to keep on making plans and acting in various ways in order to enable them to escape the circle of hopelessness. The stereotype of a rich man marrying the poor girl and them living happily ever after serves patriarchal interests. This romantic notion wants women to wait on men for their deliverance, instead of acting on behalf of their own benefit. The heavy focus falling on the birth of a son and how this gives validity to the life experience should also be denounced. There is more to women than motherhood. Being a mother in and of itself is also no redemption from being poor. The way the text underplays the women's solidarity must not be tolerated. This solidarity must be brought to the fore at every opportunity to remind women what they are capable of together.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

The people in the group admitted that the pictures they grew up with had a big influence in their view of Ruth. She is mostly young, beautiful, with long dark hair flowing in the breeze as she picks up oars in the field. This romantic notion can only be dispelled by alternative art, of which no one has seen a sample on the topic. The women stated that they eagerly await an alternative painting depicting not the romantic Ruth, but the realistic one. A second way of actualization could definitely be in a play format. The women also mentioned the opportunities poetry held, but were not familiar with any poems about Ruth. Unlike the work Musimbi Kanyoro did, my group felt that the story of Orpah is a separate tale. It is not necessarily part of the story of Ruth. They liked to keep the two women's lives apart. They thought that in creatively imagining Orpah, a great gap could be filled by bringing this marginal figure to the centre, but that this was not the scope of what they were focusing on.

#### **5.16. ESTHER: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT ESTHER**

The narrative of Esther is important because, as will be proved later, it has great influence on the reader, and in this case, especially the young reader. It seems that readers get conditioned to read in a certain way even from a very early age. By reading this text against the grain, ingrained reading practices are challenged.

##### **5.16.1. Negative Patriarchal Commentary**

Despite positive appreciation in the Rabbinic literature, it seems that in the tale of Esther, the traditional hero has always been made out to be Mordecai, who was supposed to provide the brains while Esther simply carried out instructions. Carey Moore and Paton place her in a completely negative light, with Paton stating that she won her victories not by skill or character, but by beauty. She is furthermore said to conceal her origin and be merciless toward fallen enemies (White 1989:166).

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has warned against adopting the standard scholarly interpretation of texts, since they are often androcentric. Most commentaries of the book Esther are precisely this, with the author either ignoring the character of Esther or placing her second to Mordecai (White 1989:166).

In this short study, attention will be given to ways of viewing Esther in a light that is against the grain of standard commentary, and to re-evaluate her role in order to make her the focus and the hero of the tale — ultimately, to give her a louder voice.

### 5.16.2. Positive Commentary

Sidnie Ann White draws a positive picture of Esther as the true heroine of the tale. The traits of character she displays are the ones necessary for Jews to emulate in order to be successful in a world of Diaspora. Mordecai is unsuccessful in life because he refuses to fit into the situation, while Esther not only unravels the plot of Haman, but also strengthens her position and affirms her ethnic identity as Jew (White 1989:166).

In White's handling of the Esther tale, we see a good example of the positive results that can be gleaned from dialogue with other disciplines, in this case the psychology of women. By means of her interaction with this field, she proves that women function differently in the world than men, and that their actions must be judged according to their standards (White 1989:166) and not male standards of conduct and ways of operating.

Esther might not have acted as a man would have acted, but in her way of acting as a female, she reached her desired goal.

### 5.16.3. Political and Social Background to Esther

Elizabeth Janeway has stated in her book *Powers of the Weak* that the variety of lives women have led at different times and in different places in society has enabled them to make up a dictionary of survival techniques. In any society one encounters the powerful and the weak, the dominants and the subordinates. A subordinate group mainly concentrates on survival, not on gaining power. For the powerful to maintain their power, the weak must acquiesce to the relationship. Women have nearly always been the weak in any society, and the adjustments they have made during the centuries spent as subordinates depict the whole range of power situations (White 1989:166-167).

During the Diaspora the Jews were also in the position of the weak under the domination of the Persians. They have had to adjust and work within the system to gain what power they could. In the book of Esther, this woman stands as symbol of this adjustment. She is firstly a woman, secondly also an orphan, and thus a completely powerless member of Jewish society (White 1989:167). The lowly societal status Esther has as background and the heights to where she rose, may be



used as tool of inspiration for women who reason that their background hampers them in reaching their personal goals.

#### **5.16.4. How Esther Gains Favour**

Esther is first mentioned in 2.7, where she is introduced as the cousin of Mordecai. The text tells us that she is beautiful but does not mention her character. Verse 8 shows her being taken into the King's house together with other unmarried women. Verse 9 says that she pleased Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the King's Harem, and that she won his favour. The phrase **וַתִּשָּׂא חֶסֶד** (*wattissa hesed* — “she won his favor”) is active in meaning. Esther is not passive, she takes the necessary steps within the situation and places herself in the best possible position. Her strategy works. Her beauty treatments are moved forward, she receives good food, and receives seven maidservants (White 1989:167).

Esther 2.15-18 shows Esther winning Ahasuerus' favour and becoming the queen. Her actions once again show her to be taking advantage of opportunities around her to improve her position (White 1989:168). This woman is not depicted as an empty-headed beauty queen who is sitting around and waiting for instructions to action. When one closely scrutinizes the text, Esther's ability to read situations and use the best moment to her advantage, is astounding. The woman seems to be a born strategist.

#### **5.16.5. Esther the Wise Daughter**

But Esther is also a listening type and therefore a wise daughter. Her uncle advises her to partake of the beauty contest, and she obeys. She relies on her uncle's wisdom, as a good child should do (Prov 1.8-9; 6.20). Esther cooperates with Hegai in the preparation for the contest, and does not reveal her Jewish identity. She also listens when Mordecai advises her to appear before the king for the sake of her people. Her wisdom in listening is rewarded when her people are saved. Advice should not be despised, even if it comes from the “powerless” and sounds unwise (Masenya 2001:38-39).

All children regardless gender are expected to respect their parents and elders, but more is expected from the female gender. In a patriarchal culture which emphasizes

male leadership and female submission, it is only logical that females are expected to be more obedient than their male counterparts. In the story of Esther, it is the female child who becomes the paradigm of a child that listens (Masenya 2001:39).

#### **5.16.6. Esther the Trickster**

Esther plays the role of a trickster too. By her position as female in a male world, coupled with her “powerless” position as daughter, together with her diasporic condition, she manages to manipulate the king. In chapter 2 Esther hides her identity, since she knows that her Jewish identity will spoil her chances of winning the competition. She also tricks in chapter 4, where she “appears” to be humble before the king, but not for the sake of the Persian people (Masenya 2001:44).

Why should Esther be portrayed as a trickster? For a trickster she definitely is. She appears before Ahasuerus as a candidate for a queen without disclosing her foreign identity, she later appears unsummoned and pursues her Jewish agenda. She reverses the evil that was meant for her people and “tricks” the king to join her side. She is a character study in the survival strategies used by the powerless, in this case, strategies of women in the world of men, and exiles in the countries of their captors (Masenya 2001:46-47).

#### **5.16.7. Esther's Tale for African Readers**

Mmadipoane Masenya points out that the story of Esther is characterized by its male-centredness, but her wonderful contribution to the reading of the text, is her identification that the text portrays a certain class. She states that the class depicted in the tale is not very helpful to women of a (Black) African context whose social and economic conditions make them invisible. She quotes Mosala who pointed out that Esther depicts the surplus of the economy squandered on non-reproductive luxury goods and a luxury lifestyle among the ruling class. The text is silent about the conditions and struggles of the non-rulers, namely the peasants, serfs and underclass (Masenya 2001:31).

Another highlight to keep in mind when reading the text from the perspective of an African-South African, is the “chosenness” of one race (Jews) above another (Persians). The problem this chosenness leads to, is the seemingly justified plundering of the unchosen race, even in their own country, in the name of God.

Though the name of God does not feature in the book, it is possible to identify veiled elements of the Divine throughout the story of Esther (Masenya 2001:31).

Esther becomes queen through Divine intervention (ch 2), and displays much cruelty against the Persians later in the tale, and seemingly with Divine sanction. She requests a second day of murder against many innocent people (ch 9). Masenya describes how this tale echoes for her in the acts of the native inhabitants of South Africa being plundered in the name of God. The "chosen" race came and found the "heathen" people, took their land and colonized their minds and cultures in the name of the Biblical God (Masenya 2001:31).

Keeping the above in mind, the text of Esther becomes problematic as far as class perspectives are concerned, and shows ethnic biases and an ideology of colonization (Masenya 2001:31).

In pointing out the understanding of the tale amongst African readers, the first step is taken towards mutual understanding between races and classes and their differing experiences. The tale can be used as tool to facilitate dialogue about such cultural and class differences.

#### **5.16.8. Esther's Tale for Children**

Arzt did research on the reception of Esther's tale among children. The value of this study can hardly be ignored since it proved many points highlighted by feminist criticism.

In an exercise where children were asked to fill in the blanks in the text left by the slight mention of Vashti, the object was to find out who they identified with. The girls identified with Vashti, while the boys, on the other hand, identified with Ahasuerus or the male servant Memucan (Arzt 2002:37). Gender-specific differences were also noted at the end of the text. Girls were more likely to describe a new beginning and happy end, while boys finished with the Biblical ending and the sadness of Ahasuerus (Arzt 2002:38).

From the studies conducted with children with specific referral to this story, it was clear that children bring their own concerns and experiences to the text. This is also true for the way gender relations are addressed. Girls wrote more extensive stories

about the missing parts in the texts than the boys, and this too may be an indication of gender-specific reception (Arzt 2002:38).

One point that studies did not prove with regards to this text, is that girls are more interested in relationships and feelings. The study did, however, provide clear evidence of gender-specific reception of Biblical texts. *Students identify with Biblical figures of the same gender* (Arzt 2002:39).

In light of the results of this study, care should be taken when communicating (Biblical) narratives to children. Special care should further be taken not to transmit traditional interpretations where women are seen or portrayed in negative light, or shown to be passive recipients of circumstances. When communicated, tales should highlight the active participation and independence of all characters, but especially female characters.

#### **5.16.9. Questions Asked to the Text**

The tale of Esther is a good example of a seemingly simple story becoming intricate once one starts to scrutinize it under the lens of feminist criticism. Many new angles come to light when the narrative is thus studied, and this serves to enhance the experience and the depths of this tale.

#### **QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION**

Esther is a main actor and the Hebrew verbs used for her actions prove to be active. Social conventions in the tale included those of the status quo at a king's court and harem, the way in which women in the harems were treated, what aspirations women of low status had etc. Esther is an orphan and a foreigner, which makes her a character without any social status whatsoever. Her uncle also has a lowly status as foreigner. In this case, Persians have a higher social standing than Jews. This text is a favourite of children's Bibles and makes for popular reading. Traditionally, Esther is painted as a beautiful woman who manages to save her people by outwitting their enemy and gaining the favour of the king. This presentation is true to the Biblical text, although the Biblical text yields more to ponder once one reads it more closely. Traditional presentation has served men well by affirming cultural myths of women only able to survive by means of their looks and by gaining the favour of powerful men. Traditional interpretations have not served to help women gain a self-identity apart from outward appearances. Overt negative attributes given

to Esther might be that of only beauty and trickery, but covertly, the text shows her to be someone who makes the right political moves, who works towards influencing people, and who listens to good advice. The main stereotype in the narrative is that of the king being swain by the beauty of a woman. The text might be used against women's struggle for liberation when it is handled to only show a woman saving her people by gaining male favour — when the woman is not interpreted as being able to have influence on her own. A supposition of the text may be that women can only get their way by using their beauty to further their cause. Once one starts to read the text closely, one sees that Esther is not only using her looks. She shows the ability to gain people's favour and influence their thinking and actions, and this is a great ability to have. She is also a trickster, and she is wise enough to listen to and evaluate good advice. Esther's thoughts are not shared with the reader. One does not know what motivated her actions, how she thought about being taken up into the harem, what she feared with regards to her people, etc. In this regard, the text ignores Esther's experiences.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is Esther's ability to sway the king by her beauty and gaining the protection of her people. One can read against the grain through a close reading of the text, thus highlighting her active participation in her circumstances after she is taken to the harem, and her ingenuous use of wits and trickery. The silenced voices in the text are those of the Jews to start with, and later the Persians who are killed. These voices can be made audible by reading the narrative from the underside — the side of the oppressed and powerless as is done by Masenya. Women are central to this text — two of the main characters are the two queens. A lot more can be done to creatively imagine Vashti's reluctance to show herself before her king, at his whim. What were her motivations? What happened to her after she is conveniently written out of the main narrative? The text offers hope and liberation by showing how a powerless orphan girl can become the most influential woman in the kingdom. It also shows how a woman can gain the goodwill of people and influence them.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. This tale can serve as classic example of people being powerless in society, being saved from a certain death by the providence of God working through a woman. This is not the first narrative where a woman proved instrumental in saving her nation — one can refer to the Deborah tale to amplify this



**WOMAN OFFERED 5**  
JANET MCKENZIE

as well. The aspects of the text to be denounced should be that of the underdog gaining the upper hand and then in turn oppressing the previous oppressors.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This text is often depicted in children's Bibles, and one grows up with a set idea of how Esther looked, what she did, how Vashti was expelled etc. Arzt's work also shows that children identify with the Biblical characters sharing their gender. In this regard, it is important to let little girls also associate with Esther's ability to actively participate in her destiny, and not just rely on her looks. She should be depicted as being a woman who shows true wisdom, make the right political choices, walk the diplomatic line with great diplomacy and wisdom, etc. This tale lends itself to role-play and creative imagination. Lessons are also to be learned about new roles for all parties once the oppressed comes to power. Revenge and retribution should get attention in this regard. By elaborating on the voices of the silenced parties, the women and men of the oppressed groups (in this case the Jews and later the Persians), this tale can serve an important role in teaching about forgiveness and the correct use of power. The tale can sensitize the reader to the use of power in aid of protecting the weak and voiceless marginals of society. Esther herself was such a person.

#### **5.17. 1 SAMUEL 18 – 2 SAMUEL 6: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT MICHAL**

In my pre-doctorate years I read feminist work on this narrative which opened my eyes to Michal's unenviable position as a woman who is isolated and scorned, used as a political pawn and never allowed personal happiness. Since then, this narrative has coloured my image of David (who I grew up admiring as perfect example of faith). By giving attention to Michal's narrative in this section, I wish to share with readers some of these insights.

The character of Michal remains one of the most misunderstood in the Bible. This woman is easily judged, not just by the writer of the text, but also by the reader. Yet, Michal stands as a very complicated character at the centre of extremely complicated and problematic events. She is torn between many choices and loyalties, and ultimately discarded by husband and writer alike with no regard for her personality and history.

The key oppositions that create tensions and complicate the portrayal of Michal in the Biblical account are:

1. The house of David versus the house of Saul
2. Marriage bond versus kinship
3. Male versus female
4. Political (public) versus domestic (private), and
5. Lower class versus upper class (Exum 1996:55).

Seldom in the Biblical text does a character have to face such varied and numerous conflicting choices.

#### **5.17.1. Readers Should Beware of Simplification**

Both commentaries and lay readers are guilty of a process of naturalization and subsequent simplification of Michal's character. It is a natural reaction and common practice to naturalize and simplify complex texts. Even Biblical scholars wrongly naturalize events in order to make them intelligible and thus subject to moral judgment (Exum 1996:56).

Clines argues, for example:

*In the end, I know I should not let my reading of David from Michal's point of view be determinative for my reading of David; I will have to end up with a reading with the grain, that reduces Michal back to a more proportionate size and that restores a David seen from as many different perspectives as the story offers (Clines in Exum 1996:56).*

The critical reader should aim to read against the hostile grain of the text in order to redeem the woman wronged by the writer, events, other characters and her surroundings. When this exercise is undertaken, Michal gains new dimension in the eyes of the reader, and empathy for this scorned woman results. The tale of Michal may also serve as tool of enabling understanding of how class differences may isolate women from each other, and deny them the support they might otherwise have given each other and enjoyed from each other.

#### **5.17.2. Did Michal Love David?**

1 Samuel 18.20 says that Michal loved David, while 2 Samuel 6.16 reports that Michal despised David in her heart. She is only active in two scenes in the Bible:



1. In 1 Samuel 19 she saves David's life by warning him that Saul plans to kill him. She is the one who orchestrates his escape. This can be seen as an illustration of her love.
2. Michal's second scene is her quarrel with David, which is seemingly triggered by David's dancing before the ark (2 Samuel 6). It is difficult to imagine that this loathing is sudden, that one minute she loves him and the next she sees him dancing and starts to hate him. The events between these scenes are important for understanding this woman (Exum 1996:57).

With regard to her feelings, the reader has to draw conclusions from her actions alone. It is difficult to think that she did not love David at the start, while it is difficult to think that she loved him at the end, after all he has done to wrong her as woman and wife. Might she be the classic example of the woman discarded along the path of her husband's success?

In this sense Michal might stand as paradigm of the woman of high social and economic standing, staying at home while her husband acts in the business world/social world, being faithful while her partner is not necessarily so, and loving and being loyal in the light of being last on the priority list of the one she loves. In previous sections the criticism was given by theologians of colour that white women struggle to understand some of their problems. This text might be a curtain lifted to open eyes to the struggles women of lesser economic need (not necessarily white) might be facing. As will be discussed later, her class also isolates Michal from other women, so that she has no one to turn to in order to vent her distress. The pretext here holds that class is a barrier not to be breached, and that women are unable to form bonds subverting their class structure.

### 5.17.3. Did David Love Michal?

The text states that Michal loved David, but does not say that David loved Michal. This is not significant on its own, but when viewed together with Michal's feelings and her treatment of David, it becomes important. Is David such a loving partner?

1. After fleeing Saul's court, David has two secret meetings with Jonathan, but none with Michal, who helped him escape.
2. He finds refuge for his parents with the king of Moab, but he does not take Michal or his other wives while on the run (1 Samuel 25.42-43).
3. Is it possible that David could only be interested in Michal as a means to Saul's throne? The Bible does not give this as a motive, but the events prove this to be a possibility.

4. Due to her being left behind (neglected?), Saul gives Michal in marriage to another man.
5. David only has Michal brought to him again when the issue of his kingship over the Northern tribes gets raised.
6. In the meantime, David marries six other wives (Exum 1996:57).

One metatext (a Hollywood film about Michal and David) gives an interesting different reading and understanding of the interaction between Michal and David. In the screen version of the story of Michal, the Hollywood Michal tells David that he never loved anyone but himself. David means beloved. In this light David is the beloved of David (Exum 1996:67). In the screen version, David is also called a vain man. This possible angle of understanding has never been investigated in traditional commentaries. It has been far easier to blame the woman for not being in alignment with God's plan for David, and thus deserving her punishment and suffering.

The story leaves room for the possibility that David has wronged Michal, though commentators are reserved in picking up this line. The text states that she loved him but is silent about his feelings. David met with Jonathan, but does not arrange to see Michal. He does not take her with him, but he arranges the safety of his parents and has his other wives with him in the wilderness. After David becomes king, Michal is forcibly taken from her husband Paltiel. After her outburst David rebukes Michal (2 Samuel 6) and she is childless. The text hints that he might have ceased having sexual relations with her, and that it is he who is responsible for her childlessness (Exum 1996:70).

In summary, David's action towards Michal does not speak acts of love, but rather acts of violence to the woman's trust. David never tries to understand her or abate her possible loneliness, and it is clear that he does not see her safety and care as a priority.

#### **5.17.4. Silence About Michal's Feelings**

The reader is not told of Michal's feelings in being given as Paltiel's wife once David flees the court. She also remains inscrutable when she is forcibly taken from Paltiel and returned to David as a result of his negotiations. In 2 Samuel 3.16 Paltiel is grief-stricken and follows in tears when Michal is taken to David. This information invites speculation. It is interesting that the narrator describes Paltiel's feelings but

yet is silent when he should be considering the feelings of Michal (Exum 1996:58). Would giving her feelings endear her to the audience? Would it make her seem someone worthy of sympathy and put David, favourite of male writers, commentators and ministers alike, in a bad light?

The silence surrounding David's feelings towards Michal is problematic. On a certain level it might show his lack of interest in her. Saul gives Michal in marriage, first to David and then to Paltiel. Though the latter case is unusual, it could be argued that David's desertion constitutes divorce (Judges 15.2). It could also alternatively read as a case of the king putting himself above the law. It has been said that Michal could have resisted the marriage, but this argument is a modern naturalization that does not fit the times of the text, where a woman did not have a choice in these matters. It also encourages us to blame Michal and to see her as having control over her own life rather as a pawn at the mercy of powerful men (Exum 1996:64).

#### 5.17.5. Michal's Outburst Scrutinized

She remains silent until her outburst against David after he dances before the ark. The reasons for her outburst have always fascinated commentators, and have mostly been interpreted to her detriment:

1. David Clines suggest that her disgust is not aesthetic, but sexual: *She cannot bear to see the man she has loved flaunt himself as sexually available — presumably, that is, to anyone but her. His self-exposure earns the acclaim of the bystanders, but it is in fact a humiliation to him, if only he could recognize the fact; and it is a humiliation to her as well, because it proclaims David's indifference in matters of sexual loyalty* (Clines in Exum 1996:59).
2. Walter Brueggemann finds Michal lacking in religious sensibilities: *David is utterly Yahweh's man, a fact Michal either cannot understand or refuses to acknowledge...In David's utter abandonment to dance and in his liturgic, social, royal extravagance, a new order is authorized, wrought out of unrestrained yielding and worship. David is freshly legitimate* (Brueggemann in Exum 1996:59).

It is rather obvious that commentators, when they cannot find any other reason to account for negative textual evaluations of characters (when naturalization is difficult) they resort to accusing the character of having the wrong religious attitude (Exum 1996:59). Michal's outburst is usually naturalized under headings such as sexual jealousy, lack of proper religious enthusiasm, royal arrogance and so forth. By doing

this, it gets explained in familiar terms based on constructions of “reality” or literary and cultural conventions (Exum 1996:60).

But Michal's outburst should be placed in a larger context of complex ideological issues.

1. She belongs to both the houses of Saul and David. The houses cannot be united for ideological reasons.
2. By going outside to confront David, Michal leaves the (womanly) safe, domestic sphere and levels her charges at the king in public, which is not a place where women are allowed to act.
3. The fact that Michal has no child by David as result of this, signifies not just the breakdown of a marriage, but also the solution to a political and theological problem. There will be no child born from this union who is a descendant of Saul and David at the same time.
4. The expected place of conflict — between Jonathan and David — does not take place. Jonathan conveniently dies before the friendship can be tested to this limit. The conflict is reserved for David and Michal, who represents Saul's house. By calling her Saul's daughter, the writer is connecting her with her father's house. In the battle between the sexes, the woman loses.
5. When Michal remarks about the servants, a class issue enters the picture as a final opposition. It does not just separate Michal from David, but serves to isolate Michal from other women, ultimately rendering gender solidarity impossible (Exum 1996:61).

To this woman from the house of Saul falls all the unresolved ideological and political conflicts that her father and brother never settled with David. Her relationship with him becomes the battlefield where the others did not tread. To blame Michal in light of religious or sexual reasons, is an oversimplification of her very complex and stressful marital relationship. If seen in this new light, the woman can be redeemed and the wrongs against her spoken and proclaimed. She may stand as symbol to other women of the difficult circumstances some women have to balance in their own personal relationships, and the disastrous effects wrong action and wrong words when spoken to powerful men might have.

#### **5.17.6. Michal Isolated from Other Women**

The Bible does not separate theology and politics in this story. David's rebuke of Michal is based on Divine sanction of his kingship. The story portrays Michal as an

elitist because she looks down on other women. David appears democratic by comparison, and when David talks about the female servants, he boasts that among them he will be held in honour. His remark shows a kind of solidarity with them. The imputation of the inferior status of these women is what gives the remarks their sting: David turns Michal's pejorative remark around to shame her (Exum 1996:68).

In the story, Michal has no friends and confidantes. Her support structure is nonexistent. She has no family to rely on, and her isolation from other women makes her a lone sheep in a world of wolves. Where she moves in the circles of politics, kingship, ideology, war, power plays etc, she walks alone as a (single, discarded) woman. The other women in the tale are not elevated to her status, and she is not stooped to theirs. She remains in lonely orbit in elitist circles.

#### **5.17.7. Michal's Textual Confinement**

Not just the events conspire against the woman, but also the structure of the story of David. The Biblical Michal is hemmed in. The two scenes in which she is active (1 Samuel 19 & 2 Samuel 6) are framed by scenes in which she is acted upon, first by her father Saul (1 Samuel 18.20-29; 25.44) and then David (2 Samuel 3.12-16; 21.8-9). In the first active scene on her part, Michal takes her husband's part over her father; in the second she chooses her father's house over her husband. The scene in which she is active and takes David's part is framed by scenes in which she is acted upon by Saul, her father, and the scene in which she actively represents Saul's house is framed by scenes in which she is acted upon by David. In her story is found a perfect example of her confinement as woman being mirrored in the structure of the narrative (Exum 1996:72). Yet the character strives for autonomy despite the restrictions of the text. Michal seeks to assert her autonomy by siding with her husband against her father in 1 Samuel 19 and by taking up the cause of her father's house against her husband in 2 Samuel 6 (Exum 1996:75).

There is another interesting level of confinement to be found, which can serve as the image of the predicament of this woman. In 2 Samuel 6 Michal is inside, looking out through the window as David and "all Israel" celebrate the procession of the ark. In 1 Samuel 19, Michal is also active, and this scene also involves a window. She lets David escape through a window. In giving him his freedom she loses him forever, since he does not seem concerned with her after that. He escapes with a woman's help from the domesticity the woman and the house represents, in order to meet his

destiny in the world outside while she remains inside. The repetition of the phrase "*through the window*" (1 Samuel 19.12; 2 Samuel 6.16) as the only scenes where Michal is active, also draws attention to her confinement. In 2 Samuel 6 when she dares to leave the house to confront David outside, she is humiliated and eliminated. David has the last word in the quarrel, and Michal disappears from the narrative — doomed to childlessness (Exum 1996:73).

#### **5.17.8. Final Remarks**

The character of Michal gives an opportunity for the reader to identify with a character other than the traditionally main one. When the narrator describes her "changing" feelings for David, the reader is actively called to involvement (if not sympathy) with Michal. In this case the Bible gives the potential for full characterization (Exum 1996:72), even if it is a woman, and not one of the traditional main characters in the scope of the David story.

#### **5.17.9. Questions Asked to the Text**

Michal can stand as character women can identify with when they have to face tough choices and when they are torn between different loyalties. This character also speaks to women scorned and deserted by unfaithful or uncaring spouses, and women shamed by their spouses.

#### **QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION**

Although Michal is acted upon by David, she is a main actor since she proves to be active — she saves David, she goes outside and she has a dispute with him. The social conventions in the tale paint the domestic, confined life of women, and the results when they venture outside these parameters. Another convention is that of women belonging to their husbands without any say in the matter, and the husband's right over the woman even to the degree of her fertility. Ideological considerations between the house of Saul and the house of David also come into play in this narrative. The wife's social position is one of subjugation to her husband, but in Michal's case she is also estranged from other women since she is the daughter of a king. She finds no companions among other women. Traditionally, Michal is censured for her condemnation of David. The text itself does not condemn her — David does. The text does, however, confine her on all sides as was pointed out earlier. By traditionally condemning Michal, patriarchal interests are served. Women

are loathe to criticize their husbands for their insensitivity and their questionable conduct because of what happened to Michal. The tale shows women, even women of high standing, to be utterly dependent on their husbands, and once they meet with the displeasure of their husbands, they may even become barren. The text and traditional interpretation harm women by showing them that meekness and silence in the light of injustice would be a better option. Michal is cast in a negative light because she dares to criticize the beloved of God. This text can be used against women struggling for liberation by using Michal as a warning of what happens when women step outside the domestic sphere and even when they criticize the men in their lives. The text shows the beloved David to be above criticism. Not even when he discards his wife is he reprimanded. A major supposition in the text is the priority of the Davidic line and the need for Saul's line to end. The woman is treated ghastly at the hands of her husband and the text. She becomes the victim of ideology. By never reporting on her feelings, motivations, speech, or never stating that David loved her in return, she is neglected completely, as in life.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is the censure of Michal after she dares to condemn David, the beloved of God. One can read against the text by closely looking at textual clues to the distress this woman must have endured, the situations leading up to this event, and overall imagining her motivations and torn loyalties. Michal's voice is silenced as her body is enclosed by the patriarchal narrative. She struggles to move out of the enclosed spaces to her detriment — she moves out and confronts David, by this she leaves the domestic sphere and she breaks her own silence. The reader can come to an understanding of her difficult ideological and social position and be brought to a place of sympathy for this tragic character. The other women mentioned, play a role of further isolating Michal, and modern women should be taught that individuals should not stand alone, isolated, in the circle of women/womenchurch. Michal must be remembered as a woman discarded by her husband, a woman walking a political tightrope, a woman who is not loved, a woman isolated from other women.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. It can be used to empower women who have gone through similar experiences as Michal — women who have been abandoned by their husbands, women who had to make impossible choices, women who tread outside the domestic sphere and who had their fingers burnt, as well as women living lives of isolation from other women. This text could be used as a guideline of the grave

consequences of certain courses of action — look what happens when you isolate yourself from other women, or when you choose the wrong alliance. The patriarchal slant of this text should be criticized and this modern censure of Michal should be balanced with a holistic view of David's shortcomings.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

As mentioned earlier, this text has been actualized in film. One could make a good theatre piece exploring Michal's motivations and struggles, a piece in which this woman is central and where the audience can interact with her only. By focusing on Michal herself, and not just in the context of her dispute with David in public, this woman can become a wholly different character as traditionally presented. Modern women can be encouraged to never allow individuals to become so isolated within the womenchurch or the ekklēsia.

### **5.18. 2 SAMUEL 11.1-5: THE NARRATIVE ABOUT BATHSHEBA**

After reading Francine Rivers' novel about Bathsheba, *Unspoken*, I found it necessary to give the reader the opportunity to read this woman's life against the patriarchal grain of the text.

In the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba, David's erotic involvement occupies only one verse of narrative time (2 Samuel 11.4). It is almost as if the incident is just mentioned in passing, and only does it warrant a pause once the consequences of the deed are known. Much is normally made of the consequences this deed had for David, but what about the implications for Bathsheba and her integrity as a literary character? Another reason why this brief story warrants attention, is for the impact it has traditionally had on the moral responsibility that has been placed on women at the hand of these events.

#### **5.18.1. Patriarchal Interest in the Story**

The story portrays its patriarchal interest from the start. Since Bathsheba will fall pregnant, the clause stating that she was purifying herself from her uncleanness, is necessary to establish David's paternity.



### 5.18.2. What was the Nature of their Interaction?

In the brief interaction only five actions are minimally described:

David	sent	took	lay
Bathsheba	came	returned.	

The whole brief story is placed in a context of aggression and violence. All Israel (2 Samuel 11.1) are away at war, while David remains behind and eventually takes a woman. The text does not state that Bathsheba was taken by force, even though the verbs describing David's actions are aggressive. The king sends for a subject and she obeys, not knowing what is waiting for her (Exum 1996:20-21). Although the reader would have a natural resistance to infer that Bathsheba was raped, the actions of David's children later on serves as a mirror of what transpired between David and Bathsheba. The text seems to want to keep silent about the initial circumstances, but the theme of rape comes through in later passages. Nathan gives a prophesy that the actions done by David will be repeated by his children, and later on, David's children reenact his sins as part of his punishment. His sins are twice replayed as rape.

1. Ammon rapes his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13).
2. Absalom rapes ten of David's wives. The ten women are raped in a tent on the roof, which serves as reminder of the location of David's sin. Thus Nathan's prophesy is fulfilled that God will do to David in the sight of all Israel what David has done in secret (2 Samuel 12.11-12; 16.21-22).

The rape acts of his children serve to problematize the nature of the interaction between David and Bathsheba. The text keeps silent, but do the later actions speak louder than the silence?

These events are interesting not just on the direct level, but as clues as to what the nature of the interaction between David and Bathsheba was at the start. Had the first sexual encounter been a seduction, with Bathsheba being a willing participant, would the sin have been replicated as rape by the children? On yet another level, can it be seen that God Himself sanctions the public proclamation of this sin despite the attempts of the writer to keep silent about the nature of the event? Is God on the side of the woman, and does He want David to be shamed for her sake? On the other hand, why cause so much pain to other women later on, who all fall prey to

rapists? Given the chance, would Bathsheba have chosen this path for others if she herself had really been raped?

By reading this text critically and against the grain which favours David, new nuances come to the fore, some of them extremely problematic.

### 5.18.3. Ways of Raping Bathsheba in the Text

Even if she was not physically raped, Bathsheba's rape is semiotic. Her rape occurs not so much in the story as *by means of the story*. By denying her subjectivity, the writer rapes this woman. By keeping silent about her motivations and circumstances, she is portrayed in an ambiguous light. This leaves her vulnerable, not simply to assault by David, but also to misappropriation by interpreters. By saying nothing about her own view, she is open to the charge of seduction (Exum 1996:23).

### 5.18.4. Patriarchy Blames the Victim

This tale more than many others illustrate clearly the way traditional comment shows its insensitivity towards women in the faith. No effort is made to entertain the thought that Bathsheba might not have looked for or wanted David's advances. When (traditionally male) commentators suggest that Bathsheba shares the blame, two questions come to the fore:

1. Are they interpreting a latent message in the text
2. Are they reading their own gender stereotypes into the text?

George Nicol, as one example, maintains:

*It cannot be doubted that Bathsheba's action in bathing so close to the king's residence was provocative, nor can the possibility that the provocation was deliberate be discounted. Even if it was not deliberate, Bathsheba's bathing in a place so clearly open to the king's palace can hardly indicate less than a contributory negligence on her part (Nicol in Exum 1996:24).*

Another crying example of insensitivity towards a female audience and textbook example of not only blaming the victim, but making the victim a co-conspirator, is found in the popular classical argument that describes Bathsheba as feeling honoured at having attracted the king. It is disquieting to think that what was arguably a violation and certainly an objectification has so easily in the view of the conventional commentator, become honourable (Exum 1996:25). In doing this, not

only the woman in the text is betrayed, but a message goes out to all women in the faith as to the primal patriarchal male view of rape: If she did not want it, she definitely was looking for it in some way or another.

#### **5.18.5. Does God Blame Bathsheba?**

Who is guilty in this affair? Do films and commentaries find support in the Biblical story for the portioning out of guilt? Definitely not from God, who condemns David alone for sin by means of Nathan the prophet:

*Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in His eye? Uriah the Hittite you have slain with the sword, and his wife you have taken to be your wife, and him you have killed with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house (2 Samuel 12.9-10).*

God does not blame this female victim. The question should be critically asked of traditional exegesis why it is so eager to blame Bathsheba when the text does not. Is it perhaps such a strain on David's image that it would distort the "beloved of the Lord" view held of him? Might it be such a powerful blaming of the perpetrator that it would have to change the way society thinks about female victims? Might it be such a powerful paradigm of blaming the male for infidelity that it would have to alter the way males conduct themselves in relationships?

#### **5.18.6. Patriarchal Considerations Dominate the Text**

Even after having stated that God is not blaming the woman and is only condemning David, can the text escape the androcentric male confines of reasoning? Is the text really concerned about Bathsheba, or is it just preoccupied with male interests? In the Biblical account, David's crime is twofold:

1. He had Uriah killed and
2. He took Uriah's wife.

Both are crimes against Uriah and against God. The androcentric preoccupation and ideology is revealed by the fact that these actions are not treated as crimes against Bathsheba, who is solely defined in terms of her relationship with Uriah. Having sexual relations with Bathsheba is a crime because it violates another man's marital rights. David's punishment for adultery is that his own wives will be raped. What he did to another will be done to him, but more so. In neither these examples is the woman's viewpoint represented (Exum 1996:49). The text remains mainly

concerned with men and their rights to ownership over women. There might be nuances of a self-critical note in the text, but critical readers have to delve for it in order to criticise patriarchy.

#### **5.18.7. Final Remarks**

By problematizing classical interpretations where nothing whatsoever is made of the female experience within this event, the text is still redeemable to women. This text shows a good example of how the writer, the ideology and the traditional commentators conspired to create a climate of sanctioning as far as the woman was concerned, while only condemning the act as far as the interests of the men were thwarted. The mentality can be summed up like this: "It is sad that it happened to Bathsheba, but it is definitely worthy of punishment because it happened to Uriah".

When conscious readers start resisting this androcentric grain of the text, much dialogue can ensue around issues of rape, blame for marital betrayal, responsibility of loyalty, the blame women and men share in society and the differences in their blame and responsibilities, etc.

#### **5.18.8. Questions Asked to the Text**

The narrative about Bathsheba has the potential to point out to readers the way in which traditional interpretation patriarchally tends to blame the victim. This narrative can also be used in dialogue about topics such as rape and marital fidelity as well as societal censure of infidelity.

#### **QUESTIONS ABOUT SUSPICION**

David is a main actor in this tale. He is active and acts out his desires on Bathsheba. Uriah is mentioned but in this narrative represents another silenced voice together with Bathsheba. The social conventions surrounding the narrative are those of marital fidelity and murder. The wife belongs to the husband and the husband is harmed when infidelity takes place. Some depictions have been presented with Bathsheba in some cases knowingly bathing in full view of David and seducing him in this way. When Bathsheba is blamed for David's actions, this interpretation is not true to the Biblical text. The Bible does not blame Bathsheba. Nathan gives David the blame exclusively. Despite David's having lusted after Bathsheba, little is made of his negative actions. Some commentators have blamed Bathsheba, as was seen

in the sections above. David is such a patriarchal hero that he can do little to shake the firm image of godliness attached to him. The text is patriarchal in the sense with which it depicts the woman as possession between two men. The woman also has no voice in these matters, and is painted as completely passive. In this sense the text confirms the patriarchal attitude towards women where they are seen as possessions by the sides of their men. When commentators blame Bathsheba for the events, they display their patriarchal attitude whereby women are seen as sexual "traps" for men, and men are victims. The Bible does not paint the tale this way. The text does, however, neglect Bathsheba's experience by having her stay silent throughout all that transpires.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE

The grain of the text is the infidelity committed between David and Bathsheba. David then has Uriah killed at the hands of the enemy. One can read against the grain of the text by imagining Bathsheba with a voice and feelings that are uttered. She might have something to say about all this. She might tell us whether she was possibly raped by David. The other women who are later raped in David's family also need Bathsheba's voice to explain why this was done to them if she wasn't raped. Uriah furthermore has a silent voice and is a victim who pays for David's lust with his life. Women are a main part of this text, but then only as possessions and objects of desire. Imagining these women as full characters with hopes and dreams and motives of their own, leading lives apart from their men's interests, may redeem them for modern women. The text itself does not blame Bathsheba for the infidelity, and this should give modern women a reason for hope. One can say that the Bible understands that the victim is not to be blamed. The Bible itself holds the perpetrator responsible, in this case the mighty and beloved David.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCLAMATION

This text is the Word of God. This text can be used in conversations surrounding rape. It can be used to empower and liberate victims when it is shown to them that the Biblical text did not hold Bathsheba responsible for David's actions. The raping of women as a way of claiming authority by males in this tale should be condemned. This text can be used with great success in dialogue with rape victims.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTUALIZATION

This tale has been creatively imagined in films, paintings and books. Francine Rivers is just one such an author who comes to mind. Her interpretation of Bathsheba is of

a woman not completely naïve when bathing on her roof. She went to David willingly (Rivers 2003:327-453). In this regard, a modern female writer still falls into the trap of malestream patriarchal thought. Just because the text does not paint Bathsheba as raped overtly, does not mean she was a willing partner. On the other hand, this one aspect of the tale is not all there is to glean from this narrative. The fact is that this narrative makes for interesting reading/viewing in contemporary culture. Through all these actualizations, one should not lose sight of the fact that they all serve to give the silenced woman a voice and make her character come to fullness.

## **5.19. CONCLUSION**

This chapter gives ample proof of the possibilities the text can yield for readers striving towards an emancipatory reading method. Not all questions posed to the text are equally easy to answer, and the female reader may for some time still struggle with the text in order to glean some sense of the violence perpetrated against womankind.

### **5.19.1. The Stencil of Questions Evaluated**

In this chapter I have given a list of generic questions I have developed to aid in the process of reading with a hermeneutics of suspicion. The idea with this list of questions is that it should be usable on every narrative one encounters, and aid the reader who has no previous academic knowledge of the process of reading with a suspicious mindset. The four narratives that the focus group used this stencil on, were the narratives of Eve, Hagar, Deborah and Ruth. I have found that this list of questions (given under 6.1.1.) helps a great deal in setting people in the group at ease and starting the mental process. My group did not meet for a time long enough to really start spending so much time together so as to begin generating their own questions. In chapter 6 I write more about this and echo this with the experience of Janet Sprong and her group, where time was just never enough. Gerald West, on the other hand, states that when his group meets, they take as much time as is needed to get the process of a critical reading going. I do not know how much time is referred to here. My sessions were three hours long, every week, and it was hardly enough to scratch the surface of the text, or get to the basic know-each-other of the group members.

The close of this chapter evaluates the effectiveness of this stencil of questions and the reaction the audience has had to it. The idea is to evaluate its effectiveness

It is vitally important that all structures of government including the President himself should understand fully that freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us must take this on board, that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) will not have been realised unless we see in visible and practical terms that the condition of the women of our country has radically changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society.

(Nelson Mandela, opening of Parliament 1994)

(Pretorius, Internet article)

when used with a group of lay believers who form a focus group for Bible study. Once one has ascertained that this stencil is in itself an effective tool in aiding the "ordinary reader" in the processes of using a hermeneutics of suspicion on the Biblical text, one can move on to an evaluation of the hermeneutics itself, and its effectiveness, measured by means of this stencil as used by the "ordinary reader"/lay believer. In chapter 6, the hermeneutics of suspicion itself is evaluated at the hand of this stencil as experienced by the group.

The people attending the focus groups were able to understand the questions as developed in the stencil. The method we used was as follows: In the first session, I explained to the members the basic assumptions of a hermeneutics of suspicion, and we touched broadly on feminist criticism so that the attendees could understand the new mindset they would have to "adapt". They found this interesting. The time for questions and interaction was used by answering their questions on further clarifying the methods of such a hermeneutics etc. We said at the start that time would not be enough for the focus group to look closely at all the narratives in the Old Testament, and a decision was made to stick to the four listed above. The group members had to start reading these texts on their own in preparation of the weeks to follow. They had to start looking at the text closely and critically on their own, and then in group, we would amplify this experience more in a group setup. They were not given this list of questions to aid them in their individual preparation. The questions given in this chapter was only discussed once they were together in the group. The method followed in the group was to read the text out loud at the start, pray, and then start discussing each individual's findings during the previous week of preparation. After this feedback, we moved to the more structured questions I have prepared. The group members did not seem confident enough to generate questions like this on their own as yet, but this could be due to the fact that we did not have a very long course.

#### 5.19.1.1. Questions About Suspicion

I developed 16 questions in this section to be used as a stencil on all narratives I encountered in chapter 6. Some questions were easier to answer than others, but all were easy enough to understand. It is not always possible for a group of lay believers to answer questions about the social background to a Biblical section and cultural conventions surrounding the narrative without the input of a Biblical scholar. Everyone can answer questions about how a text has been traditionally presented



since we all learned it in some way or another, and that presentation would, to us, represent traditional presentation. Questions about who has benefited and who has suffered as a result of the traditional interpretation forced readers to start thinking critically in a setting wider than just the immediate group of people assembled for Bible study. Attendees had to start looking at society through lenses coloured by a hermeneutics of suspicion. Questions about the patriarchal nature of the text were not difficult to answer, but was hard to admit. Readers were for the first time made aware of how the text ignores the experiences of women at the hand of these questions. This part of the stencil did not meet with any resistance, and people found it easy to partake in the exercise of generating answers to the questions. This proved an effective way of applying the hermeneutics of suspicion without having to lay too heavy a theoretical burden on the people attending the focus group.

#### 5.19.1.2. Questions About Remembrance

Readers had a harder time to initially identify the grain of the text. This is not just a question focusing on awareness of the text, but also asks for a certain amount of self-awareness and critical thinking. As respondents grew more accustomed to the way of critical thinking employed by feminist theology, the answers to this type of question became easier. It sometimes came as a surprise that there were silenced voices in the text at all. Readers were just never aware of such a possibility. By asking suggestions of how these voices can be made audible, the reader is pulled into interaction with the text at a level not experienced before. To readers, the idea of the own ability to creatively add dimensions to the text, was an initially alien thought. Since the Protestant tradition has such a strong emphasis on *Sola Scriptura*, people with such a background find it harder to see their own contributions of remembrance as having any authority. To them, it might take the form of an interesting exercise but not much more since it does not have the authority of Scripture and cannot claim Inspiration as Scripture does. People were willing to contribute to the process of remembrance and making silenced voices audible, but were aware that even to their own minds, this activity did not, for them, carry the same weight as does the Biblical text.

#### 5.19.1.3. Questions About Proclamation

The answer to questions about this text being the words of men or the Word of God was always answered to be God's Word. There were no specific arguments to

motivate this viewpoint other than a firm belief that this is what the Bible is and what it will remain to be. It is especially its status as Word of God that can empower people in their struggle against oppression, irrespective of the individual texts to the contrary. Traditional interpretation and the way the text was handed down was more criticized and denounced as serving patriarchal interests than the text itself. Even the few cases where the text itself was seen to be serving patriarchal interests did not do any damage to its authority as Word of God. In this sense, there is a strong rift between ordinary lay believers' experience of the Bible and Fiorenza's hermeneutical stance that all texts that serve patriarchal interests cannot be proclaimed to be the Word of God. Lay believers are not willing to concede this.

#### 5.19.1.4. Questions About Actualization

Some of the texts encountered have been actualized in society and culture, especially in paintings. The impact of children's Bibles and the way these narratives are portrayed there also had a tremendous impact on the inherited interpretation and suppositions people had of some of these narratives. Due to time constraints my focus group could not go into actual, active actualizations of the narratives studied. They did agree, however, that it was quite possible to write poems, make sketches, sing songs and act out these stories in various ways.

As a whole, the stencil I developed proved effective in introducing a lay audience to the praxis of a hermeneutics of suspicion as suggested by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The questions generated were easy to understand and did not as a rule prove too academic or exclusive. People were not always willing to start asking questions to the text of own volition, but were eager and willing to follow in the steps laid down by these questions. All the questions I generated are in line with Fiorenza's philosophy about each of the hermeneutical steps in the hermeneutics of suspicion. As a whole, I find my stencil to be usable on all the narratives I encountered.

This chapter contains feedback on the results of a reading strategy of suspicion when used on the selected Old Testament narratives, but this reading must also be situated within a broader South African interpretive community. How would the results gleaned from this reading method fit into the picture of feminist criticism and its reception in South Africa, and the history of faith we Afrikaans women have inherited?

The following chapter scrutinizes some of the pro's and con's connected to the feminist reading ideal, and tests the eagerness and understanding modern audiences showed when introduced to such feminist liberative readings. The group members were not willing to criticize the text on the level of its Godly authority. This was not unexpected from my side. In the following chapter, I start with a critical evaluation of feminist criticism, and move on to ponder the reason why my group attendants believed what they believed, and resisted what they resisted. The reason for this is to be found in their religious heritage, and chapter 6 looks at the inherited piety of our foremothers which still has great influence on us today. We believe the way we do because this is what we have inherited, whether we are aware of it or not. The chapter will close with an evaluation of the hermeneutics of suspicion itself for the South African audience it was tested on — a group of Afrikaans women from Bloemfontein.

## **CHAPTER 6**

# **A CRITIQUE (THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL) OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY'S MAIN FOCUS POINTS, AND A TESTING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT**

### **6.1. INTRODUCTION**

In chapter 6 I have evaluated the stencil of questions I have developed by using it on the selected narrative texts. In the cases of the narratives about Eve, Hagar, Ruth and Deborah this stencil was used by a group of lay believers, people untrained in the methods of feminist criticism. I wanted to evaluate whether such a stencil is at all usable by a group such as this, and whether people understood it and could use it. I also wanted to evaluate whether this stencil could be used successfully on all the selected narratives, and this was indeed possible. It is, however, ultimately necessary to not just evaluate my set of questions itself, but to measure whether the hermeneutics of suspicion as developed by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, is received and adopted by a South African audience. I listed in chapter 1 some of the reasons why it is not possible to test this on all the people making up the body of believers in the country, and why the focus group was limited the way it was. The way to evaluate the audience's interaction with her hermeneutics is also at the hand of the set of questions I have developed, and by closely watching, reading and talking with the group, and interpreting their actions and reactions. As stated before, it has not been evaluated before whether Fiorenza's hermeneutics is at all a viable option for the Afrikaans woman of faith. This chapter will answer the question.

In this chapter it is endeavoured to give a final look of critique at the methods employed by feminist theology. This can only be cursory, touching on the most pressing points of feminist theology when experienced from an evangelical and Protestant background. Is everything acceptable? Is everything bad? Are the methods employed by the science acceptable when viewed from a Protestant,

Calvinist angle? Is the praxis of local, Calvinist theology as acceptable as one would wish when criticised along the lines of feminist theology?

The second part of the chapter wishes to bring the whole problem home in an intimate way and to ground it in the South African context. First, a review is given of the religious history of our local foremothers. These include Afrikaans women firstly, since I am Afrikaans and most intimately acquainted with this group, and secondly, in the broader spectrum of South African women. For this part, the work of Christina Landman is used since she is one of the most prominent and critical writers on local female piety. Male sources were not used for this part of the study due to their dubious nature.

After the overview of our problematic religious heritage, the study of Janet Sprong is used as a basis for my own conclusions about the reception of the tenets of feminist theology to the group it was posited to. As with the preceding part, her work is used exclusively since I have not come across other writers focusing on the same topic.

The chapter closes with the evaluation of the hermeneutics of suspicion as posited to a lay audience and as practiced on Old Testament narratives. I have already started giving feedback on the answers the group has given to the generic questions I have drawn up in chapter 6. This chapter gives an overall evaluation of how successful the process has been, given the listed limitations. At the end of this chapter the reader will be able to see whether Fiorenza's hermeneutics is acceptable to an Afrikaans female audience, and whether there are some aspects of this hermeneutics that are more easily adopted into the life of piety than others. Aspects that were identified as stumbling blocks will also be pointed out.

## **6.2. WRONG CONCLUSIONS USED BY FEMINIST THEOLOGY AS BASIS FOR CRITIQUE**

In this short section, attention will be given to some of the theological fallacies that underlie many arguments of feminist theology. This is not meant as a negative evaluation of the theology in its totality, but as a pointer to some of the very unscientific and incorrect assumptions made, which need to be studied in order to find out whether better analyses could result in better building blocks.

Mary Daly's slogan *Since God is male, the male is God* has been extremely influential, but shows once again the chasm between understanding of God in feminist theology and traditional Christianity (Frye 1992:21). The differences in understanding go further than this one aspect, and makes for a completely different theology in some radical instances (which is what some has as goal). In this section, attention will be given to some of the premises and pre-conceptions which lead to important feminist standpoints. Their differences from traditional orthodox dogma will be pointed out where relevant. Furthermore, there is not a notable distinction between Catholic and Protestant thought, but rather between traditional dogma and feminism. It seems that feminism draws some wrong conclusions at the outset, and proceeds with its arguments from there. These wrong conclusions at the beginning need to be exposed. It must furthermore be noted that in the material I have researched, the difficult relationship between feminists and the Bible have struck me time and again. Despite all explanations to the contrary, this central discomfort cannot be reasoned away.

Mankowski holds that the following are four harmful constructions:

1. The masculinity of God is a cultural imperative.
2. The Old Testament authors were theologically naïve.
3. The Old Testament shows a hermaphroditic God.
4. The idea of God as Father is a feature of late Galilean piety (Mankowski 1992:169).

The above constructions come to the fore in feminist theology, and are used as premises by various authors in the field. They are, however, constructions, and wrongful ones at that. From such faulty premises flow reasoning that cannot be constructive towards theology as a field, or true to Christianity.

Christian feminists have a hard time balancing allegiance to Biblical traditions while still rejecting the traces of patriarchy within those traditions (Green 1992:49). This discomfort remains a tension in the field.

There are many authors who, while not standing for misogyny or hegemony, and while being sensitive to the cause of women in the faith, hold that when the Biblical images of God as Father, Bridegroom etc are interpreted right, one becomes aware that there is no "sexist" meaning or intent about them (De Marco 1992:294). Such authors, who do not handle the text in hostile fashion, and while being aware of the hermeneutics of suspicion, still hold that the focus point in theology is not just

humans searching for God through a better contemporary feminist system, but of a loving God who looks for us as male and female, as His Bride (Wiley 1992:319). These notions are seen as very patriarchal by some feminist authors.

### **6.2.1. The Influence of Role-Model Theology on Feminist Theological Thinking**

In order to understand the wrong premises from which feminist theologians sometimes argue, one needs to understand the building block of such a theology — role-model theology. Garrett Green defines role-model theology as the pretheological assumption used by proponents of a genderless God. According to this definition, religion is a projection and social construction. Mary Daly's statement that the male is God, bespeaks this assumption. According to this definition, all religious communities construct their gods as expressions of their social values. Modern people committed to full equality of the sexes, would therefore have a theology that does not speak of a god in merely male terms (Green 1992:48).

Sallie McFague is the most influential practitioner of metaphorical theology, another sophisticated version of role-model theology. Metaphorical theology also assumes that God must be conceived in a way worthy of emulation by people. The problem is seen as a language problem. The images, models and metaphors used for God must be changed (Green 1992:50).

Feminists state that the language changes in English (feminist/non-sexist) language have been a natural process, which is not true. Feminist language use has never been "grass-roots" but has been the invention and conscious objective of a small, academic, relatively affluent minority. This specific language has always been artificially imposed from the top (Hull Hitchcock 1992:340). The driving force behind the challenge to traditional language for God has thus not been a natural process of the Church itself becoming more aware of a discomfort with language used, but has been an active campaign run by a few people.

McFague rejects all models for God that are patriarchal, imperialistic, triumphalist and monarchical. She finds such imagery oppressive and opposed to the continuation and fulfilment of life (Green 1992:50).

The weakness of role-model theology becomes clear when one scrutinizes the theory of metaphor employed by metaphorical theology. The proposal that one metaphor

for God can be replaced by another, assumes that one metaphor can be substituted for another without loss or change of meaning. Sallie McFague is convinced that her models can replace the Trinitarian name of God in which Christians have worshipped since the beginning of the faith. The assumption about replaceability of metaphors does not align with the recent theories on metaphor that stress the uniqueness of metaphors, and that once again affirm that what they say cannot be said in any other way. McFague herself has been an advocate for the uniqueness of metaphors, as seen in her book *Metaphorical Theology*. She shows metaphor to be the way language and thought works. It is baffling how she can maintain this inconsistency between her own theory of metaphor and her theological proposals (Green 1992:51).

How did theologians come to the conclusion that metaphors are to blame for Christian fallacies? The key here is to acknowledge the theological pre-commitment to role-model theology. If the function of religion is to construct models that should be emulated, a tradition that imagines God as Heavenly Father must serve patriarchal agendas. On the other hand, if metaphors are uniquely informative and give insights not otherwise communicable, then changing religious metaphors implies changing religions (Green 1992:52).

Traditional patriarchalism and the theology of the genderless god share the same presupposition: that the function of divinity is to provide a model for humanity and that religion is the practice of conforming human behaviour to a divine model. Both of these standpoints are committed to a role-model theology. The only difference between them, is the choice of what role is to be deified (Green 1992:54).

### **6.2.2. The "Christification" of Creation as a Result of Role-Model Theology**

Radical feminist theologians do not want a deity who is described through male language. They rather offer an alternative that is, to them, not as offensive. In their opinion, the offered alternative is the solution to the problem of a male god, and a complete fulfilment of the needs experienced by (especially) females in the faith. A critical view of these alternatives would identify it as a theme that is uttered often in feminist theology — the "Christification" of creation. According to Scott, this theme has not been duly noted. This theme needs to be criticized and questioned, since its doctrine attacks basic Christian beliefs, and it may ultimately undermine feminist goals if taken to its end point (Scott 1992:237).



Grace Jantzen stated that the thing central to feminist theology is the argument that Christian theology has been in the grips of various destructive dualisms for centuries. If this statement is correct, it renders plausible a theme that runs through feminist theology, namely that the creation or aspects thereof, is given attributes reserved for Christ in classical theology. This line of thinking seems to be a feminist response to the (perceived) dualistic thinking of traditional Christian theology. Some feminists describe the relationship between God and the world not in terms of transcendence and absoluteness, but in terms of immanence and interdependence. These characteristics were traditionally reserved for Jesus (Scott 1992:238-240).

Feminist theologian Sallie McFague models the world as God's Body. In her mind this model offers the perfect solution for a non-hierarchical, inclusive vision of fulfilment for all creation. McFague states that she does not actually mean that the world is God's body, but that this metaphor is aimed at sparking the imagination so that humanity can work towards the fulfilment of all creation. How this model is to aid the task? By leading us to see the world as self-expressive of God, as a sacrament, as the outward visible presence or body of God, as an expression of God's very being...the incarnation (Scott 1992:240-241) (This once again serves as illustration of the merging fields of theology and eco-theology, and the intricate interwovenness between feminist theology and various other disciplines).

According to McFague, her vision is panentheist, which means that all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside God, though it does not mean that God is reduced to these things. McFague sees her model as a replacement of the "monarchical model", which, according to her, is to blame for attitudes of militarism, dualism, escapism, violence and oppression, and apathy towards the nonhuman world (Scott 1992:241).

Despite her own protestations, her model does not keep McFague from transferring categories from classical Christology to her way of speaking of the creation. In classical Christology, Jesus Christ is

1. The only embodiment and enfleshment of the Word of God,
2. The revelation and human expression of God, and
3. The sacramental presence of God in and to the world.

McFague attributes the world itself with all these functions. In doing this she herself becomes an example of the most profound "Christification" of the creation. She invites us to think about the world as we were used to think about Christ — revelation

of God, sacrament of God, resurrected body of God, and incarnation of God (Scott 1992:241-242).

Another example of role-model theology at work as premise for feminist theology is in the work of Isabel Carter Heyward, who shifts her focus to interpersonal relationships. She herself offers a further example of the tendency to assign to creatures the attributes that classical Christianity reserves for Jesus Christ. The first step in her thinking process, is to identify God with the power of interpersonal relationships marked by mutuality. Heyward states that the experience of "self-in-representation" is the ultimately nomic experience. Nomic is to her the power to give meaning and structure to life. In her own words:

*God is our power in mutual relation. It is with and by this sacred power that we are able to nurture relationships as resources of growth as cocreative women and men. By God, we can act, responsibly (morally/ethically) and joyfully, on behalf of the liberation of all people and creatures, including ourselves, from bondage to wrong relation. God, our sacred power, is both "personal" and "transpersonal". God is the active source of our creative, liberating power — she with whom we are open (in prayer). We embody the sacred when we generate right relation, acting with one another as resources of the divine Spirit. Insofar as we do so, we 'god' (verb) (Carter Heyward in Scott 1992:243).*

When humans generate right relationships, they "god". It is understood that Heyward by this means that, not only do humans participate in divine power, but that we actually generate deity in our working at mutual relationships. Her position is paradoxical to say the least. At one place she says that our power to live comes in the first place from God. But then her thought processes lead us to a conclusion that she means that God needs us in order to be real:

*In sustaining and becoming ourselves in relation, we are giving birth to more of this same sacred power who needs us, her friends, to bring her life and help nourish her life on earth. She is being born among us... (Carter Heyward in Scott 1992:243).*

Heyward shows similarities as well as differences in her views from McFague. The similarity they share lies in their idea of humans as "goding", which assumes that God and world are not separate entities. God is in the world, and the world is in God. They differ on their ideas of the scope of Divine presence and manifestation. McFague sees the whole cosmos as embodying God, while Heyward sees God as a presence of right-making in relationships, and identifies it closely with "the erotic" as a feature of human vitality (Scott 1992:244).

Heyward states that redemption is not the exclusive domain and work of Jesus, and that the work of Jesus is brought to a final conclusion when we contribute to God's redemption and erotic renewal of humanity in and through right-making relationships. In this way of thinking, Carter Heyward embodies the trend to transfer the attributes of Jesus to creation (in her case human relationships of Justice and Mutuality). She gives feminist writers the mandate to apply to creation divine attributes that classical Christianity has reserved for the second person in the Trinity (Scott 1992:244).

Matthew Fox introduced the notion of relating to God as "Child" — the child who delights in play. He further invites people to view God as Father/Mother in conjunction with Child:

*In some sense God is not born yet. And that is indeed the case. Wherever compassion and wisdom are lacking, wherever justice and delight are missing, there the full presence of God does not yet exist. In the creation-centred tradition there is ample awareness of the childhood of God. But patriarchy, if it has acknowledged God's childlikeness at all, has done so only in the sentimentalized context of a "sweet baby Jesus". Its truer meaning, that God must be born and must be allowed to grow up into human society, and social structures, and that humanity is responsible for the birthing and the nurturing of God — all this has for rather obvious reasons not been heralded as integral to the Good News of late. But in fact it is among the Best News one could imagine (Fox in Sprong 2002:46).*

Fox goes further to affirm the role of the human race in the Cosmos — a Cosmos which, according to him, is still birthing, still expanding and still calling humans to birthing and expansion. He sees the human race as the most recent and most surprising child of the Cosmos, who is called to play a conscious role in its birthing process (Sprong 2002:46).

The chasm between feminist theologians and traditional dogma becomes apparent when one takes a quick look at some of the beliefs held of Jesus. The Council of Nicea confessed Jesus in the fourth century as the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten. The Eleventh council of Toledo declared the Son to be begotten from the womb of the Father. A striking contrast the works of some feminist theologians make, is to take the image of being born and begotten and applying it to the world. Once again, an attribute that was reserved for the Word made flesh (being begotten and not made) is ascribed to the world (Scott 1992:245).

Classical Christian theology makes a clear distinction between the fact that God created the world, but that God has eternal life and has not been created. God furthermore made the world, and did not beget it or give birth to it. This makes it clear that the world does not share God's nature. Creation has its own unique nature, and is real in its own right, but is dependent on God for sustenance. Classical theology, by way of clearly marking the boundaries of the created order and the divine order, made a clear distinction between the eternal Word's relation to God and the creation's relation to God. The Son was *generated*, but creation was *created* (Scott 1992:246).

### 6.2.3. Praxis of the Christification of Creation in the Church — an Example

It is troubling to find that, under modern feminist influence, some liturgical texts have been changed to reflect a view of God bringing forth and nourishing creation. Scott gives as example the Supplemental Liturgical Texts of the Episcopal Church and the Commentary accompanying the texts. The world is stated to exist "before time". If the world is co-eternal with God and generated from the being of God, then the world is divine in some way (Scott 1992:247). Another explicit metaphor that jumps out to the reader's attention is the use of the birthing metaphor for God's original relationship with creation. This metaphor goes unsupported by Scripture. The implication stands that creation is of God's nature, since a child shares the nature of the mother. This is the exact reason why Classical Theology made it clear in no uncertain terms that generation of the Son from the Father is to be differentiated from God's creation of the world. *That which is generated of God is God* (Scott 1992:247).

Statements of God giving birth to the earth are developed in response to a perceived need for inclusive language and imagery. This is a very weak defence. Even the language found in the Second Eucharistic Prayer and the concluding prayer invites Christians to think of themselves in terms of the same categories that Classical Christianity reserves for the Son of God. The prayers invite worshippers to think of themselves as children after the fashion of Christ's eternal, uncreated Sonship, and sharing the nature of children of God. The New Testament states that we are children by means of adoption and not because we share God's nature (Scott 1992:247-248).

How can this un-Biblical description of creation as being birthed be explained? One possibility is the tendency of feminist theology to incorporate ideas from ancient

goddess religions. These religions often hold that the world was birthed by the primordial mother goddess after a sexual act with her consort. Rosemary Radford Ruether has done this in her book *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist theology*. She proposes pagan sources as one possible resource for feminist theology. She has specifically in mind the pagan veneration of nature, but goes further to say that what the Bible rejected and adopted in changed fashion, can be illuminated by these ancient near eastern Sources. Ruether states that this resource for theology identifies the root human image of the divine being as that of the primal matrix (Scott 1992:248).

By accepting the premises of Babylonian Goddess religion, Ruether reduces God's generativity to God's relation to the cosmos. This theology eventually leads to the sacralization of nature, and has vast implications:

1. The *kami* (spirits of nature) of Japanese Shintoism have to be accepted,
2. The fertility rites of Canaanite Baalism should now be appreciated,
3. The modern sacralization of *Blut* and *Boden* in Nazi ideology gets a foothold.

The question has to be asked how Ruether finds it possible to protect her theology from the destructive implications of such a sacralization of nature (Scott 1992:249).

#### **6.2.4. The Evangelical Standpoint as Opposed to the Feminist Standpoint**

One might think that the hammering around the question of creation from nothing is not relevant to the issues concerning feminist theology, but it must be dealt with in order to get clarity on why some feminists think the way they do, and why it is problematic. A few questions may clarify the problem.

1. Does feminist theology distort classical Christian theology in the process of presenting "holistic" feminist alternatives?
2. Are feminists accurate when they claim that the classical Christian doctrine of creation from nothing underlies and ideologically supports sexist dualisms?
3. Is the doctrine of creation from nothing itself a destructive dualism and the foundation of all others?
4. Could it be a destructive dualism only when misrepresented?

A summary of the doctrine of creation from nothing is given by Donald Bloesch:

1. God exists prior to and independent of the creaturely world of time and change.

2. God created the world "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) by an act of will. God did not create the world from pre-existing "matter" or out of His own divine substance. Creation is made and not born.
3. The world exists apart from God. It has its own real, though dependent, contingent existence, coherence and order.
4. God is wholly immanent as the sustainer of all creaturely existence. He is the protector, provider and rejuvenator of everything. The whole of creation and all its parts depends on God for sustaining them in being (existing) every moment (Bloesch in Scott 1992:250).

A very important point to make is that God created matter as well as spirit. He does not just create matter, but every aspect of creation, even the spiritual (Scott 1992:251). When this point is highlighted, the feminist criticism of dualism in traditional theology is unfounded.

The subordination of matter to spirit is not the logical implication of the doctrine of creation from nothing. *Precisely because the creation is not an emanation from God, born of God's substance, creaturely matter and creaturely spirit are equally different from and equally sustained by God* (Scott 1992:252). Spirit and matter are different from each other but are equally good and valued and equally sustained by God for the same purpose. Since God is categorically (ontologically) different (other) from creation, *all* aspects of creation are equally different from God. Matter is not more or less "god-like" than spirit or mind. This point is strengthened by the orthodox understanding of Jesus as having two natures, divine and human, in one flesh. His flesh in the form of the Eucharist is as important to believers as his teaching. The resurrected Lord is also the crucified one. His embodied death is also included in the resurrection victory — not just his mind (Scott 1992:252).

*The question of clarity and accuracy in representing what Christianity actually teaches touches the substance of feminist theology's constructive theological proposals* (Scott 1992:252). It seems that a lot of critique can be spared if only the central tenets of true Christian dogma were taught clearer and represented more often and consistently.

Sallie McFague and Carter Heyward state or imply that the creation is the incarnation of God. McFague's metaphor of the world as God's body implies that the whole world incarnates God. Heyward's assertion that humans "god" in their efforts at right-

making relationships implies that God is incarnate at human efforts to just relationships. The praxis of the work of such theologians spill over into liturgy used in Churches throughout the world. In liturgical statements the believer is invited to think of him/herself in terms of having a divine nature and proceeding (like Christ) from the essence of deity (Scott 1992:253).

The feminist teaching that humans can "god" God or that the earth incarnates God, destroys the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and makes Him no more than a very vibrant example of what the whole creation in right relation is. Christ is then no longer unique, but simply a good example and paradigm. As example or paradigm, Jesus does not incarnate God, but a principle, whether it be the principle of creation's deity or the principle of humanity's potential for "goding" (Scott 1992:253).

The centrality of Jesus for the human knowledge of God is also undermined when He becomes merely an example. When a theologian affirms this universal unity (all in right relation to each other), it means that knowledge of God can be sourced from a place other than God's revelation in Christ. This ultimately makes the theologian him/herself the arbiter of revelation. The theologian's own experience becomes revelatory or elevated to the status of revealed source. Here, the statement made by Carter Heyward becomes instructive:

*I am re-imagining humanity, God, and Jesus in order to speak my truth* (Heyward in Scott 1992:254). This brings us back to one of the places from which feminist theology wanted to liberate us: a theologian who has the only authority of being able to guide the people into right relationship, knowledge etc, standing in front of a congregation of lay people who have no authority or right, sophisticated knowledge of knowing God on their own through His instrument the Bible. Is this not an ironic hegemony in religion when one person has the authority to decide what God says and when God is worshipped right, with others having to follow in their footsteps and wait their cue?

Theologian Helmut Thielicke gives an analysis that clarifies the relationship of theology to modern thought forms. According to him, it involves two fundamentally different approaches which he calls Cartesian and non-Cartesian:

Cartesian	Non-Cartesian
1. Emphasis on the autonomous "I".	1. The self is seen as constituted by its relationship to God.
2. Humans are generally understood (pre-	2. Thielicke states that the Holy Spirit

Christian understanding) as a separate theme to be tackled before the theological agenda.	creates its hearers. Our identity is determined by the God who addresses us and incorporates us into His history with the world.
3. The end result is that the method takes control and provides a "sieve" through which God's addresses reach humans. The kerygma has been cut to fit us. We can understand and appropriate it on the basis of ourselves.	3. God's address is creative and challenging.
4. We control that which addresses us. We hear only that which we have decided we are capable of hearing.	4. The address of God calls its recipients and their presuppositions into question and not vice versa.

The problem with Cartesian theology is that the Holy Spirit is not adequately understood, and hence from it flows that God is inadequately understood, with an inadequate understanding of the human self following (Zeigler 1992:318-319).

Despite the positive contributions made by feminist theology to the field of theology, the above discussed wrong conclusions a lot of its arguments is based on, remains a very problematic aspect of its integrity. Since these conclusions are in such direct contrast to traditional Christian faith, I do not foresee people of traditional faith embracing these new insights readily. In such a case feminist theology does not offer liberation and new-found freedom of religious expression, but rather an opposite faith alternative which should be resisted in the minds of those it wants to reach.

### 6.3. THE PROBLEMATIC MALENESS OF GOD

The gender of God is a problem for many feminist theologians and their audiences. Mary Daly's slogan (if God is male, the male is god) has been very effective in stirring up emotions and thought about the gender of God, though it does not meet with evidence. Neither the Bible, nor the Christian or Jewish faith has ever taught that God is explicitly male. In contrast to the pagan and Gnostic religions, the Christian and Jewish faith does not have a single or a host of "genital gods" (Mushat Frye 1992:218). God is not male in Biblical and Churchly understanding. It would be proper to replace the slogan of Mary Daly with something akin to: Since God is not male, the male is not god. A concept such as this should be helpful as well as



truthful (Mushat Frye 1992:222). Frye identifies the real problem as being the way this knowledge is communicated (or not) and the way this is experienced in every day religion.

Why the great discomfort with female imagery? The work of Sallie McFague helps when one wants to stretch the traditional Christian images of God to encompass others which speak more directly to women's experience. Some people are very uncomfortable with the image of God as Mother, and McFague locates this distress in the fact that "unlike the male metaphors, whose sexual character is cloaked, the female metaphors seem blatantly sexual and involve the sexuality most feared: female sexuality" (McFague in Rakoczy 2004:76-77). Even though traditional language for God is male it is not nonsexual, it is male. Thus female images for God jolt (perhaps even shock) us into the awareness that there is no gender-neutral language if we take ourselves as the model for talk about God because we are sexual beings (Rakoczy 2004:77).

One of our Afrikaans foremothers (Johanna Brandt) wrote that

*We find then that in the Trinity as in the material Universe and in every earthly home, there is no masculine without the feminine, no positive without the negative. We cannot have a Father in Heaven without a Mother. God the Father is the Creator, God the Mother is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter of the World; and God the Son is the only-begotten Child of the Father and Mother God, our Elder Brother and Representative in our Heavenly Home, endowed with the qualities and attributes of both Father and Mother (Sprong 2002:53).*

African languages do not describe God in gender-specific terms since as the Supreme Being and ultimate origin of all that exists, God defies the gender category. The African mind contains an image of a motherly Father or a fatherly Mother as the Source Being. Oduyoye stresses that the gender of God is of low priority to African women theologians, and calling God "Father" or using masculine pronouns in relation to God, does not unsettle women in Africa (Rakoczy 2004:87).

A very important distinction must be made between male and female imagery for God in the Bible. Roland Frye has demonstrated that female imagery is in the form of simile and not metaphor. Simile compares one aspect of something to another. Isaiah 42.14 tells that God will "cry out like a woman in travail". Only the crying is compared, and not the whole figure of God.



**IN THE GARDEN OF BLESSINGS**  
JANET MCKENZIE

Metaphors on the other hand, assume identity between subject and the thing compared to it. God is Father, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, God is King. The metaphor carries a word beyond its lexical meaning to provide greater understanding (Achteemeier in Kimel 1992:4-5). God is not called a man, but the images used for Him function as metaphor (albeit male). The often quoted female images for God are used as simile, which does not carry the same weight of comparison as metaphor does. It can be highlighted that these images exist, but the text refrains specifically from naming God female names.

The main body of metaphors associated with God is male, like shepherd, warrior, Father etc. One cannot completely escape the male representation of God in the Old Testament — even when one encounters the phenomena of the “men” who visit Abraham, one deals with a specific male representation. This representation is part of the patriarchal discourse, but it can be contextualized so that this patriarchal way of representing does not need to be associated with *reality*.

Christian theologians need to point out the fact that God is not male, but the language chosen by Himself in which to worship and address Him, is. Such a masculinity is a grammatical aspect of the revelation of the Bible. When this masculinity is read in context, it is “kenotic”, which signifies a Divine self-emptying, through which God divests Himself of majesty, dominion and power in order to overcome the various powers of this world (Green 1992:64).

#### **6.4. LANGUAGE DOES NOT MAKE REALITY**

Feminist theory on language is built on the assumption that language shapes and defines reality to a degree, and, to greatly simplify, to change language would effect a change in reality as well. If one could then change religious language specifically, women would experience less alienation in their Churches. If language in society could be made less androcentric, women would enjoy a better status in all walks of life.

In the whole feminist debate around offensive language, one is struck by the pervasiveness of the behaviourist fallacy underlying the thinking. Sexist attitudes cannot be eliminated by eliminating “sexist” terminology. Language in and of itself is not able to convince one of anything. When one uses the word *shrew*, feminists would argue that this word signifies bias against aggressive women. But phrases

can be constructed that dissociate women from the word, like *There are no shrewish women*, or *Only men are shrewish*. It is the characteristic in the person that is at stake here, and not the gender in the language. Language in this case reflects reality, and not the opposite of language shaping reality (De Marco 1992:278).

A healthier outlook would be that the mind is more flexible, unpredictable and adaptable than the word. A word can be changed with regards to usage and meaning, depending on the imagination of the person using it. A word does not have fixed power to define and shape behaviour of itself. If the claim of feminists were true that language has made them powerless, speechless and invisible, they would not have had such an impact and such a powerful movement around the world. Reality proves this theory wrong. In the words of De Marco: *Their own impressive display of insuppressibility and transcendence refutes their thesis* (De Marco 1992:278).

To be honest and realistic, it must be stated that one cannot escape that we are born into a language-structured world. This language-world organizes more than just the physical world, and also influences the psychology of the human being. Ultimately, our perception of reality is language- and culturally embedded.

When one brings the argument to bear on language used of God, feminists have an argument stating that language does indeed have influential power to define reality. Clifford agrees with the statement made by Janet Soskice that religions are not patriarchal simply by virtue of their deities being styled as fathers. Yet she remains unconvinced that male God symbols can be easily divorced from social patterns that privilege men over women. The images of God implicitly guide a religious community's principles, values, initiatives and relationships. Symbols of God have multiple functions: they express people's sense of the highest good and most authentic truth. Such God imagery shapes the personal and corporate identity of believers in ways that give people a sense of the ultimate and proper order of direction of the world and direction for living justly. Clifford is therefore sure that changes in language are necessary. Language remains the house of being, and many people feel less at home in the Christian house even though they cannot consciously articulate the reason for their felt alienation (Clifford in Procaro-Foley 2002:152).

De Marco disagrees and proves the point by using two examples to further disprove the ability of language to influence thought and behaviour:

1. The phrase being doctored has a negative meaning, indicating something being tampered with. Being nursed, on the other hand, has a positive connotation of care giving. Despite this, people seek doctor's advice when seriously ill, and doctors have a higher regard in society than nurses (De Marco 1992:278).
2. The word "old" is always used when inquiring about age. The word "old" also covers the entire age spectrum, from newborn to old. Yet, society has a higher regard for all things "young" than "old" (De Marco 1992:279).

Radical feminist language for God involves major misreadings of language and of history and historical evidence. Oppression among any segment of society cannot be alleviated by altering the language about a God who reveals Himself as sovereign God who created all, male and female, equally in His image, and call us all to His love in the person of His Son (Frye 1992:43). As much as feminist language reform aims to diminish language that reflects sex and hierarchy, it cannot be escaped. Reality implies hierarchy. Hierarchy can never be obliterated from the way life is lived. Will the feminist ideal only be saturated when all possible evidence of hierarchy is removed? Are all hierarchical concepts oppressive? How is it possible to have a school functioning, or even a shop/retailer or a city, without hierarchy? It seems that language as well as reality leaves us with concepts that are simply part and parcel of the way things exist.

All proposals for the use of inclusive language for God are given on the basis of certain assumptions about the nature and function of language itself. The assumptions are stated to be self-evident, and are oftentimes not even presented. Some of the main notions of language among pro-inclusivists, is that

1. Language controls attitudes (shapes thought)
2. Generics in the English language are gender-specific ("man/mankind")
3. A change to inclusive language would result in a change of attitude (if language no longer excludes women, sexism could be eliminated).

The above assumptions have been questioned by linguists and socialists alike and have been labelled to be mistaken and seriously problematic (Zeigler 1992:325).

The discussion of language is not purely academic. The use of language circles out to encompass real pastoral issues. It cannot be ignored that women who have been abused by men may find idealized male descriptions of God problematic and confusing. Would female language be the logical resolution of the problem? It

seems not, for in cases of abuse where the mother was aware of the situation, language about motherhood will be no easier (Fraser 2002:205).

I find the Jerry Springer show quite fascinating at times. The thing that I notice most of all, is the militant language of emancipation uttered by females on the show. They definitely use very assertive language. Despite this, their language use has failed to make of them free, emancipated women. They are by no means liberated on a social or economic level.

Janet Martin Soskice has used the aid of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical reflection on the term "father" in the New Testament to prove that religions are not patriarchal simply by virtue of styling their deities as "fathers" but rather by underwriting social patterns that privilege men over women. This could be the case in a religion that used no personal stylizations for God of any form (Hammond in Procaro-Foley 2002:147). Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswane proves this to be true when writing about the term Modimo before the arrival of Christian missionaries to her culture. Modimo did not have a gender, age or any human-gendered connection whatsoever, and yet the society remains patriarchal to this day, as is also true of the religion, native or Christian.

The absence of gender from a language does not show women of such a culture to share equal rights or participation in social spheres with men. The Turkish language does not have gender, but Turkish women do not share the freedom of women in cultures with more "sexist" languages (Levin 1992:129). The fact that natural language reflects sex differences does not make it anti-woman, unless the assumption is that male traits are better than female ones and that any reflection of gender differences reminds of female inferiority (Levin 1992:130).

Since contextual awareness is so important to feminist theology, might misogynist behaviour be more a function of social, economic and cultural factors? If that is the case, attempts to change language might be unnecessary for the overcoming of patriarchal domination of women, and perhaps even harmful to the project of uncovering the liberating message of the gospel (Hammond in Procaro-Foley 2002:147). In Africa this echoes within rural culture. African theologians have pointed out that culture is predominant, and rules and shapes religion, and not the other way round. Refer to the work of African theologians mentioned in earlier chapters.

### 6.5. HOW FAR CAN THE TEXT BE PULLED BY BOTH SIDES?

Not just the use of extra-Biblical concepts to describe our theology and relationship with God is troubling. Feminist theology also shows a tendency to pull texts in directions they were never meant to go. Although the hermeneutics of creativity has a place, some of the explanations offered by feminist theologians stretch the imagination to its breaking point. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza builds a whole book and concept of the Baptism and Eucharist around a woman mentioned in the Gospel of Mark. Though it is not the scope of this work to look at New Testament texts, this one serves as great example of the way in which texts can be isolated and distorted and robbed of any original intent — all in the name of liberation. Mark tells of a woman who came and anointed Jesus with expensive ointment. Angry onlookers wanted the ointment to be sold and the money given to aid the poor. Jesus defended her by saying that she has performed Him a good service in doing what she could to anoint His body even before its burial. He mentions that we will always have the poor, and that we can show kindness to them whenever we wish, but that we will not always have Him. Mark then mentions that what this woman has done, will be mentioned wherever the gospel is preached in memory of her (Mark 14.9). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza manages to isolate this verse and turns it to not incorporate this one woman, but all women. She uses it to liberate, but in actual fact it announces death. She goes on to make this woman the paradigm of a true disciple. By her argument, Schüssler Fiorenza loses the particularity of the woman in the text and blurs the distinction between her and Jesus. The woman becomes a symbol, Jesus becomes a "Her", and both the Baptism and Eucharist get new meanings. The Eucharist becomes a focus point of the female body and the Baptism becomes the initiation rite into the discipleship of equals. We end up forgetting the particular act of the woman in the text and ironically no longer have a reason to remember her (Jenson 1992:284-285).

Feminist theology's criticism of traditional theology should not go unnoticed due to some of its own questionable practices. Luther reminded the Church that a truly Christian theology must always be a theology of the Cross. Theologians need to be reminded of this again when contemplating the theological implications of the feminist challenge. In feminist theology, the theology of glory wants to know God apart from Jesus crucified. When role-model theology is subjected to this test, the fallacy becomes evident: by trying to model human behaviour after the image of God without

regard for the image of the crucified God, this theology wants to imitate the God of glory directly. But traditional, patriarchal theologians exercised an equally questionable premise in their theology by trying to model themselves after God the Father after ignoring the crucified Son of God. They want to share the power of God, but not His powerlessness (Green 1992:56).

No radical shift is possible without overemphasis. The radical character of the feminist reading strategy must be worked out in every dimension of theology and liturgy. It is possible that the overemphasis of the absolute alternative, pressurizes people to think and reflect, and hopefully, within this process, a median is reached that makes sense. Such an endeavour as the feminist "agenda" cannot lightly be undertaken without reckoning of the impact thereof on the confession.

Even today, Church leaders tend to oppose "feminist perspectives" without even attempting to interact with those who are pursuing a more holistic ministry and view of God. The result of this resistance is the inability to come to a point of understanding, since they refuse to entertain the thought that God may be more than the limited image they have of God (Sprong 2002:54).

Furthermore, modern Protestantism makes the mistake of determining what Deity is by means of philosophy, ideology, culture and religious experience. Afterwards it is asserted that this Deity is somehow "revealed" through Jesus. The ultimate result of this train of thought, is that Jesus is theologically rendered irrelevant, and that the Doctrine of the Trinity is disposed of (Kimel 1992:201). In this regard, traditional options are as capable of fallacy as feminist theory.

After having looked at some of the main points of critique as mentioned at the start of the chapter, the focus must shift to the South African context. Why do we criticize the way we do? What makes us believe the way we do? What type of influence does our inherited religious past have on us today? How strong is the hold of our inherited religious past? How does the religious history of our foremothers look? What were the sources that influenced them? Can anything positive be identified in our religious history? Were women and men on the same religious footing? How emancipated were our foremothers by their piety?



## 6.6. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FEMALE PIETY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The minute one starts to criticize feminist theology, one needs to be able to articulate the angle from which the criticism comes. In this case, critique comes from an evangelical base. But women's resistance to the tenets of a feminist theology is not based on a thorough knowledge of evangelical apologetics. Why show resistance or why feel strongly about certain points? The answer lies in the inherited religious past. We may not know it, but we have inherited the piety of our foremothers whether we want to admit it or not. This piety shows very specific characteristics which make a brief overview of its development necessary. In order to work towards our own liberation, we need to become self-aware, conscious and critical, and in order to do this, we need to know about the influence our past has on us.

Christina Landman writes in her 1999 book, *The piety of South African Women*, that we must resist the impulse to acknowledge God as the primary cause in the history of the women we are about to mention, since we are not mainly trying to retrieve God's voice in history, but the voices of these oppressed and muted women. A big part of women's oppression in the past has been the fact that God's voice was used to speak against them, and that His voice was reconstructed from the Bible to restrict women to subhuman conditions (Landman 1999:3).

1. Landman says we must be extremely suspicious of primary sources, both those written by others referring to women, and those written by women themselves. Both types of texts may reflect the conscious or unconscious use of religion to disempower and stereotype women (Landman 1999:4).
2. Furthermore, the voices of our foremothers must be reconstructed so that acknowledgement is given to both their self-suppression and the seeds of liberation present in their thinking, and
3. thirdly their stories should be used as intertexts to form new images of God and to rename the religious experiences of women in a positive way (Landman 1999:4).

Our local foremother's spirituality has been kept in check by ecclesiastical male overseers and labelled childish and emotional. Landman writes that white Afrikaans women wanted to be liberated from the fear of being murdered on their farms, from depression in the spheres of inactivity into which they were forced, and from the pain

of war with Britain. They looked towards religion to liberate them from these fears, but without knowing it was exactly the patriarchal type of piety they inherited from their men which kept them in fearful and confined conditions (Landman 1999:5).

Black women wanted to be liberated from bad social conditions and illiteracy, and found Christianity to be liberating in this respect. Eventually though, the piety of the missionary became black women's enemy because it condemned them to new positions of inferiority and powerlessness (Landman 1999:5).

Few studies have focused on the religious heritage of women in South Africa. Prof Christina Landman is the author of one such a work. JL Sprong agrees with Landman that the South African religious heritage of women is not Calvinism:

*Only in recent years have I begun to understand that much of South African "Calvinism" is not an authentic example of Calvin's doctrine at all. According to Landman, and other scholars, most South African Dutch Reformed theologians were strongly influenced by Abraham Kuyper (Sprong 2002:19).*

For almost four centuries Afrikaans women have kept alive an outdated, patriarchal and exclusive faith of their "fathers" (Sprong 2002:34).

### **6.6.1. Characteristics of the Piety of Our Foremothers**

Afrikaans women are enslaved by history and especially by history books portraying Racheltjie de Beer as the ultimate woman who took off her clothes and died in the cold while her younger brother warmly survived (Landman 1994:vii).

I find another main characteristic of Afrikaans women's piety to be a deeply ingrained "Calvinism" which they themselves are not even aware of. It is necessary to briefly examine this "Calvinism" in order to understand the Afrikaans woman's attitude towards her Church and the Bible. The majority of Afrikaans women belong to the Dutch Reformed Church, which used to heavily lean on a form of Kuyperism which was reduced to a simple formula. Anything that could be defined as individual, subjective, experiential or human-centred, was identified as revolutionary and resultingly censured. Truth was defined as the revealed, objective and pure Biblical teaching which was to be found in the Bible, the Reformed credos, and in Calvinism (Deist 1994:161-162). The objectivity of the Bible was guaranteed by a specific

inspiration theory, and the objective teaching from said Bible was guaranteed by the "testimonium Spiritus Sancti" (Holy Spirit) (Deist 1994:167).

Reformed Afrikaans people accepted the Bible as Word of God and as highest authority for life. Exegesis rested on three main assumptions:

1. The Bible is unique and is the highest authority of life.
2. Even the historical parts of the Bible come from God and can be defined as the Word of God.
3. The authority of the Bible does not rest on human experience, but on the proof in the Bible itself and the claims it makes.

Calvinism also rejected "subjectivity" and had a high regard for "objectivity" (Deist 1994:190-191).

In order to guarantee an objective reading of the Bible, the specific South African strand of Calvinism, informed by Kuiperism, worked with the literal meaning of the text. The Bible does not just contain the words of God, but *IS* the Word of God. If it is understood in its literal sense, it releases these godly ideas (Deist 1994:196).

After 1950 the insight started growing in local Reformed theology that the faith of the theologian defines the paradigm within which study takes place. This critical insight did not lead to theology becoming a critical science. The insight that theology starts with the subjective assumptions of the theologian did not lead to reflection on these assumptions/subjectivity. It rather had an opposite effect: the argument for the obvious existence of subjectivity became the alibi for the canonization of these subjective assumptions. These self-evident assumptions grew to a body far more influential and far reaching as would have been acceptable in other sciences, and all alternative assumptions afterwards were rejected with the label of being "subjective" (Deist 1994:226-227).

Our foremothers were not aware of the far reaching consequences of the above discussed Calvinistic strain in their daily piety, but as the modern group of Afrikaans women met with me, it became clear that this inherited piety is deeply ingrained, unproblematized and subconscious, yet definitive for the whole of the spiritual being. This background of the faith life explains much of the reactions the women in my own and Janet Sprong's groups had to some of the committed standpoints of feminist theology. This Calvinistic background explains why a suspicion of the text, self-awareness and a critical mindset, as well as an alternative (more female) view of

God was so problematic to them. Are there other, specifically female, traits of this inherited piety that still create problems for modern women of faith?

Landman identifies that Afrikaans women have become associated with self-sacrifice while Afrikaans men have become associated with survival (Landman 1994:vii).

Landman identifies a few characteristics of Afrikaans women and their forebears:

- I. Our foremothers believed in a demanding male God who wished to be pleased, and empowered those who succeeded in doing so.
- II. The Afrikaans woman also became subservient to the male in order to gain the favour of the dominant male culture.
- III. In competing for the favour of this dominant culture they were, and still are, disloyal to one another.
- IV. The restrictions in their subculture led them to be extremely suspicious of other cultures, especially British and Black cultures.

Their piety of self-hate and submissiveness enabled the men of the dominant culture to use female piety to (i) keep women from participation in public life, and (ii) to engage them in male nationalist struggles (often unknowingly) (Landman 1994:3).

Many of the women wrote about their sinful nature without being able to define their actual sins. They would name doubt or unbelief as their sin. They often felt guilty for sins they have never committed. Landman suggests that since these women were under the influence of specific male sources, they were often controlled by the mood of self-meditative depression (Sprong 2002:35).

For the most part, only male writers wrote about Afrikaans women. Willem Postma praised the Afrikaner woman for her submissiveness. While vigorously fighting the enemy culture, she submissively bows in front of her own dominant culture. She keeps in the background in private conversations and politics because the Bible tells her she should (Landman 1994:5-6).

In South Africa, the voice of Abraham Kuyper was predominant in Reformed circles. In 1920 Dr JD du Toit (Afrikaans theologian) was a member of a commission of three men who represented a report to the Synod of the Reformed Church of South Africa regarding the vote of women in the Church. The recommendation was negative. It was based almost verbatim on Kuyper's *De eerepositie der vrouw*, and a copy was

sent to Parliament by the Church advising against women's suffrage on a national level (Landman 1994:16).

Only one woman reacted against this decision from within Reformed Church circles: Marie du Toit, sister of JD du Toit. She published her book *Vrou en feminist* in 1921, which was also the first and last time the term "feminist" was to appear in the title of a book written in Afrikaans. Du Toit warned women that their accepted submissive role was "unnatural". She begged Afrikaans women to get rid of their guilt before God and reread the life and work of Jesus with regards to His attitude towards women. She wanted them to also resist their sense of unworthiness with regards to men, their disloyalty to their own sex, and their suspicions towards fellow people (Landman 1994:16-17).

How do we learn about the piety of our foremothers? We get to know these women from their diaries and letters, their ego-texts. When we read their own writing, a different picture emerges than when we read about them from male sources who wrote biographies on them for either nationalistic or religious reasons.

#### **6.6.2. Catharina Allegonda Van Lier (1768-1801)**

Van Lier did not read the Dutch Pietists of the Second Reformation, but she interpreted her sources in such a way that she came to the same understanding of sin and hell and self-hate as the Dutch Pietists. The socially restricted role that Dutch-Afrikaans women had to play made them prone to a certain type of piety, specifically one in which they feared many things and tried to please one specific image of God, and in which they all felt bad about themselves as human beings (Landman 1994:21).

Van Lier's brother loved all people and preached a positive message to them. His sister in her self-chastisement did not hear this message. In their lives and thought world one sees an interesting difference in the way two people using the same sources can read and interpret differently, the reason being the one (male) belonging to the dominant culture and the other (female) belonging to a subculture (Landman 1994:25). Catharina van Lier believed mainly in God as Judge (Landman 1994:27).

She relied heavily on the works of John Newton, the man who composed the song "Amazing Grace" (1725-1807). Due to her interpretation of his work, she can aptly

be called the mother of our female sin. She used the negative remarks on human nature in Newton's works out of context and as a source for her self-hate. This brings a question to the table of whether Newton formulated his message to women differently to that of men. He did indeed. The Christian behaviour which Newton prescribed to women conditioned them for a lifetime in the female subculture. Humility abounds in his letters to women, while it is not explicitly stated in his letters to men. The second main theme in his letters to women is that of sin. His message was that "Sin is the sickness of the soul", and this was preached to men, but more so to women. It must be stated that he never referred to sin without pointing women and men to the grace of Jesus. Van Lier in her subculture was unable to integrate these two themes in her spirituality. She could not recognize guilt and know that it is graciously forgiven. Van Lier was either ecstatically happy in her God or in the depths of depression because of her sinful nature. This was a result of her being brought up to believe that she had an innately sinful nature. Van Lier was never able to spell out her sins in her diary. She only named doubt and unbelief, common to all believers. Ultimately Van Lier was controlled by the mood in her female subculture. This mood was one of self-meditative depression (Landman 1994:29-31).

Van Lier was restricted by a subculture in which it was not possible to engage in much sin. Her concept of sin and the sinful nature she attributed to herself should be seen as products of her imagination, more so because she could never name her sins. She was in constant flux between a fantasised sinful world of Satan and the Godlike life she felt she must follow (Landman 1994:33).

Van Lier's ideas of sin and self-hate were primarily influenced by the isolation caused by her subculture (Landman 1994:33).

### **6.6.3. Hester Venter (B 1750)**

Venter identified sadness with sin and happiness with salvation while emphasising her sinful nature. She related all the disasters which befell her to the consequences of her sinful nature. By doing this, she placed herself in control and became the cause of all these calamities. God becomes involved with people because of their sin. Sin became the place where, for her, God and people meet in their fight against the enemy (Satan). By being a sinner Venter could also draw Jesus closer to her, since Jesus gave His life for sinners. She saw Jesus as the lover in the Song of Songs (Landman 1994:41).

#### **6.6.4. Magdalena Jonker (1765-1831)**

The letters Magdalena Jonker wrote to female relatives during the same time as Venter shows the same type of piety, pointing out that Venter was not just a neurotic single woman. Indeed, all the cases Landman handles serve to prove that the piety of these women was not the result of the mental state of sick individuals, but the negative influence of local Dutch-Afrikaans society on its female subculture (Landman 1994:45).

Jonker's letters were published by a local (male) minister as instructive to a Dutch Reformed readership, which shows that this type of female piety was acceptable in the male dominant culture (Landman 1994:45).

Jonker writes that her father inflicted a terrible fear of God in her and that only Jesus could comfort her from this fear. She feared God especially when she was heartbroken and filled with disbelief every time one of her children died. She came to believe (through Reverend MC Vos) that one suffered when one loved oneself more than the Lord. The Lord showed her that her children were idols who she loved more than Him. When her husband died, Jesus took his place (Landman 1994:46).

Themes found in Hester Venter's ego text were to become prominent in the pious self-expression of Dutch-Afrikaans women. First is the verbalisation of mental sadness and joy in terms of a religious consciousness of guilt and salvation. Second was the love for Jesus. It was expressed as a spiritual yearning for salvation, but should be seen as a longing for salvation from the isolation reigning in their female subculture on the one hand and their physical isolation on the farms on the other (Landman 1994:46). This love for Jesus was to become a more and more prominent theme for Dutch-Afrikaans women during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Landman 1994:47).

#### **6.6.5. Matilda Smith (1749-1821)**

After her last remaining daughter and grandchild died, Smith started working fulltime at various missionary stations where she worked with women. The difference between Smith and her contemporaries lies in the fact that she exchanged her mental depression and self-hate for an active missionary life in which she exuded a

positive view of God and her fellow people. Instead of mothering sin and guilt, she became our virgin of grace (Landman 1994:50).

Smith saw the numerous deaths of her children and husbands in the following light: affliction is the result of sin and deliverance is achieved when God graciously grants forgiveness (Landman 1994:51). Smith and her husband both believed that the deaths of their children were due to their own sinfulness. This burden of sin was so great that she fell into a depression after the birth of her 9<sup>th</sup> child (Landman 1994:52).

Matilda Smith started being happy when she engaged in missionary work. She herself felt empowered by God, victorious over depression, and useful to the Church (Landman 1994:54). During the later stages of her life, when she no longer felt threatened by death and while she was useful in missionary activities, her concept of God changed. He changed from God as Providence who cared for her in times of illness and death, to God the Father, who loved and blessed her as a father loves a child (Landman 1994:57).

Smith could once again not escape the restrictions of her female subculture, but managed to make good contributions to religiosity at the Cape. She was, however, the co-founder of a type of female piety still prevalent among Afrikaans women. According to this piety, God is seen as the strong man, the One with power, whose goodwill leads to improved spiritual experiences. He has to be pleased. In this piety the self is seen in terms of religious usefulness and service, and other people are seen as receiving the good news for spiritual freedom, even in the absence of social freedom (Landman 1994:57-58).

Landman writes that Dutch-Afrikaans piety started off as a piety in which white women empowered themselves through fear of God in times of illness and the murder of their loved ones. They also made themselves the prime cause of the calamities which befell them when they blamed their own sinful natures as the cause of the disease. God is blameless, and afflicts sinners with bodily illness. God is the one who removes sin (Landman 1994:58).

The piety of these Dutch-Afrikaans women empowered them to survive the hardships of their physical circumstances while at the same time enslaving them within their female subculture in which submissiveness to God equalled submissiveness to a



male dominant culture in which the maleness of God prescribed a negative self-image for women (Landman 1994:58).

#### 6.6.6. Susanna Smit (1799-1863)

Susanna's main reading matter was the Bible, and then especially the martyrdom of Jesus. While Smit was not illiterate, she was literate mainly in 17<sup>th</sup> century piety and in a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible (Landman 1994:62).

Smit was motivated by a tremendous fear of hell, something she had in common with Mary Moffat who was a contemporary, and who worked as missionary with her husband in Kuruman. Poverty, physical danger, deaths of children and a cultural belief in a divinely standardised role for women bonded both Moffat and Smit in their thoughts on hell, sin and damnation. Moffat, who grew up in England, proves that fear of hell was not restricted to subcultures in Dutch-Afrikaans society (Landman 1994:67).

Another contemporary of Smit was Frances Colenso, wife of John Colenso, bishop of Natal. As a result of her life of intellectual stimulation and exposure, and a higher economic status, Frances Colenso shows a resistance to hell-talk. In her letters there is a total absence of traditional damnation, and she does not even refer to her enemies in terms of hell or damnation (Landman 1994:67).

Elizabeth Lees Price describes Susanna Smit as a foremother of the class and race who were culturally restricted and poverty-stricken. Smit, according to self-admission, was caught in a subculture of very little self-expression. Eventually her close experience of hell and her constant depressions because of feelings of guilt became the main features of self-expression in her ego-text (Landman 1994:68).

Smit is a prime example of the effects of the doctrines of hell and *sola scriptura* on the uneducated mind of a person who forms part of a severely restricted subculture who is exposed mainly to a hell-orientated, pietist form of religious expression (Landman 1994:68).

Smit's relationship with God the Father was close because Smit experienced God's will directly through visions. She did not allow God to comfort her in an easy way. When mention was made of God's mercy, she found something wrong in her

behaviour towards God and envisaged God's wrath. For her, God was very close, very demanding and very threatening. She saw herself as a child who loved and feared the father she was close to. Smit often fell into deep depression because she could never please this father by whom she would not be comforted (Landman 1994:70).

Smit displays different concepts of Jesus in her ego-texts. She clings strongly to Jesus as her Bridegroom, and in Jesus the Lover she finds comfort. She secondly identifies strongly with the sufferings of Jesus. She feels guilty for being the cause of His suffering, but finds comfort in the fact that He too, suffered pain. The Son was more forgiving, more saving for her. The comfort found in Christ was reserved for the future. The moment Smit felt comforted, she experienced guilt. She would be convinced that she was the reason for His suffering. She felt guilty that she was co-responsible for His suffering. Landman interprets the problem as one of a strong woman with a wish to participate in life, but who could only fantasise about pleasing the divine. Smit reached out to her Father and Bridegroom Jesus, and this initiative towards male figures was not allowed in her female subculture. As a result, she formulated her religious experiences in terms of guilt and rejection (Landman 1994:70-71).

Not even the Spirit of God could comfort this world. Smit had an ambivalent relationship with the Spirit: The Spirit rejects her as sinner, but is also very involved with her as the penitent who knows her guilt. The Spirit notices her as sinner who humbles herself (Landman 1994:72).

Smit referred to herself as a pitiful worm, a frog, a sick dog, an unworthy dog, but preferred to name herself a worm (Landman 1994:72).

Since she was part of a subculture in which no active role was allocated to her in real life, she escaped into a world of fantasies in which her sins made her important enough so that heaven and earth were brought into motion to tempt and save her. In order to maintain her important role, Smit believed that to earthly sinners redemption could only be temporary (Landman 1994:72-73).

Susanna Smit had been socially isolated throughout her life. She wrote that nobody cared enough about her and her husband despite living among her "own people", and this can be seen as the reason for her self-isolation. But she also often yearned



**LIGHT OF MY LIFE**  
JANET MCKENZIE

to be alone. Her self-isolation was a protection against people's insults while also resulting in self-upliftment into a supernatural sphere (Landman 1994:74).

*Her captivity in a severely restricted subculture caused Susanna Smit to reveal certain psychotic abuses of religion: she found power in guilt and she used her personal relationship with God against people who did not like her. She escaped reality by means of religious visions in which she was empowered, not according to the view of this world but according to that of the life to come (Landman 1994:75).*

#### **6.6.7. Tant Alie of the Transvaal (1866-1908)**

Alie Badenhorst met God through Andrew Murray, and this God had integrated opposites: He saved people yet demanded their dependence on Him. He gave salvation and demanded legalistic holiness in return (Landman 1994:82). Before converting to Murray's God, Badenhorst was a Christian, a fun-loving person who drank too much gingerbeer on the day of her confirmation and kissed a number of men, which led to bad feelings between her and her fiancé, Karel Moller. After her conversion Badenhorst abandoned all frivolity, parties, feasts etc, and limited herself to marriage (Landman 1994:82).

When the war with Britain broke out in October 1899, Alie started to experience a new side of God. As teenager He was her personal saviour, as young mother God was her peace-loving guardian, and now He became her Comforting Father and (later) her Helping Husband (Landman 1994:84).

As her circumstances deteriorated, Badenhorst moved closer to God, and saw her husband's imprisonment in Simon's Town as a sign of God's love. The more terrified she became, the more she believed God forgave her sins, and the worse the news from the battlefield, the more she believed that God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Landman 1994:86-87). Badenhorst was an active person but led a religious life of utter dependence on God. As she heard news of more and more deaths, she no longer prayed to God the Father alone, but also to God the Husband (Landman 1994:87).

Alie at first saw the concentration camp as a place forsaken by God. This brought a new image of God: God the Punisher. During her time in the camp Alie turned from a

personal to a national God, and her personal prayers made way for prayer meetings and communal singing of war songs (Landman 1994:88).

In the camp Alie also lost faith in the traditionally male attributes of God as well as in the humanity in general of the males of her day. Her experience of the British males in charge of the camp and the burial of the dead children drove her to this loss of faith (Landman 1994:90). Badenhorst could no longer pray, and identified with the lamenting Jeremiah and the suffering Christ (Landman 1994:91). With the arrival in 1902 of a new, more humane camp superintendent, her belief in the goodwill of her personal God returned, but this faith was no longer naïve. She was convinced that God remained the same during the War but that she had changed. She asked for forgiveness for sinning against Him, which was a huge cause of her suffering (Landman 1994:91).

After the War she changed again from a Punisher view of God to a Benevolent God in control. When her husband was reunited with her two years later, her relationship with her personal God was restored (Landman 1994:91-92).

Alie Badenhorst took control of her everyday life, and when confronted with the concentration camp situation of utter powerlessness, she practiced her piety. As teenager the choice of God as personal Saviour coincided with the need to break with old friends and contexts. During the first 15 years of her marriage and motherhood, she experienced God as Peace. When her husband was imprisoned, she depended on God as her Protector and substitute Husband. During the camp period there was a time of experiencing God as National God, and after the war she once again entered into a personal relationship with God while placing the blame for the war on her personal sins (Landman 1994:92).

#### **6.6.8. Johanna Brandt (1876-1964)**

Johanna Brandt could be called the first potential Afrikaans feminist but her church rejected her when she was almost sixty in 1933. There is no evidence that her book *The Petticoat Commando* (about her war memories) was read by women, even in her own church. Her views set forth in this book had no impact. In 1936 her book *The Paraclete or Coming World Mother* was published which illustrates her conviction that the time had come for God's feminine side to be made known to humanity. It is disturbing to think that this insight was developed eighty odd years ago and still has

made no impact since Afrikaans women still follow the masculine spirituality of their forefathers (Sprong 2002:52-53).

In the early 1930s Johanna Brandt wrote her theology of hope during the Great Depression. In her book *The Paraclete, or Coming World Mother* (1936) she reinterpreted her 1916 visions, and announced that the second coming of God to the world would be in the form of a woman, a Mother. This book contains many of the elements of modern feminist theology in its concern for the political, social and physical exploitation of the world (Landman 1994:96). She claims that the contents of the book was revealed to her directly in a divine manner. Brandt does refer to the work of Anna Kingsford, and quotes Kingsford's feminist insight that the suppression of the femininity of God is because of a priesthood desirous of preserving a Masculine Conception of the God head (Landman 1994:102-103).

As young woman Brandt's ego-texts testified to narrow nationalist views. As woman of 40, God visited her and told her to go to the people, tell South Africa that God was everybody's God and that He desired harmony. When 60, Brandt addressed the whole world and challenged the male dominant culture which brought the world to its knees. She told the world in need of care that their mother was coming to comfort them (Landman 1994:96).

Johanna Brandt inherited both the God of her foremothers and Andrew Murray, and the national God of post-war revenge. Her own contribution was to return the international God who stands for socio-political righteousness to South Africa (Landman 1994:98). Brandt, while honouring God's special interest in the Afrikaans nation, had been incorporating ecumenical and non-racial elements into her religious message since 1916. She also underwent adult baptism. The church eventually condemned her not for her writings, but for being baptised again. Brandt turned radical after this rejection (Landman 1994:102).

Brandt's message was no longer one of submissiveness to the dominant male culture. She abandoned the personal God inherited from her mothers, the national God inherited from her fathers, and now proclaimed the Cosmic Mother with a message for all humankind (Landman 1994:104). She placed a high value on women's ability to grasp religious truths. Men would not be willing to accept her message of equality between men and women, but she was certain women would.

In this, she was mistaken. Afrikaans women were not then, and are not now, willing to accept ideas of the femininity of God, self-healing and the value of their own religious understanding (Landman 1994:107).

Johanna Brandt's contribution to the liberation of Afrikaans women (even though they rejected it) was to replace the personal God to whom these women felt attracted as well as the national God they shared with the men after the war, with the cosmic God. Brandt presented a God who would bring balance between the sexes, restore nature (ecofeminism), wipe out violence and war, a God for all races, sexes and ages (Landman 1994:107).

#### **6.6.9. Marie Du Toit (1880-1931)**

When Marie du Toit used the word "feminist" in her book '*Vrou en feminist*' title (1921), it was the first and last time this term was used in a book title in Afrikaans. She was alone among her contemporaries in pleading for suffrage, and today is forgotten. Du Toit regarded the restrictions on clothing, voting and other forms of self-expression of women as unnatural and unbiblical (Landman 1994:111).

Du Toit was very concerned about what is "natural" for women. In 1920 the Synod of the Reformed Church in South Africa stated that women may not vote because that would mean women participated in government, which is forbidden by 1 Timothy 2.12. Genesis 2.18 places woman in an inferior position to man as his helper. The Synod relied heavily on Kuyper's ideology in its decision, who held that female participation in politics is against the will of God and against the nature of woman. Kuyper held that the natural woman is shy and passive, with weaker bones, limited physical abilities, a louder voice, strength in her lower body, and a lack of sharpness of brain (Landman 1994:112).

Du Toit held that the differences between "natural" man and "natural" woman were minor; not innate, but social. She always regretted that women were not loyal to one another, and ascribed this to the fact that women had a poor self-image and did not believe that something great can come from themselves (Landman 1994:113).

The Synod held that God did not create women as individuals but as part of a family. Christian teaching does not emphasize the individuality of people — it is the result of the ideology of the French Revolution. A statement like this is pure Kuyperism. Du

Toit answered that women's suffering, and not the French Revolution, is the source of their struggle. Du Toit exposed a fundamental difference between the male and female religious thinking of her time. Male theology centred on principles while women's argumentation was based on experience. Du Toit held that women wanted to vote because they wanted to address the needs of all women (Landman 1994:113-114).

In Du Toit's view, political feminism should put the following social issues on the public agenda:

- Equal educational possibilities for boys and girls
- Laws which allow married women to have a say over their children
- The abolishment of female "slave trade" (the exploitation of the female work force)
- State subsidy for needy mothers
- Equal pay for equal work (Landman 1994:115).

History made Marie du Toit the first muted feminist amongst Afrikaans women. Neither her Church nor her society took any notice of her insight into women's social inequality and personal suffering (Landman 1994:116).

#### **6.6.10. Looking Back at Our Foremothers**

From the beginning Afrikaans women did not believe in a national God, but in a personal God. Due to the loss of so many of their children, the most important question to them revolved around the fate of the soul of the beloved deceased. They were not theologically trained and had little or no access to books, which resulted in them believing that God visited them personally with the relevant answers and comfort (Landman 1994:117).

In the late 1700s, the books of the Dutch pietists of the Second Reformation, which were no longer read in the Netherlands, reached the South African market. These books formed the reading matter of our foremothers through the 1800s and even on the Great Trek. Pietist theology had a strong emphasis on personal sins, and supported the women's belief that God was blameless and that everything should be blamed on their personal sins. Their belief in a punishing God caused these women to fall prey to guilt fantasies accompanied by excessive confessions of their sins to



God in order to be saved from the arms of Satan. Jesus also played an important role in their guilt fantasies and especially took the role of the lover in Song of Songs. In a subculture which little valued women and where they hated themselves, Dutch-Afrikaans women believed they caused all disasters which befell them. Their survival is due to their belief in a fantasy strong God who rescues them and a Jesus who loved them as tenderly as their husbands should have done (Landman 1994:118).

## **6.7. THE RELIGIOUS INHERITANCE OF NATIVE FOREMOTHERS**

The piety that was brought to our shores did not stay with our Dutch and English foremothers, but was transferred to our native foremothers as well. In their lives, this piety had different effects. In the following short section, attention is given to the few various foremothers who encountered this inherited (missionary) piety and whose stories can be reconstructed from various literary texts. Once again, the work of Christina Landman is of utmost value in this regard since she is practically alone in her field as far as research on this topic is concerned.

### **6.7.1. Krotoa**

Krotoa was a Khoekhoe girl of about ten years who was given as present to the Dutch in 1652. She was robbed of her name and called Eva. In the Fort she was expected to please the men, and Maria van Riebeeck took her on as handmaid. Van Riebeeck taught her handmaid the things of the Lord, and in two years she became an interpreter and broker between the Dutch and the Khoekhoe. A week before Van Riebeeck was to leave for the East, Krotoa was baptised, after which her own people rejected her. She married Pieter van Meerhoff in 1665. While he worked on Robben Island, she started drinking heavily, and after his death she was brought back to the mainland with her three children. Her children were removed from her and she was sent back to Robben Island as prisoner, where she deteriorated and died in 1674 (Landman 1994:7-13).

Krotoa's story is one of a Christian woman who was highly frustrated with the individualism, loneliness and bodylessness of contemporary Christianity. Krotoa could not bear the loss of her body in religion as her Khoekhoe tribe was used to celebrate. In centuries to come South African Christian women were allowed only a soul, and local patriarchal theologies were to determine how this soul was to obtain salvation (Landman 1994:14).

### 6.7.2. Vehettge Tikkuie

Vehettge Tikkuie visited missionary George Schmidt regularly where he made his home in the Baviaanspoort. She would ask him what he came to tell them, and he would reply that he came to save her soul from her body and from hell, to show them the way to heaven. Eventually she, her husband and 30 other Khoekhoe joined the missionary in the settlement (Landman 1999:16-17).

In the settlement Vehettge had none of the joys of living in the kraal (dancing, festivities etc), while the women still had to do all the work expected in the kraal. They had to wear western clothing and the literacy offered to them was at the price of a division among the sexes in Bible classes from the start (Landman 1999:17).

At the time of Vehettge's death in 1800 many women in the Genadendal area were Christians. These people formed the second generation of black women converts, whose piety would be more and more formed by white missionaries from different denominations who all told the women more or less the same thing: The more you feared the Lord, the more He loved you; the more you forsake your body, the more the Lord would be interested in saving your soul; the more you feared hell, the closer you were to heaven (Landman 1999:19).

It took South Africa a hundred years to produce the second generation of black women converts since the first generation like Krotoa was reluctant to carry through with the tenets of Christianity. The first (Van Riebeeck) generation was taught that God predestined salvation, and the second generation was taught that the onus rested on the individual to save herself with the help of Jesus and through a lifestyle of self-negation. This second generation was also taught that the soul had gender. With Vehettge's generation the concepts of a genderised soul and "sin" enter into the discourse of black women's spirituality. This idea of an everlasting soul should have been liberating, but because it was genderised, women were taught to believe that their salvation depended on good woman-like behaviour. The missionaries' concept of soul as taught to women became part of their enslavement (Landman 1999:20).

### 6.7.3. Segatisho

Segatisho was a Tswana convert under the missionary work of Mary and Robert Moffat in the era around 1839. But did the piety of English-speaking women like Mary Moffat help black Christian women cope with life? Could this piety of hell-scare and salvation through Jesus who cared mainly for the metaphysical well-being of the soul, help the black women through the coming years of severe oppression at male and white hands, both English and Afrikaans? (Landman 1999:47).

Not all English-speaking women were guilty of disempowering black women. Frances Colenso (1816-1893), wife of the Anglican bishop of Natal, was an exception in that she believed religion was inherent in all people and needed to be enlightened with knowledge of Christ's saving nature and not by hell-scare. The Colenso's also placed more emphasis on the salvation of one's total being (Landman 1999:48). Colenso's more liberal stance was a direct result of her intellectual upbringing and economic class.

Sadly, it was the conservative and underdeveloped piety of Mary Moffat which survived. Until the liberation theology of the 1970s, black women believed that religion was mainly about keeping one's soul out of hell and on the way to heaven (Landman 1999:48).

### 6.7.4. Princess Emma

Emma was the daughter of Sandile, chief of the Gaikas, who lived west of the Great Kei River. She was born in 1842. In 1857 the Anglican bishop of Cape Town, Robert Gray, and after him the governor, George Grey, visited Sandile and asked him to give his children to them to educate. 35 Children left for Cape Town, among them Emma. In 1860 these children were settled into their own residence, Zonnebloem College (Landman 1999:51-52).

The content of their education was, among other things, the doctrine of sin, the doctrine of immortality, the soul, holiness and temperance. Polygamy was rejected. The boys and girls were taught how to read and write, and Emma wrote letters to Robert Gray in 1860, becoming the first black woman in South Africa to write English. The girls were kept apart from the boys and taught domesticity by single English women. The girls were taught cookery and needlework, with the aim towards making

them useful to whites and men. There was no point in educating a black man and not providing him with a black Christian wife. This wife was supposed to run a Christian home and educate Christian children. This was useful to whites, who saw unchristianised blacks as potential thieves and murderers (Landman 1999:53).

In 1868 Emma was 26 years old and too old to get married. In 1869 Emma became one of the ten wives of minor Mqwati chief Stokwe Ndela. Emma went back to her former life, and helped in the wars and rebellions of the Xhosa against the whites (Landman 1999:54).

The mainline churches, missionaries and pietists all taught women the same thing: all people have souls, and souls had sin. Sin can be evaded by covering the body completely with clothes and restricting it to unchangeable social norms. Especially a female body should be made useful and functional by serving other people. Women's domestic roles were taken for granted. Domesticity was the main component of the curriculum (Landman 1999:55).

#### **6.7.5. Libuseng Lebaka-Ketshabile**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century black women received a message from Christianity revolving around sin, soul, temperance and hell. These concepts preyed on a view of women as naturally inferior to men, and as black being inferior to white. This inherited piety did not help women to struggle against apartheid, poverty, domestic violence and other politico-societal evils. Black women became the most oppressed group in South Africa (Landman 1999:77).

Liberation theology came to our shores and was driven by black men since the 1970s. Libuseng Lebaka-Ketshabile was born in 1958 and studied in Pietermaritzburg under the Methodist Church. She worked in Natal and the Free State before leaving for the USA. Her thinking as teacher is influential, and as theologian she represents the theological development of many contemporary black women in South Africa. Lebaka-Ketshabile offers exciting alternatives to the notions of sin, soul, temperance and hell in her 1997 book *Liberating action: a perspective on contextual spirituality* (Landman 1999:77-78).

Lebaka-Ketshabile replaces women's fear of sinning with their power to rename their experiences. Behaviour which was typified as sinful in the past, can now be

renamed by women as legitimate female experiences and used as source of power. Where in the past anger was sinful, for instance, it is now something which empowers a woman to act against her oppressor (Landman 1999:78).

Lebaka-Ketshabile places women on the path towards a God who understands them, rather than a God who judges them. God the Judge is renamed as God, the One who Cares (Landman 1999:78).

Lebaka-Ketshabile replaces the notion of soul with that of spirituality. Spirituality now involves one's whole being and rejects self-hate. Women can now proudly identify with being women (Landman 1999:79).

Temperance as taught to black women over the centuries is still in high regard among black women theologians. Lebaka-Ketshabile's research is aimed towards developing the notion of women as moral agents, who can take moral leadership and teach people morality in economics, politics and society (Landman 1999:79).

Hell is a concept absent from Lebaka-Ketshabile's work. She encourages women to change their present "hell" of oppression by transforming society and the oppressive influence of patriarchal religion on it. Black women are liberating themselves from the oppressive piety they have inherited from missionary Christianity. The fruits of this new theology are evident when one notices black women being extremely influential in politics, both social and economic in present day South Africa. These women openly acknowledge their religious affinity (Landman 1999:80).

How far have white, middle-class, Afrikaans women come along this road?

#### **6.7.6. The Pink Ladies**

In the 1990s Christian bookshops were flooded with "pink books", books containing spiritual messages for daily devotionals written by lay Afrikaans-speaking women. These books repeated the piety of the day, which painted women as dependent on God and men for their identity. By 1995 the sales of these books reached record proportions, with retailers relying on the "pink ladies" for a third of their income. These diaries still display an affinity with the values of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch piety. Together with the Dutch pietists, the "pink ladies" encourage Afrikaans women to reach new heights of self-affliction, guilt and self-hate. One of these books, for

instance, has the refrain "Please, O Lord, change me; change me into a child, break my will, save me from carnality, humanness, and apostasy." This is exactly the feelings Susanna Smit shared when she called herself a worm, dog and frog (Landman 1999:82).

The pink ladies prescribe a low self-image as precondition for salvation, and constantly remind their audience of the power of Satan. Their work furthermore testifies to the simple dualities of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch pietism. The world is evil and escape into the God of eternal things is recommended. God is the mighty Other, just as men are. There is a close identification of *Pappa* with God: *Pappa was daar: onsterflik en wys, magtig en sterk*. This makes one of the most prominent features of the pink books their genderised view of God and religion, and also salvation and social stereotypes (Landman 1999:83).

The pink ladies' most laboured duality is that of soul and body, the soul being eternal while the body is made of clay. The body is irredeemable and emphasis falls on the redemption of the soul (Landman 1999:83).

Why do the pink ladies unknowingly make outdated piety relevant for women today? And why do these women feel comfortable within this piety which encourages guilt about sins not committed? These women know no other piety. They belong to a female culture of deep spirituality which have been excluded from theological training and neglected in religious discourse by their churches. Male ministers have kept these women naïve about the empowering possibilities of piety which would have posed a threat to the authority of men in general, and these ministers specifically (Landman 1999:84).

This piety sees God as the Father whose task it is to discipline women's dreams. These women are also not aware of the consequences of their "pink book" piety. Today Dutch-Afrikaans women are victimised by verbal and physical abuse in personal relationships more than ever before, and their divorce rate is the highest in the world. A woman who has been told that salvation lies in childlike submission to God and man, sees herself as martyr when her pious submissiveness is not rewarded by her husband with lifelong loyalty (Landman 1999:84).

Lebaka-Ketshabile maintains that women's spirituality stands on three pillars: love for an accessible God; an empowering love for the self; and a love for others based on

mutuality in relationships. Can Dutch-Afrikaans women benefit from a piety that sees God as accessible and themselves as empowerable? (Landman 1999:85).

In what follows, the result is documented of the effort to introduce modern day women in their local Church setting to the views and guidelines offered by feminist theology which offers an alternative piety to the one they have inherited and the one they are confronted with in their local Churches. Sprong documented her findings in her Master's Degree thesis and this work is consulted since it gives a good documented affirmation to the results I have also found in my work among women of my own culture and religious denomination.

## **6.8. INTRODUCING A NEW LIBERATIVE PIETY**

What happens when feminist theology is introduced to a (lay) South African audience? The first interesting thing to note is: who answers the invitation which is given to all members of a congregation. Are they men, women, or both? How many people answer the invitation? How easy is it to convey feminist theology to this audience? Janet Sprong describes the exercise of exposing a small group of women to some specific aspects of feminist theology as an undertaking which proved to be quite strenuous and demanding. Her work is valuable since it documents the reception of a group of Afrikaner Free State women, of middle class income, aged 30 upwards, in a typical Protestant religious setting. The group she worked with shared the same values and background to mine, although the women I worked with were living in the city (Bloemfontein), and her women in the rural area of the Eastern Free State (Bellefontein). My group were members of various Dutch Reformed Churches in the city, and hers were members of the local Methodist Church, where services etc were conducted mainly in English. They were all, however, able to speak Afrikaans, and some of them had Afrikaans as their Mother Tongue despite attending an English Church. The members who attended my group sessions were Afrikaans Mother Tongue users, although they were all bilingual.

### **6.8.1. Initial Problems Encountered**

- The first initial problem was encountered when the level of Bible knowledge and theological awareness is considered. In both our groups it was experienced that all of the women needed to be coached in some of the simple Christian basics despite having been Church-goers for years.

- My group sessions were only for a short period of time, the month of August, with members meeting every Sunday afternoon for three hours. I found that people were unable to commit to a longer period of time, and had to limit it to one month. The sessions could also not be longer (a day-long workshop, for instance) because attendees could not commit to such long sessions either. I found the same result as my colleague in Betlehem: The time set aside was always insufficient and little progress seemed to have been made towards theological depth and spiritual maturity — this despite the fact that Sprong's group met for months.
- Her group did have the benefit of members getting to know each other better over time, which my group did not share. The bonding between the attendees due to time shared together was lacking from the Bloemfontein sessions.
- The attempt to introduce a circle-type of leadership was also not met with great participation from the group (Sprong 2002:23). There was a strong sense of a leader and followers who were called to participate in conversation, but not in leadership.
- The members in both groups were not as eager and open to learning as one might think. Janet Sprong identified that a major part of fear of feminist perspectives may be due to ignorance. Women who joined her working group were initially resistant to being called "feminist", while it was less of a problem for them six months later.
- Members to the groups were women exclusively although invitations to join were issued to all members of the congregation. Men were simply absent. She remarks that not a single male in her congregation, with the exception of her husband, has ever read a book or article on feminist theological perspectives. When challenged, they (men in the congregation) responded from a biased and limited knowledge of Scripture, which was either interpreted from a literal point of view, or with a conservative fundamentalist perception of the Bible (Sprong 2002:50).
- Sprong shared her own experiences. She tried to be open with the group members and planned discussion topics carefully in order to introduce some of the more radical concepts only after dealing with a certain level of foundational material. Honesty was easy but discernment difficult. Some of the concepts were almost too complicated to impart and the group needed more preparation before they could comprehend it. She had to accept that



some of the seeds would not be able to germinate immediately (Sprong 2002:150).

### 6.8.2. Introducing Alternative Images of God

A great focus point of feminist theology is the development of a new vision with regards to God. This is what Janet Sprong endeavoured to do. She introduced the group to the work of Sara Maitland who discussed the names for God in her book *Ways of Relating*. Maitland claims that during the time of industrialization, focus became stronger on Mary as mother and Jesus as friend. Jesus' blood flowed on the Cross and, as in childbirth, the joy afterwards (in this case the resurrection) was exuberant. Christ's passion is brought into line with a creative birthing process and trust of the metaphor of God as Mother (Sprong 2002:110-111).

One woman experienced the exercise of calling God "Mother" especially painful and disturbing (Sprong 2002:53). Gladys, one of the learned members of the group came to see Sprong and was clearly distressed. She could not accept calling God anything other than "Father", and despite being affirmed and respected, broke contact with the group on a strained footing. Others who joined the group did not understand what many words meant when it was initially put to them in all openness. Many felt the group would only explore roles of women in the Church, and was taken aback by the exploration of a possible "feminine side" of God. People obviously only heard what they wanted to hear or what they could comprehend. Most of the women knew very little about feminist theology and did not know what to expect (Sprong 2002:156-157).

Sprong further introduced the group to the work of Matthew Fox who relates to God as *Child — the Child who delights in play* (Sprong 2002:111). She does not report on their acceptance or resistance to this metaphor.

In as far as language theory goes, Sprong taught her group that religious language can hardly be but metaphorical in character. Her group discussed God being called "the Rock, Mother Hen, The Way, The Truth, The Life, The Good Shepherd, The Door, Living Water, Light of the World and The Bread of Life". The group knew that these metaphors help us as humans to gain a deeper insight into the nature of God. They also remarked on their knowledge of the limitedness of these metaphors (Sprong 2002:105).

My own experience was that members of the group were willing to discuss (theoretically) possibilities of alternative images of God, but were not willing or able to merge these images into their piety and experience of a personal God. The time constraint on our project might have played a significant role in this inability. It might be possible that, given more time, over a longer period of time, members may have felt more empowered to consider these alternatives more positively. The deep-ingrained influence of a Calvinistic Protestant upbringing and piety must also be respected in this regard. If you have known God as "Father" for 30 odd years, it is not suddenly possible to now know Him as "Mother".

### **6.8.3. Introducing the Concept of Equality**

Two members of Sprong's group could not fathom that they could be equal to their husbands. Their understanding of the Bible was quite clear that the husband was the "head of the home". Members of the group who were in business, felt that women should get equal pay for equal work, but had to admit that this was not happening in reality. Group members were happy with women in politics, but unsure about women in ordained positions in the Church. According to them, the Bible speaks clearly against women taking leadership in the Church, and for them, a clear line was drawn between acceptable situations in society and those in the Church (Sprong 2002:99).

Discussion on the passages in the Bible against women in leadership was strained as the women felt these passages limited their involvement. The need was expressed for in-depth study of certain passages and their context in order to better understand the role of women in the Church. Sprong remarks that it became clear during this discussion that some of the material covered in previous sessions had not been fully integrated into these women's experiences. Some differed in their opinions and were reluctant to share their views with the others and some others had, at this stage, already withdrawn from the group (Sprong 2002:123). One of the women who had a senior training position in her secular employment, recognised that women were not given senior positions in the Church. This did not result in criticism of Church, theology or Bible, however.

After discrimination was explained to the group, it became clear that some women have accepted their role as "lesser beings" to such an extent that they never felt discriminated against (Sprong 2002:160).

The concept of equality also led to constant miscommunication. When Sprong changed the words of the doxology on the overhead computer at Church in order to show more inclusive language, some were shocked. The member of the group who had had former Bible training, fully understood "men" and "brothers" to include "women" and "sisters" too. God was male and therefore women should accept being referred to as male as well. For this woman specifically, her journey towards feminist theology has come at great cost (Sprong 2002:166-167).

Another woman accepted her oppression for the sake of "peace". To her, harmony, peace and little discomfort were main points to consider (Sprong 2002:172).

In my own group these issues were tackled differently, possibly because the demographics of the group were different. My group had a membership of mostly unmarried women, with the effect that the experience of the male as "head of the home" had no bearing in their practical lives. They did grow up in such homes, but were now in charge of their own lives where they did not have such experiences. The married women in the group did not share an experience of men having a hierarchical superiority in the household.

Since my group's members were women making their way in the private sector, their work experiences of injustice and discrimination were far more pronounced than that of the Betlehem group. These women knew what discrimination was and have experienced it firsthand. They were enraged by it and because of it, and were outspoken against it.

The group had no difficulty with women being clergy members, but this may be due to the fact that their Church affiliation has had female clergy (at least in theory) for over a decade now. They did not have any theological problems with such a practice in the Church.

My group did not share the problems of inclusive and exclusive language. This may be due to two reasons: one is that Afrikaans does not have the generic term "men/man" under which women are categorised and included, and another is the fact that the group members have never before been sensitized to this problem in language. With time, this may become a problem as awareness increases.



# REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

JANET MCKENZIE

#### **6.8.4. Openness to New Insights**

It was very clear to Sprong that feminist theological perspectives were completely foreign to the members of the group. Some of the ideas proposed by Christina Landman and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza were hugely threatening to some while others simply found them interesting (Sprong 2002:132). Many would only understand a concept after many extra hours of discussion outside of the meeting times, while others are still grappling with some of the theories (Sprong 2002:132).

The co-ordinator of the group endeavours to be objective, but is deeply committed to sharing with the group members insights into what wholeness for all humanity could in turn mean for the emancipation of women and marginalised groups. The reality is that one can only offer something to another. Group members can accept or reject the offer. Reaction to some challenging concepts has not been surprising but the outright rejection of unexamined ideas by some members was. The whole discipline of feminist theology calls for openness to a new paradigm, but it became clear that for some group members this ideal was premature and hugely threatening (Sprong 2002:140).

The Bloemfontein group were willing to discuss many challenging concepts as far as time allowed, but were not willing to incorporate these into their lives. Given more time, a longer journey together, this might have proven different.

#### **6.8.5. Support in Church and Community**

Sprong writes that it would have been good to be able to state that her group had experienced the general support of the congregation and the leadership of the Church, but that had not been the case (Sprong 2002:149). I experienced the same in my own endeavour. 30 CD's were handed out to ministers in Bloemfontein with accompanying letters in which it was clearly explained what I aimed to do in the sessions of my course, and in which they themselves were invited to these sessions. The letters and CD's asked them to please notify their congregation members of this course. The CD itself contained my radio interview held with Phillip Kotze of Radio Oranje. I even met an old classmate who was now a minister in his own congregation, and handed him an invitation letter and CD on the spot, but not a single person attending the course did so because of the mention made of this event from the pulpit or in the Church newsletter. Not a single minister replied, called,

wrote, objected or made any response whatsoever. With the exception of Sprong's husband, only one male member of her Church, a retired minister, was sensitive to the feminist cause. This retired minister indicated that one of the ways he believed the Church denigrated women, was by perpetuating the assumption that women's gifts are limited to those of hospitality. Sprong remarks that this is a much kinder way of putting it than saying women should always pour the tea (Sprong 2002:178).

#### **6.8.6. Results of the Questionnaires**

Sprong handed out detailed questionnaires and some of the feedback is as follows:

- I. 3/7 women were happy to be called feminists and all attend Church regularly.
- II. 4 indicated that they held leadership roles in the Church.
- III. 4 indicated that non-hierarchical partnering appealed to them.
- IV. 3 indicated that the husband is the head of the home.
- V. 4 indicated that they had not experienced any form of discrimination, which proves that they may not understand the term.
- VI. 2 believe that boys and girls should be treated similarly.
- VII. 1 woman indicated that it was woman's role to be subservient.
- VIII. Only 1 woman had the courage to state that she was unwilling to explore new concepts of God. Although the others indicated their willingness, it was only true when it excluded the feminine aspects of who God is (Sprong 2002:162).
- IX. Only 2 members of the group have ever participated in extensive formal study of the Bible, and the others indicated that they had no desire to do so.
- X. Most women enjoyed the fellowship and getting together that the group exercise provided.
- XI. Some of the women indicated that the material covered did not affect them very much (Sprong 2002:165).

Sprong also found the fear of change to be a very real element in the experience of the people she worked with and met. Many people would not recognise it as such and they would rather be adamant that they just wanted things to stay as they were because that's the way it should be. The challenges of feminist perspectives therefore face a wide range of obstacles, those seen and those not yet perceived (Sprong 2002:172).

Sprong remarks on the feedback she got from her questionnaires. Even after seriously attempting to draw out a person's real feelings, she got the impression that

most responses contained what the members thought would be the "right" thing to say. One cannot say anything negative about God, even if one's experience in the Church gives one a distorted view of God. The view of the Bible was that it is a "textbook" to live by, and members clearly had a great reverence for Scripture. Members still struggled with feminist interpretation of Scripture. Only one member risked saying that the Bible teaches that all people can change. Another member referred to role models for women like Abigail who was clearly not subservient, but made it clear that she found it difficult herself to follow such an example in her context (Sprong 2002:176).

### **6.9. FEMALE PIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA — PAST TO PRESENT**

From the previous sections it becomes clear that we have inherited a problematic piety — one that should be handled with suspicion and not just accepted because it is given to us by our foremothers. We are both blessed and cursed. We are blessed because we have the chance to interact with a personal God and we have tools through which we can know and explore (Him), ourselves, and the people and world around us. We are cursed because we seem to find no interest in problematizing and questioning our inherited knowledge of faith. We seem to believe, like children, that what Mommy says, is probably best, never exploring for ourselves whether Mommy's wisdom is wisdom, indeed.

Are we bound to keep repeating the mistakes of the past? Can we not get any further than the pious trenches of our foremothers? Can we not inherit the New Land full of promise and possibility, rather than forever rolling in the mud of our taught shame?

Women may be eager to be free of their religious bonded past, but do not seem to be eager players in their own salvation. They seem to resist new ideas, or view them as interesting without incorporating them into a liberative piety for their personal lives. In this regard they often alienate themselves from the truth that is posed to them. They seem to find more comfort in the arms of their known past tradition than in the uncharted waters of personal liberation.

Who can blame them? Women have been indoctrinated to distrust other women, female God images (for fear of serving idols), and anyone or anything coming across their way who questions and challenges the peace of the way things are.

Fiorenza's hermeneutic has many possibilities for changing the lives of oppressed groups, and for interacting with the religious text in a brave new way, but when tested among a group of women with Protestant background, it seemed to be resisted. This might be due to the fact that Protestantism has a whole different attitude towards the authority of the Biblical text than Catholics, the background from which Fiorenza does her work.

### **6.9.1. Evaluating Fiorenza's Hermeneutic in the South African Context**

Chapter 6 offered a study of various selected Old Testament narratives at the hand of Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion. The chapter closed with an evaluation of the stencil of questions I have developed in order to aid the lay reader in the processes of this hermeneutics. But how did the hermeneutics itself fare? What was the target audience's reaction to the principles and praxis of her hermeneutics? In what follows, I interpret the interaction of the group with this reading strategy and give feedback of its success.

Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion works around four pillars: suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and actualization. The questions I have drawn up and the feedback on them, as well as the interaction of the group during the sessions we spent together, are used as criterion against which the effectiveness and reception of her hermeneutics is measured. From the outset the idea has been to test her hermeneutics in a context of lay believers who voluntarily offer their time in the exercise of Bible study in a group setting.

Fiorenza works mainly with New Testament texts, and it has not been expressly tested how a group receives her hermeneutics and work with it on Old Testament texts. Her work has also not been tested for reception among an Afrikaans audience. Fiorenza furthermore writes from a Catholic background. Does this have any effect on her work or the way it is received?

As stated before, we worked together within the parameters of certain limits — time being the main one. In chapter 6, I have listed the group's answers to questions posed to the four texts we discussed. These questions were developed by myself since I saw a need to give a reader clearer guidelines about what the questions to be asked to the text should look like within the frameworks of suspicion, remembrance,



proclamation and actualization. In the works of Fiorenza herself I have encountered broad ideas of what each step in her hermeneutics should look like, but no clear-cut questions. It is possible that, along the lines of Gerald West, Fiorenza shies away from being seen as too prescriptive and domineering. My group work showed me that these "start-up" questions were not perceived to be domineering, but were welcomed. People were reserved to start discussion because they did not even know where to start! The questions offered a good starting block, giving them confidence as we went along.

The group's critical engagement with Fiorenza's work is problematic. If the question is asked whether it was productive, a mixed answer seems in order. Firstly, it was not as productive along the lines of the audience internalizing the hermeneutics as one might have hoped. Secondly, one must admit that they were willing to listen and evaluate. They did not just reject the tenets of feminist criticism out-of-hand. It was clear that time plays a great role in "bringing it home" to them. Some concepts took time to digest, as Sprong also found. I do not see a successful course in feminist theology and criticism as only lasting four sessions in future. Such a course would take a longer time, and needs a great commitment from attendees.

Fiorenza's view of the authority of the text pushed the audience in a direction they were not willing to go. Questioning the text was acceptable, but questioning the godly authority of the text, and pronouncing it to be words of men, was not something they were willing to do. One cannot say that this will necessarily be the situation forever. With more time and more detailed study and discussion, the people in the group might give different feedback on this point. I locate the reason for this stance in the religious heritage of the women in my group, and by that I include the heritage of the piety of our foremothers ranging through history up until the theology of the day. Calvinist Protestantism lays a great claim on the audience's piety, and its hold is not so easily loosened.

### SUSPICION

The group did not find it difficult to identify main characters, social and cultural conventions, and positions of the characters. The answers to questions about their inherited images of the narratives were answered without delay. They could easily tell how they were brought up to understand a text. The more difficult questions were about ways in which the text was used against liberation, and regarding women's secondary status in Church and society. Questioning the underlying suppositions of

the text was something they wanted me as the facilitator to affirm. This can be said of a number of questions — the group would formulate an answer, but would want affirmation from the facilitator that the answer was indeed “right”. Even while we exposed our problematic need for approval, we still exhibited it.

### REMEMBRANCE

There was a blurring of lines between the steps of remembrance and actualization as far as the group was concerned. Some of the members felt that the act of remembering in its various forms is already a form of actualization. These two steps showed a tendency to flow into each other. In the aspect of historical background to what women’s roles might have been in the text, the group looked to the facilitator for answers. This can be a classic instance along the lines described by Gerald West, where the group wants the input of the facilitator/theologian for background information. The group welcomed the opportunity to be able to imagine stories for the women in the texts, and to ponder their possible thoughts, but even this exercise needed time in order for group members to feel safe enough to venture their opinions honestly.

### PROCLAMATION

This is the aspect where Fiorenza expects a text to be declared either the words of men or the Word of God. To my group, there was nothing to discuss, since it was never entertained to be anything *BUT* the Word of God. They showed great resistance to the concept of the Bible possibly being words of men on paper. They furthermore were less eager to declare aspects of the text in service of patriarchal interest — it was rather the traditional interpretations that were at fault. To rightfully be able to measure fully the role of texts in contemporary culture was something they needed more time to digest. This idea was something they found new, and they were unaccustomed to critically reviewing society in light of a critical textual analysis.

### ACTUALIZATION

This is where the adventure of what Fiorenza proposes steps in, but this is also an aspect that needs a lot of time to bring to fruition. Time constraints were frustrating to all, but they were unable to offer more time for the course. The group did not show resistance to the idea of actualizing the narratives and alternative endings to them, but simply did not have time to fit such an exercise in. Overall surprise was the reaction to the idea that a text can be anything more than just letters on paper. They have not thought about painting, poetry, songs, drama, dances etc as portraying

Biblical narratives before. Once again, the religious context from where these women come, can explain this lack of knowledge to a huge extent. They (we) did not grow up in a religious setting where we were shown paintings or plays etc. The whole concept was received with eagerness.

Fiorenza's framework is sufficient and has the possibility of bringing us further in our piety than our inherited tradition. It is especially if one adapts or blends her hermeneutics a bit with local praxis, that one may find a hermeneutics that truly addresses the South African context perfectly. Looking at the way forward, there are a few pointers which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 starts with questions about what holds us back and the answers to these problems. We are afraid of change. We are afraid of worshipping idols and that may explain why Protestant women resist female images for God. We are afraid of sinning against God, which may explain why we do not wish to interrogate or criticize the Biblical text. We are afraid of the liberation of our bodies, since they have been associated with sin for such a long time. Lastly, we have internalized our oppression as women, and this stands in the way of moving forward. Chapter 7 gives some solutions to the challenges we face on the road ahead, looking forward to emancipation and liberation.

## CHAPTER 7

### A CRITICAL GLANCE BACKWARDS AND A LOOK AT THE WAY FORWARD

#### 7.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

Chapter 6 contained a reading of various selected narrative texts from feminist perspective, and introduced the reader to a set of questions I have developed to be used as a stencil for any narrative text to be encountered in the chapter. These questions were developed to echo the process of a hermeneutics of suspicion, and the aim was that they should aid the lay reader in handling the text with suspicion without the need for a post-graduate course on theology or hermeneutics. The chapter also contained an evaluation of the effectiveness of this stencil. Chapter 6 contained a critical evaluation of some of the main characteristics of feminist theology for the South African context, and situated the results gleaned in chapter 6 within a wider context of a broader South African audience. It became clear that Afrikaans women have a specific piety, and the reason for this is found in the inherited religious past. The chapter then offered a brief overview of what this inherited piety of our foremothers look like. Once the reader could understand why we believe the way we do, the hermeneutics of Fiorenza herself was evaluated in ethnographic fashion since it was measured how accessible it is for a lay audience. Some aspects were easier to digest than others, and these were pointed out. Chapter 7 wants to put the results gleaned from chapter 5 & 6 in the wider South African framework and asks: What can we do on the road ahead? How do we miss the pitfalls of our predecessors?

The outlay of the chapter looks as follows:

The broader South African context

- Do we want to change?
- Do we like our inherited faith images?
- The role of sin
- Sin in bodiliness
- Internalization of oppression

- What is expected of men?
- The African problems we face
- Solutions offered     ————— The children
  - The ekklēsia
  - Ubuntu theology     ———— Group work

How do we change? We should start with ourselves, examining the things that make us who we are and identifying the things about us that need changing in order to bring about a renaissance. We then need to look forward, into the future, and make sure that coming generations stand on our shoulders, reaching higher than us. With this in mind, we work with the children, the coming generations. As far as our religious lives are concerned, the question arises: Are we allowed to change? Reformation has change as probably its core characteristic. If we are eager and willing to accept change and to change ourselves, are there images of the Divine, religious images, we are more drawn to than others? This chapter furthermore looks briefly at women's identification with sin, which needs to come under the knife of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Women also need to declare that we are made to suffer more than men under this burden, and we need to comb the Biblical texts and tradition for where our murders took place in order to renounce it. A physical site of the murder of the feminine is in the violations against the female body in Church and society. This practice must be problematized and revealed. But are women victims only? Do women play any role in their oppression? If so, this needs to be identified as a problem before emancipation can begin. Fiorenza's women-church offers solutions in our modern times, and when interlaced with African Ubuntu theology, it can give a truly local solution for local problems. In the end, change is brought about by working with people in groups, and this chapter closes with a look at tips and pointers when doing group work towards emancipation.

## 7.2. THEOLOGICAL CHANGES

We can change and adapt. Change on religious frontiers is not fast change, but possible change. A Church should not just change for the sake of change itself, but when indications are given that the people of the faith are ready to change, work for it and embrace it.

Sallie McFague compared our theological constructions with houses, which are good to live in for a certain time. The doors are partially closed and the windows partially

opened, but these houses become prisons when they do not allow us to freely come and go, build other rooms or build new houses if necessary (Tepedino 2001:94).

In evangelical circles, we must identify core Biblical truth and theological (human) constructions. These are not the same thing even though they might be presented to the believer as such. Theological constructions can change.

### **7.3. NEW IMAGES**

Does the modern believer even like the religious images from our inherited tradition? Can modern believers even associate with the pictures held in front of them? What images make us uncomfortable and what images are we drawn to?

Tepedino worked with various groups and presented to them different images of the Divine. Her purpose was to deconstruct traditional images that have been internalized and to reconstruct new meaningful images that speak to our present age and situations. Her question was what images helped the audience to feel and experience God (Tepedino 2001:91).

All her mentioned groups rejected portrayals of suffering and institutional images like priests and sisters, a spiny crown, martyrdom and the cross with a tortured figure. The audiences welcomed figures of love relationships like men and women together, symbols of life like grapes, wheat, bread and wine, symbols of light such as candles, and symbols of the path such as the way. Her experience was that these images of love, life, light and path have always been experienced as symbols of the divine, but that today, they have a re-newed meaning altogether (Tepedino 2001:91).

Her conclusion was that the divine is found in the daily reality of grapes and wheat which gives us bread and wine, the basic symbols for living. Nobody can live without food, meaning, dreams, love, interconnections and interrelatedness, and these new images point anew to metaphors which speak about the Mystery of God (Tepedino 2001:91).

A note of caution should be inserted here. Images of suffering are inherent to the Christian doctrine. The Gospel does not JUST focus on life in abundance. The Cross remains the middle and focus point of the faith. What must happen, is that we need to re-think the way this is explained or put to modern audiences.

#### 7.4. THE ROLE OF SIN

Our foremothers have identified themselves as great sinners in their ego-texts, despite their inability to name their so-called grave sins. Their mentality of hopelessness brought about by an overwhelming sense of sin is still with the white, middle-class Afrikaans woman to this day. It does not seem that we have progressed beyond the trenches of our foremothers, but are still stuck in the same places as far as our guilt and self-awareness is concerned.

During the whole study it became very clear that a big issue to be addressed, is the whole concept of sin. For the Calvinist and Catholic, the liberal and the conservative believer, for different races and language groups, and for various age groups and especially the different sexes, sin is a different concept ranging in meaning from context to context. What is clear, is that women bear sin more heavily than men. Women are conditioned into a corporate guilt-bearing mindset from early age, and the Church plays a great role in this indoctrination. The way forward is to earnestly study and address the identification of sin, and the way women is identified with sin more exhaustively than men. But that makes for another field of study altogether, and years and lifetimes of work and change.

Feminist theology does not hypostasize sin as an event that happened or something that people do. It rather defines sin as a basic alienation within the psyche — a failure to claim one's own emotionality, insecurities or creatureliness, the capacity for nurturance or the need to be creative. For a woman, it could take on the form of failure to recognize one's own aggressiveness, power, competence and intellectuality. Feminists, and not just theologians, contends that this alienation leads to many social ills, among them war. We seem to project our group fears onto an "other", a "not me". This entity could be females, an ethnic minority or "the enemy" (Collins 1972:35). A very recent illustration of the violent form this takes, is the xenophobia in South Africa that flared up during especially May of 2008. This xenophobia was directed towards alien people from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Nigeria etc who lived in South Africa for various reasons. These people were singled out, beaten, robbed, and driven from their homes with extreme cases of killings involved. As I write during June of 2008, xenophobic clashes are still occurring in the country.

As man is alienated from himself and from woman, so Westerners are alienated from that part of themselves which belongs to the earth. Our failure to see that we are intimately tied to the rivers, the air, and the land we are polluting is another form of sin which is disastrous for all people and the earth itself (Collins 1972:35-36).

Sin, seen this way, is not so much a falling away from God or a deliberate transgression of a divine being's orders, as it is rather a failure to recognize the God within us and our fellow creatures (Collins 1972:36).

Keeping the above in mind, feminists are more likely to emphasize immanence rather than transcendence. They hold that sin is institutionalized wherever hierarchies are established, because hierarchies invariably separate people from one another, or from part of themselves (Collins 1972:36).

Because people have different histories, sin takes a different shape for them. In this feminists enter into a critical dialogue with traditional Christian ethics. Mary Daly wrote as early as 1971 that much of traditional Christian virtue seems to be the product of reactions on the part of men (perhaps guilty reactions) to the behavioral excesses of the stereotypic male. Christians have always been counselled to be meek, obedient, self-sacrificing and humble, live a life of charity towards other, turn the other cheek etc. This emphasis might have been necessary to counteract excessive aggressiveness, pride, and exploitation which characterize a male culture (Collins 1972:36).

The trouble is that these virtues are always preached to women, for whom meekness, self-humility and self-sacrifice were already a way of life. Man's sin is not that he has not had enough humility, rather, woman's sin is that she has had too much of it. It is as if, by letting women carry the burden of being humble and pious for them, men have got rid of any need to appropriate these virtues for themselves, and so have felt free to visit aggression on the world (Collins 1972:36).

#### **7.5. WOMEN'S BODIES IN RELIGION AND SOCIETY**

A part of the female that has been made to bear the brunt of sin, is her body. Bodies were always painted as the scope of sin. Women today, as in the past, continue to have problematic love/hate relationships with their bodies.

Christina Landman points out that there is no reason why women should have "suffering bodies" in South Africa, since the country has a women-friendly constitution



ranking among the most liberal in the world with regards to human rights. Further laws also support the constitution in protecting women's bodies against abuse. The most important of these is the Domestic Violence Act of 1999 (Landman 2002:85).

Despite all measures above, women's bodies in South Africa suffer abuse more severely than anywhere else in the world. We have the highest rape rate, the fastest spreading HI-virus, and the highest incidence of domestic violence (Landman 2002:85).

The question is why do women not liberate their bodies from violence when the constitution offers all possible support, and the unsettling answer is that women in this country and their bodies are still controlled by powerful cultural and religious discourses (Landman 2002:85). This finding of Christina Landman corresponds to situations in countries north of South Africa as well, as witnessed to by Musimbi Kanyoro, to name but one.

The census of 1996 showed 96% of South Africans formally belonging to a religious tradition, which makes us one of the most religious countries in the world, and also the most Christian, with 70% of the population affirming allegiance to Christianity (Landman 2002:85-86).

The startling realization drawn from this information, is that the men committing crimes against women's bodies are religious men (Landman 2002:86). Knowing that perpetrators are religious, makes the relanguaging of religious discourses and the displacement of religion as a tool that promotes violence in favour of religion as the language of liberation all the more important (Landman 2002:86).

Christina Landman suggests as solution a new religious language, but this is not something women can decide upon among themselves. Such a new religious language should be negotiated with the Church, men, and society at large. The need is to relanguage preaching, rescope liturgies, discard old ways of reading the Bible, and counsel people in a new language which speaks of a deconstructed set of values (Landman 2002:97).

What can the Church do to facilitate the healing of violated women? The first step in a process of survival is to break the silence surrounding this complex and deplorable issue. A woman's experience of violence is not part of the dominant discourse, yet it

is the story which shapes and explains her identity as an individual and as a member of the community. Just as the voices of oppressed groups must be heard, so must the stories of violation be told so that the full identity of a community can be known and the individual ministered to. Such telling of experiences can take place in small groups where the individual feels "safe" and they can also be spoken by raising the topic of rape in preaching, in teaching, and in liturgical actions. Our desire to care for one another is called into question if we are ambivalent or apathetic and silent on this issue (Ackermann 1996:153).

The second action of the Church is to stop propagating theologies which perpetuate male dominance bolstered by structures in which male power is not appropriately limited. Sexual violence is mostly a problem in which women are the victims. Inclusive theologies, where women are equally valued with men, and where women's dignity and purpose is upheld and underscored by Church praxis, are urgently needed to address the commonly held notion that women are inferior. All theology stems from the depth of human experience. Our experiences differ, and therefore critical reflection on difference and otherness is essential if we are to be sensitive to the stories of those on the margins: women, children and the poor (Ackermann 1996:153).

A third action the Church can take is to actively support and cultivate religious art that honours and uplifts women as equal partakers of the godly image. In this regard, I am glad to introduce the reader to the art of Janet McKenzie, whose images of women in religion does great work to affirm to women that they are worthy religious subjects. Images from her portfolio have been used with kind permission throughout this book. Especially in a context such as Africa, with its myriads of illiterate people, art plays a distinct role in the shaping of the believer's (and non—) Weltanshaung.

The task of creating awareness is a fourth action that is important. Women should be made aware that by simply taking a stance for themselves, they can have female/feminist influence in the most positive sense. My sister is a feminist without even knowing it or consciously practicing feminism. At a gathering of Christian women, the subject of giving birth came on the table. The other women all live in a neighbourhood speaking of affluence, and as they each shared their birthing tales, it became clear that their gynaecologists all had them undergo convenience-motivated caesarean section type births, regardless of the women's ideals and preferences. My sister proclaimed that this was utterly ridiculous! How could they hand over their

precious experience to a doctor whose only concern was making the process of giving birth controllable, manipulative, and easy to fit into his schedule? They gave up their rights to their bodies in such a basic way! My sister is a feminist without even knowing it, fighting for the rights to the female body's autonomy, unaware of the feminist take on the subject. In her own world, she is touching minds without being aware of her stance.

## 7.6. THE PROBLEM OF INTERNALIZING OPPRESSION

An important area for work lies within the female mindset. As was noted in chapter 6, women themselves seem to resist liberative voices speaking to/for them. A great leap towards emancipation of women in religion and society will be made once they themselves become self-aware. This awareness **MUST** include an awareness of the role they themselves play in their own subjugation.

Paulo Freire indicated that the poor and oppressed are not just oppressed by external structures and forces, but that they also internalize and participate in their own oppression. Freire recognized that the oppressed people's accommodation to the logic of domination may mean that they actively resist emancipatory forms of knowledge (West 1991:171-172).

## 7.7. WHAT IS EXPECTED OF MEN?

What is expected of men? Patte summed up an apt response from men where transformation is the goal. Patte advocates a transformation which requires stages of guilt, confession and repentance. He is not asking male European-Americans (all males he knows) to do anything that interpreters from other ethnic, gender- and class-oriented groups do all the time. Males must simply acknowledge that their Biblical interpretation emerges from their ethnic/gender/class identity and that no amount of critical sophistication can change this. *There is nothing wrong with interested Biblical interpretation, unless it claims to be disinterested* (Patte in Schaeffer 2000:10).

According to Ndlazi, religious men have an important role to play in transforming gender relations and ensuring gender equality in religious institutions and groupings.

1. Firstly, internal transformation is one of the basic requirements for an external transformation that can lead to a desired change. This internal transformation

entails a change of attitude, taking responsibility, and what Maluleke calls "agonistic" reflection.

2. Secondly, there is a dire need for the promotion of reinterpretation of Biblical scriptures in relation to gender. In other words, we need "to read familiar texts in unfamiliar ways".
3. Thirdly, gender awareness education among religious communities is of utmost importance due to profound gender discrimination not only occurring but also being perpetuated in such communities (Ndlazi 2004:63).

MacKinnon's key insight is that power to create the world from one's point of view is power in its male form. She acknowledges male power, but shows it as a myth. Although male power is real, it is not the only reality. Male power is a myth that makes itself true. According to her, feminism unmask the myth of a single reality by exposing the production of truth in the service of power. What counts as truth is produced in the interest of those with power. This process is eventually changeable. Change in the production of truth and reality should be the goal of feminist theorizing. Feminism's task then is to expose and renegotiate ideologies (Stratton 1995:189).

For men to play a credible role in transforming gender relations, there is a need for them to go through a ritual of confessing and repenting for their sin of either consciously or innocently benefiting from gender oppression. This is what is meant by internal transformation. Boarding the bandwagon of the struggle for gender transformation should not be an easy ride for men otherwise it will lose its meaning. Men need to consciously problematize, deeply reflect and agonize over their role and status both as perpetrators and beneficiaries of patriarchy (Ndlazi 2004:63).

It is only after confession and repentance that a new being can exist and a change of heart and attitude start to manifest itself. With such new attitudes, Church institutions can also play a role in helping men to deal with and redefine their identity in light of what has been called the crisis of masculinity. The crisis of masculinity involves a generation of fatherless children. It also involves the loss of jobs for men and the increase in the number of women doing traditionally male jobs. There is thus a dire need to redefine what it means to be a man. With such a new understanding, the Church can assume what used to be the social responsibility of an extended family and village community that was deconstructed previously by various powers (Ndlazi 2004:63).



**MOTHER AND DAUGHTER**  
JANET MCKENZIE

What does our society look like? Work in our society is based on a male workday that presupposes a wife. In South Africa working hours are no longer from nine to five, but from nine to six minimum, with only two weekends off every month. In urban cases retailers stay open until 9pm, with staff working in shifts. Women, who do not have wives, but who has to be the wife, find themselves unable to cope with the workload of the modern workday. They cannot compete on the same level as men. There can be no liberation for women merely by changing job opportunities and psychology. The liberation of women depends on the fundamental restructuring of the socioeconomic relation between work and the domestic support structure (Ruether 1975:24). This second phase of the struggle for liberation has barely even begun, even in South Africa.

Women need to understand that to get "equal" parts in walks of life will not make them equal as long as the whole direction life takes is still held by men (Lerner 1986:13).

The ultimate dream is to live in a world where each person has full and free access to any position and in which everyone is encouraged to follow his or her calling. When mutual respect is fully exercised, fewer people might feel the need to compete with one another for power over others (Sprong 2002:103).

## 7.8. THE CHALLENGES TO AND IN AFRICA

A further challenge for the African context is the fact that most African Old Testament scholars have been trained in a western context, where the Old Testament is read through an interpretive grid developed in the western culture. The only solution to this problem lies in the establishing of structures for an Old Testament scholarship in Africa, which proceeds from African experiences and concerns (Holter 2001:36).

Sprong writes about her understanding that *difference* does not need to mean *separation*. This concept may have had something to do with the traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" ways of thinking, in that patriarchy, which is masculine, believes in separation or exclusion, and feminism, which is seen as feminine, believes in togetherness and inclusion. This realisation can shed light on the ideology and aftermath of *Apartheid*, since even current leadership in both Church and Government is still based on patriarchal hierarchical structures, and these are hindering integration and wholeness for South African citizens (Sprong 2002:119).

A big challenge lies in our religious history on this continent. Our foremothers suffered from a piety which left them powerless and in total dependence on Christ's salvation and men's social handouts. A liberative piety acknowledges that women have already been saved by Christ and that part of that salvation entails their liberation from attitudes and structures which undermine their dignity as human beings. Women need to take co-responsibility for this liberation (Landman 1999:89-90).

Our foremothers also suffered from a piety that made them suspicious about relationships with themselves and other people. This piety viewed people as fallen beings. Their piety allowed them to escape this world into a righteous relationship with the God who was always on their side, even when He punished them for their sins. A liberative piety restores the dignity of all people and empowers them to enter into mutual and equal relationships with one another and with God. This piety views God as good-willed and accessible to all (Landman 1999:90).

Our foremothers were victims of a patriarchal morality which determined their behaviour as women in heavily genderised hierarchies. A liberative piety empowers women to become free moral beings and gives them a voice in moral decision-making. Women are now obligated to work towards the reform of immoral oppressive attitudes and structures (Landman 1999:90).

#### **7.9. A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IDEA OF READING WITH SUSPICION**

The working model of this study involved the hermeneutics of suspicion as developed by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. This is also the frame of application that was applied to texts of the Old Testament, as was done in chapter 6. The tool I used to this end was the questions stencil I developed to aid the lay reader in such an engagement with the narrative texts.

In chapter 1, I stated that feminist hermeneutics, and specifically the hermeneutics of suspicion, seems to be reserved for a small academic community, and that ordinary lay believers and the broader theological field has no idea or interest of what this hermeneutics comprises. This has proven to be true during the course of my work. Lay believers do not know about this field, and theologians (ministers) I have

contacted have proved themselves to be disinterested to such a point that they did not even bother to object to the invitation put forward as explained in chapters 6 and 7.

The introduction to this field entailed an introduction to the field of feminist philosophy and feminist hermeneutics, which was done in chapters 1-5 in varying degrees as it pertained to the argument set forth.

I have set as an objective in chapter 1 the designing of a practical model for the reading of Old Testament texts in the light of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and this was introduced in chapter 6. The model was tested with groups of interested individuals, who proved to be women exclusively, despite invitations having been given to a broad section of the community of believers. Chapters 6-7 also listed practical hints and results which came to light during the field work, and successes and shortcomings of the model were discussed.

The questions stencil had questions that were designed to aid in identifying the following:

- I. Plotting androcentric language within the text.
- II. Identifying patriarchal elements within the text
- III. Pointing out social criticism within the text.
- IV. Identifying elements of ideology in the text.

Identifying these four elements within the text is one of the main functions of a hermeneutics of suspicion, and this was done successfully. Lay believers could not before do this without clear guidance on what to look for and how to identify it. One needs to be taught how to read with lenses of suspicion, since this is not a natural reading process from the start. But, once the building blocks of such a hermeneutics have been taught and grasped, this becomes easier and with time a basically natural way of reading. My field work has proven that in order for this ideal to be realized, a lot of time is necessary, and that in the reality of what people's lives look like, this amount of time is simply not available. Fiorenza has high ideals for her audiences without ever mentioning how easy it is for them to adapt their way of reading and understanding to this new hermeneutics. My work has proven to me that it is not easy, and that it is often a painful spiritual exercise, which is not mentioned in Fiorenza's work.



Did Fiorenza's hermeneutics answer the spiritual needs of the people it was presented to? For the short period (4 weeks) they were exposed to it, the simple answer is "no". The reasons for this are numerous and have been explained previously. Does her hermeneutics meet the expectation of the audience? Once again, "no". Sprong came to the same conclusion when she stated that the audience thought they would simply learn more about women in the Bible and the female role in Christianity. What Fiorenza offers is unexpected. Is the audience interested at all? Yes, some are, while the main stream (malestream) simply is not.

To answer questions put forth in chapter 1:

- How eager are lay people to learn the tenets of a hermeneutics of suspicion? Not much. Janet Sprong also indicated that people attending her groups were only mildly interested in further Bible tuition, and Gerald West had the same experience in his groups in Natal. The whole process of a hermeneutics of suspicion rests on a good level of theological education. People must learn that they read and interpret. They must be made aware readers. They must become sensitive to the processes in the text that make up the main stream (malestream/ grain) of the text, and their tendency to follow this direction without resistance. Lastly, people must be taught to become resisting readers/listeners/interpreters. These processes all take a significant inset as far as tutoring is concerned, and time plays a big role in the internalization of these principles.
- How effectively can the contours and principles of a hermeneutics of suspicion be taught to a lay audience? This has been answered in chapters 6-7 but for the sake of thoroughness I expand on it here. My own and Janet Sprong's group proved to me that the principles of this hermeneutics of Fiorenza is teachable, but that it takes time to bring people to a level where they can successfully practice the principles of this method. People may grasp it academically, but they may not internalize the principles immediately. It also takes time to become part of the process of reading/understanding/listening/interpreting, and it takes practice to become accustomed to using this method. What one must realize, is that Fiorenza's hermeneutics offers a way of looking at the world of the text that differs completely from what the lay believer has been experiencing in the religious life up until this point. It is not easy to start questioning one's whole faith foundation, and in the case of evangelical Protestants, the Scriptural basis to one's faith foundation.

- How does a Protestant (Calvinist) audience experience the proposals brought by a hermeneutics of suspicion with regards to the naming and identification of God the Father, the authority of the Bible, the contours of the Church, and the liberation from oppression? In as far as Fiorenza expects her audience to proclaim texts that do not offer liberation for women as words of men and not the word of God, she has lost her (Protestant) Afrikaans (female) audience. This audience is not willing to be lenient on topics such as the authority of Scripture and the Fatherhood of God. By Fiorenza's insisting on these points, especially under her step of proclamation, she alienates her audience who is simply not willing to follow her down this road. They are, however, willing to criticize the contours of the Church and discuss ways of liberating women in the religious life. Her hermeneutics loses momentum when she insists on points which are too alien for her audience. They would rather cling to what they have believed always, than embrace new insights or possibilities. Gerald West has found the same to be true of his Zulu audiences in Natal, although he does not state that his result expressly pertain to the hermeneutics of suspicion.
- Can Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics be used on the narratives of the Old Testament? Yes, chapter 6 has proved that, especially with the help of the questions stencil, this is very doable and that lay believers can utilize this hermeneutics in gaining new understanding and interaction with the narrative texts.

Fiorenza's ideals are lofty and admirable, but she needs to be confronted with the reality of the spiritual make-up of lay believers, and in this case, specifically female, Afrikaans, middle-class, Protestant believers. These women search the text for solace and certainty in uncertain times, not for a new way of enabling critique of their faith and the Bible this faith is based upon.

#### **7.10. SOLUTIONS OFFERED**

The Post-modern feminist Luce Irigaray writes that sexual difference is probably the issue of our time which could be our *salvation* if we thought it through and listened to women's bodies and the maternal body in particular (Fraser 2002:194). She is opposed to gender neutralization and argues that it is necessary for women to participate as *women* in culture. Such participation is only possible once language which gives the phallus a position of privilege, has been transformed. Her writings

show that she does not consider inclusive language as a solution to the problem, since it simply serves to incorporate women into phallogocentric cultural values defined by the male subject. The best solution would be for the woman to become her own subject in own right, without considering her being as fulfilment of the male's patriarchal-phallogocentric needs (Fraser 2002:194).

Women cannot just reverse sexism, and blame men while playing innocent victims. Women cannot affirm themselves as created in God's image in a way that diminishes male humanity. Women must rather reach for an expanding definition of inclusive humanity which includes both genders, and all social groups and races. Any principle of theology that marginalizes or diminishes one group of humanity, diminishes all. By rejecting androcentrism, women also criticise all other forms of chauvinism (white western males as norm for humanity, Christians the norm of humanity, privileged classes the norm of humanity). Humanocentrism also falls under the critical light that makes humans the crown of creation in a way that diminishes other beings. Here comes into play the recognition not of sameness, but of value, which affirms variety and particularity. It reaches for a new mode of relationship: a mutuality that affirms different ways of being instead of a hierarchical or equality model (Ruether 1985:116).

In order to reintegrate Christianity with creation, it must be integrated with egalitarian anthropology. Women, as a result, must be affirmed as theomorphic. If women share equally in the image of God, then they share equally in the care of creation. This cannot be limited to the domestic sphere (Ruether 1998:92).

Christina Landman writes that women are pious for three reasons: to ensure that they will be saved; to enter into a relationship with God, others and themselves; and to receive guidance on how to live a moral life. If one can find answers to the following three questions, one may be on the road to a liberative piety: From what must we be saved? Whose neighbours are we? Are we free to be moral? (Landman 1999:87).

#### **7.10.1. From What Must We Be Saved?**

What do South African women need Christ to save them from? Dutch Afrikaans women express the need to be saved from sin. Black women converts also learned about their innate sin and that they need to be saved from it. Today, however, sin is

seen as hurting, and women need to be saved both from the hurt inflicted on us and the hurt inflicted on others. How does Christ save women from hurting and being hurt? Christ has already saved us and given us a new life, thereby empowering us to change the attitudes as well as the structures which inflict hurt on people, such as hierarchies in which men dominate women, and power games in which people of different races dominate others (Landman 1999:87).

Our foremothers hurt a lot on their border farms, in wars, in kraals, under a low self-image and voicelessness. Today women still suffer from abuse, domestic violence, poverty and lack of fulfilment. Women need each other to save us from the damaging cultural practices which infringe on the dignity of women, patriarchy in Church and society, loose morals, theft, corruption, violence etc. Christ offers salvation from these sins by renewing people to change the attitudes and structures which cause them (Landman 1999:88).

#### **7.10.2. Whose Neighbours are We?**

Our foremothers seem like very lonely people. The black female converts found this form of Christianity very human-unfriendly and isolating, and the Afrikaans women found the inherited Dutch pietism suspicious of relationships between people, and restrictive of free relation among genders, classes and hierarchical standing. A liberative piety sees people as basically good and relations between people as satisfying and empowering rather than sinful and suspicious. This piety describes relationships as mutual. Mutuality enables people to feel free and empowered in relating to others — people have equal power to grow and let grow, and not to hurt (Landman 1999:88). The example we follow is Jesus who saw everybody as His neighbour.

#### **7.10.3. Are We Free to be Moral?**

Our foremothers were not free to be moral and neither are we. There are two reasons for this:

- I. Morality has always been prescribed to people by Church and society. Women were free to act morally according to set standards, but not free to participate in moral decision making.
- II. Women are bored or angry or poor or all of these because of the consequences of oppression. Women fighting for physical and/or emotional

survival often behave contrary to societal norms. When women have no other choice but to steal from their employer, they are not free to be moral (Landman 1999:89).

A liberative piety will do the following two things:

- I. It acknowledges that women are competent to be moral and make moral decisions.
- II. It also encourages women to develop themselves to be moral agents and to take responsibility for the morals of society. Attitudes and structures which leave women oppressed, disadvantaged, underdeveloped and poor, need to be addressed by women as moral agents, and the immorality of these situations should be exposed and changed (Landman 1999:89).

### **7.11. CHILDREN – THE NEXT GENERATION**

Changes can begin with the education of the next generation of believers. Great attention should be given to the way we teach the Bible to children. What truths do they internalize, sometimes without even the intention of the teacher? What interests them?

When one teaches the Bible to children, the variable of gender must be taken into account, and can be considered at two levels:

1. The range of female identification figures offered.
2. Room in religious education for different ways of understanding.

In the first case, girls are too often exclusively offered texts with male protagonists. The theme of friendship, for instance, has more examples than just the relationship between David and Jonathan. Esther can be taught from a feminist angle in order to teach girls a view different from the traditional. We should strive to move away from the “wiles of women” mentality with which women have been painted in the past.

In the second case, the lens of gender influences the reception of texts. Girls read differently from boys because they have different experiences. Children’s different ways of understanding must be kept in view when they are given religious instruction. There must also be a climate where different perspectives are tolerated and encouraged (Arzt 2002:39). Children should be taught answers to questions like Who is God? Who am I? Boys should not just be accustomed to associate with the heroes and girls with an image of women being weaklings at the mercy of men.

As children grow up, care should be taken that boys do not grow up with an exclusive God-identification and girls with a sin-identification. A new generation of women should be trained to have a healthy religious self-image. The aim should be to eradicate the pink ladies mentality — "I am not a worm"! Our female inherited piety is not healthy and should not be swallowed any more.

Sunday school generally chooses the most popular Bible stories to study, rather than searching out the overlooked stories about women. Paul is used as example of a missionary, but if the Church is to teach both boys and girls that they are called to be missionaries, then the example of Paul needs to be balanced with a female example like Priscilla (Acts 18; Romans 16.3) (Tuckey 1996:161).

Everyone selects texts, but not everyone is aware of this fact. Sunday school teachers could select texts about women in the Bible in order to present Christianity in a less sexist way. For children to have non-sexist faith, stories about women need to be emphasised and remembered. The fact that these stories are recorded at all, given the androcentrism of the Bible, is significant (Tuckey 1996:162-163).

The Bible even has a few examples of women in leadership roles, which come through despite the patriarchal nature of the ministry of the Church. Women leaders were probably not few and did not do little, but their stories are not recorded and preserved. Women were not simply marginalised figures in the early Church; they also exercised leadership as missionaries, founders of the Christian communities, apostles, prophets, and leaders of the Church (Tuckey 1996:163-164).

The Church needs to emphasise rather than neglect the few stories and details about women. A good example is the lesson about the prophets Elijah, Samuel and Amos, but such lessons should also include a study of Huldah (Tuckey 1996:164).

In order for socialization of children at Sunday school to be non-sexist, more stories about women should be included in the teaching programme. These stories need to be of women who are active people of God, leaders of God's people, speakers of God's message and doers of God's work. Women should be painted in more roles than the traditional ones of mother and comforter (Tuckey 1996:164).

A great problem is created by the difficulty in finding stories about women in the Bible. The way the Bible is translated is partly to blame for this, and Elizabeth

Schüssler Fiorenza pointed out that titles such as *prostasis* and *diakonos* are translated as helpers and servants when used of women, and translated as deacons, apostles and leaders when used of men (Tuckey 1996:164).

The women of the Old Testament should also get attention. Stories of the patriarchs should be told alongside stories of the matriarchs. Lessons on prophets should include Deborah and Huldah. Women are also to be found in the Psalms and Proverbs. The woman of Proverbs is involved in many activities that are not traditionally seen as roles of a female. The Song of Solomon also shows a wonderful degree of equality in a relationship between lovers, and is a great help in overcoming patterns of dominance and subservience (Tuckey 1996:164-165).

The gospels lend themselves to inclusive stories because Jesus was non-sexist in his actions. There are also stories where God is alternately portrayed as male (the good shepherd) and female (the woman searching for the lost coin). The kingdom of God is also compared to the worlds of males (the mustard seed belongs to the farming world) and females (the yeast belongs to the domestic world) (Tuckey 1996:165).

The early workers in the Church are often overlooked because the Church is accustomed to male leadership. This was not always the case. The Council of Nicea (325) saw deacons (female as well as male) as clergy, and the Synod of Tullio (692) ordained women deacons (Tuckey 1996:166).

Stories of men which reveal some of the traditional virtues of women should also be told to display these traits. The story of Jonathan should be told in the light of loyalty and compassion, and not just friendship. Stories of the caring mother should also be balanced with stories of caring fathers such as Eli (1 Samuel 2), or David's sorrow at the death of Absalom (2 Samuel 18) (Tuckey 1996:166).

#### **7.12. THE *EKKLĒSIA***

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza uses the term *Ekklēsia* (the term for Church in the New Testament) as a civil-political concept rather than a religious concept. It means the actual assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs. Women in a patriarchal church cannot decide their own theological-religious affairs. The *ekklēsia* of women is as much a future hope as a reality today. Yet

women have begun to gather as the *ekklēsia* of women, the people of God, to claim their own religious powers and participate fully in the decision-making powers of the Church, and to nurture each other as women Christians. We are called into the discipleship of equals through baptism. A feminist Christian vocation has a life-praxis commitment, accountability and solidarity in the *ekklēsia* of women. The *ekklēsia* of women stands as the incarnation of the vision of a "new Church" in solidarity with the oppressed and the "least" of this world, the majority of who are women and children dependent on women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:344).

The community called forth by Jesus is not an end in itself. The disciples are called to do what Jesus did: feed the hungry, heal the sick, liberate the oppressed, and announce the inbreaking of God's new world and humanity here and now. To embrace the gospel means to enter into a movement — and *ekklēsia* expresses this dynamic reality of Christian community. It is not a religious expression, and it means the *actual* gathering of people, the assembly of free citizens in a town, called together in order to decide matters affecting their own welfare (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:345).

In the Greek Old Testament *ekklēsia* means the "assembly of the people of Israel before God". In the New Testament *ekklēsia* is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit to make people come together around a table, eat together, break bread, and share a cup in remembrance of Christ's passion and resurrection. For Spirituality to be Christian, it means that people must share and drink and eat together, and receive each other. As long as women Christians are excluded from breaking the bread and deciding their own spiritual welfare, *ekklēsia* as the discipleship of equals is not realized and the power of the gospel is greatly diminished (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:345-346).

Feminist Christian spirituality calls us to gather together the *ekklēsia* of women who are sent forth to feed, heal and liberate our people who are women. It rejects the idolatrous worship of maleness and articulates the divine image in female human existence and language. It sets us free from the false sacrifice that puts men first to the detriment of women's welfare. The hallmarks of the struggle and calling of the *ekklēsia* of women are commitment, accountability, and solidarity in community (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:346).



Is there anything remotely like this *ekklesiā* of Fiorenza's functioning in South Africa today? I have come across a description of the *manyano* movement, which is not exactly what Fiorenza describes, but is a step in the right direction.

*Manyano* prayer groups in South Africa are a place where women gather together, without men present, and prescribe their own agenda of faith and practical daily living. They have consistently fought for this space and ensured that control of the meetings lie in their own leadership. Thursday has been set aside as *manyano* day, a day when churchwomen gather in their various groups away from the public church realm and its dominant discourse. Here, the intertwining of the spiritual and material realms of women's lives is demonstrated through three major characteristics: the wearing of a church uniform, the extensive use of extempore (spontaneous, unprepared) prayer and preaching, and internal fundraising (Haddad 2004:8-9).

Their meetings have a great emphasis on extempore prayer and preaching. *Manyano* women use their Thursday meetings as the place to give each other space to pray and preach. As much time is used as is necessary to allow for all women to participate, individually and often simultaneously in extempore prayer. Prayer to God becomes a means through which women voice their burdens, away from sites of struggle, in their own safe space. It becomes an immediate link with the spiritual realm that enables them to see their lives from a different perspective as they unburden to God and to one another that which weighs heavily on their hearts. As they do this, women reach out with mutual care to one another and so "become" the incarnate response to this pain. That which is expressed within the spiritual realm is manifested and dealt with in their human relationships with one another (Haddad 2004:10).

In their extempore preaching practices, women experience a direct link with God through expounding the Biblical text, which is always directly related to and makes connections with their material reality. Personal stories abound in the extempore preaching of *manyano* women, as they take turns to relate the Biblical text directly to their lived reality of survival. As this occurs, women hear women's perspectives on faith that results in a mutual exploration of the practice of faith within the particular constraints of their lives. This process results in a different theological discourse from that articulated in places of power such as the male hierarchical Church structures and the academy. It is a discourse that does not distinguish between a life

in the Church and a life in the world. It is a discourse that embraces poor and marginalized women's struggle to survive each day physically (Haddad 2004:10).

### 7.13. UBUNTU

Fiorenza's women-church furthermore finds an African resonance in the Ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu. These theologies, placed in interwovenness with each other, bring the reader closer to the feminist ideal. What does Ubuntu theology entail?

The opposite of Ubuntu is a fabricated society of competition, which is also a sign of the fall of creation. A system is sick when the telos of people (their goal) is to achieve autonomy of market-forces despite the result of atheism and dehumanisation. In such a system personhood is defined through the value of the product a person produces (Battle 1996:97).

As a Christian who is a person and a member of the Church, one cannot accept and tolerate processes of dehumanisation. Tutu illustrates the sick product mentality by stating our tendency to ask people what they do when we meet them, meaning to find out what gives them value (Battle 1996:97-98).

From Tutu's perspective of Ubuntu the reader learns that it is human systems that encourage a high degree of competitiveness and selfishness. Such systems illustrate the highest discrepancy with God's creation of interdependence. Tutu cites the creation narrative as a sign of interdependency:

*Apartheid says people are created for separation, people are created for apartheid, people are created for alienation and division, disharmony and disunity and we say, the Scripture says, people are made for togetherness, people are made for fellowship.*

*You know that lovely story in the Bible. Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden and everything is hunky-dory in the garden. Everything is very nice, they are all very friendly with each other. Did I say everybody was happy? No, actually Adam was not entirely happy and God is solicitous for Adam and He looks on and says, "No, it is not good for man to be alone." So God says, "Adam, how about choosing a partner?"*

*So God makes the animals pass one by one in front of Adam. And God says to Adam, "What about this one?" "No." God says, "Ah, I've got it." So God puts Adam to sleep and out of his rib he produces this delectable creature Eve and when Adam*

*awakes, he says, "Wow", this is just what the doctor ordered. But that is to say, you and I are made for interdependency (Tutu in Battle 1996:98).*

To define Ubuntu, it is necessary to turn away from Western definitions of personhood (persons as consumers). Tutu's connotation of the term Ubuntu is in the phrase *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye bantu* (*Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others, and, in turn, individuality is truly expressed*). A person depends on others to be a person (Battle 1996:99-100).

To say that somebody lacks Ubuntu is to say that such a person is unfaithful in social obligations, and is a self-centred person (Battle 1996:100). To say that a person has Ubuntu, is to indicate that such a person cares about the deepest needs of others and adheres to social obligations.

Tutu describes the African Weltanschauung, by saying that a person is not an independent solitary entity. A person is human when being enveloped in the community of other human beings. To be is to participate (Battle 1996:100). For Tutu, Ubuntu is the environment of vulnerability. It is a set of relationships where people are able to recognise that their humanity is bound up in the other's humanity (Battle 1996:103). Mbiti points out that what happens to the individual, happens to the whole group (Richardson 1996:137). The individual becomes aware of his own being in terms of other people.

Through a theological Ubuntu the Christian concedes to the need to be transformed into a new identity, ruled by the principle of grace (God does not love us because we are lovable, but we are lovable because God loves us. God's love gives us our worth). In such a system we are liberated from the desire to achieve and impress (Battle 1996:105). It is only in each particular community that character formation and moral development can take place (Richardson 1996:138).

What can a modern Christianity learn from the Ubuntu theology? Deep roots are to be uncovered in the Christian heritage, namely the "corporate identity and personality" of the people of God in the Old Testament, the intense unity Jesus prayed His disciples would know, and the life in the body as envisioned by Paul (Richardson 1996:138). African communality includes mutual caring and sharing, and this Ubuntu has the possibility of overthrowing systems of acquisitiveness and greed so evident in Western life (Richardson 1996:139).

Underlying Ubuntu is a holism that is foreign to dualistic Western thinking. African tradition does not distinguish between the material and the spiritual. That is why the African notion of goodness necessarily involves sharing. Ownership of material things can never be exclusive. In the possession of material goods lies the obligation to see that others who lack such goods are cared for. In this sense African tradition once again reminds us of Christian essentials. African traditional caring is also not limited to the same group, but includes the stranger. Today, this rings out a sharp challenge to the Church and individual Christians in the rainbow nation (Richardson 1996:140).

Louis Jonker proposes that we in Africa should consider a "communal" approach in our interpretation of the Bible (and the OT in particular) (Jonker 2001:77).

He goes on to agree with the aspects identified by Ukpong as common to all African world-views and that belong to the root paradigm of African cultures. One of these aspects is the sense of community, which Ukpong describes as

*...The life of the individual human person and also even of inanimate objects in the cosmos finds meaning and explanation in terms of the structure of relationships within the human community, and between the human community and nature...The individual defines his/her identity by the community to which he/she belongs..(Ukpong in Jonker 2001:78).*

In the spirit of this sense of "community" is where Jonker suggests that a "communal" approach should be considered in African Biblical interpretation, and in order to preclude our developing tendencies towards exclusivism (Jonker 2001:78).

An African hermeneutics is rather a hermeneutical stance according to which and in the service of which a whole variety of exegetical methods or tools are used. An African hermeneutic is comparable to feminist or liberationist hermeneutic (Jonker 2001:78).

David Tracy distinguished between the three publics, namely the academy, the Church and the society at large. When one advocated for an African hermeneutic, the question should be asked on what level does this hermeneutical discourse take place (Jonker 2001:79). A communal approach provides the opportunity of discovering how the hermeneutical and exegetical contributions from our own contexts enrich the communion of Biblical interpretation (Jonker 2001:79)

Where does this theology find soil to grow? In smaller groups of people who meet to study the Bible and enjoy fellowship. In this regard, a few points should be kept in mind when doing group work.

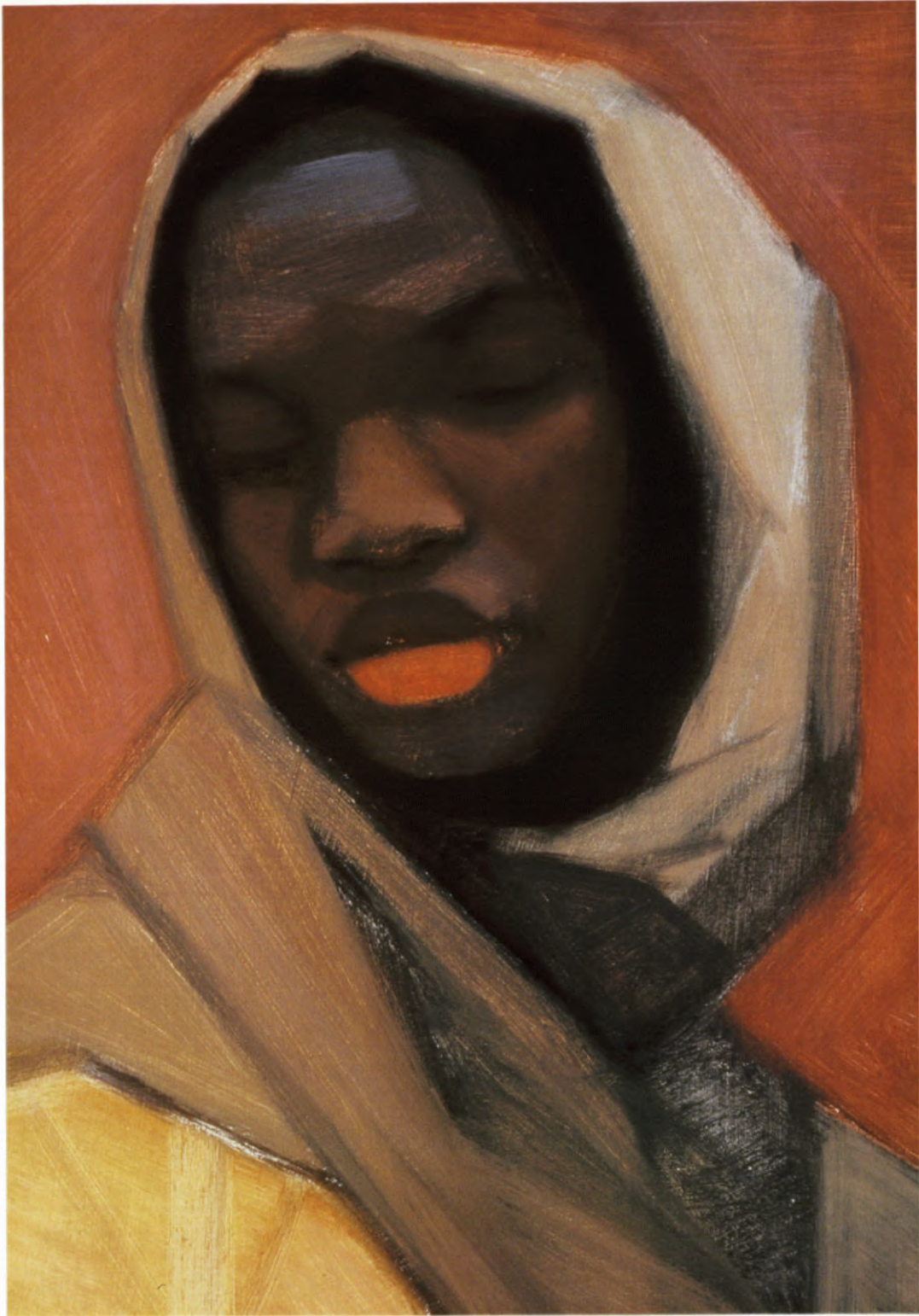
#### **7.14. GROUP WORK**

Experience in South Africa, as well as in similar contexts like Brazil, has demonstrated two potential problems which constantly recur when Biblical scholars participate in Bible reading with local communities of the poor and marginalized: Biblical scholars either romanticize and idealize the contribution of the poor and marginalized or they minimize and rationalize that community's contribution. Both an uncritical "listening to" and an arrogant "speaking for" must be problematized (West 1999:37).

Mestes describes the danger when a learned expert joins a group of "common people studying the texts". This teacher may once again expropriate the gains won by the people in their study. The result is that they once again grow silent and dependent on the presence of the expert (Mestes 1993:9).

The method of the expert is logical, with a reasoning process and a careful line of argument. It is "scientific". But when the people get together to study the Bible and interpret it, they do not proceed by logical reasoning but by the association of ideas. One person says one thing, and another says another. Experts tend to think of this method as having little value, but it is just as scientific as the acknowledged scientific approach. This is, for instance, the same method used by psychoanalysts. This method of free association is, according to Mestes, even better than the "logical" method. Whereas the logical method is a method for teaching information, the free association method helps people discover things for themselves (Mestes 1993:9).

West indicates that, within liberation theologies, the role of the intellectual is crucial in "breaking the culture of silence" — in enabling a language and a speaking (West 1999:40). It seems that this role is necessary, but should show a tight self-aware self-control. Meddling with people's faith is a serious business. You must have deep respect and a delicate touch, try to feel as they would and intuit their possible reaction to what you are going to say. The people should be allowed to grow from



**THE EYES OF THE HEART**  
JANET MCKENZIE

the soil of their own faith and their own character, and should not be dragged along by aggressive questions (Mestes 1993:10).

People do not always take things literally, and are far smarter than an expert gives them credit for. The questions of experts must take into account more and more that ordinary people understand history in a certain way, and that they are far more capable of understanding symbols than given credit for (Mestes 1993:13).

Werner Kahl uses the terms of "critical" and "intuitive" *interpreters*. Many Christians in Africa are not able to read the Bible, and they listen to tales that become well-known to them. It is by intuition that many of these interpreters arrive at, what seems to them, obvious interpretations. West calls these people "ordinary readers". He uses the term "readers" in inverted commas to signal that the term includes the many who are illiterate, but who listen to, retell and remake the Bible (West 1999:10). They derive meaning from the Bible with the understanding that God directs their mind spiritually to a proper appropriation of a passage within a given life situation. Spiritual insight is a prerequisite to understanding the Word of God, and the Bible is definitely revered as the Word of God — it is Holy Scripture. The view is that God as Spirit talks directly to them when reading Scripture. The meaning-generating process involves Scripture, the spiritual direction of God, and the preparedness of the interpreters to carefully listen to the Divine voice. African Bible studies are commonly framed by songs and prayers, which have the function of inviting the Spirit of God into the midst of the group. In this way intuitive interpreters have a direct access to the Bible. They easily identify with the narrative addressees of Biblical speakers such as Moses, Jesus or Paul (Kahl 2007:148).

Academically trained theologians on the other hand, are expected to be critical readers of the Bible, which they are not supposed to interpret as the Word of God. Theologians should firstly employ literary and historical tools of analysis that allow for an understanding of a given Biblical text within the parameters of its original setting. They should secondly be able to reflect on their own life-contexts, intentions, preunderstandings, and methods employed for analysis (Kahl 2007:149).

It should also be kept in mind that in a group of people, emphasis is not placed on a text's meaning itself, but rather on the meaning the text has for the readers. At the start of a group, people tend to draw any meaning from the text, but they gradually in the course of life develop an interest in the intrinsic meaning of the text. At this point

they can greatly benefit from a study of Biblical history. Still, they are motivated by better grounding the meaning of the text *for themselves*. In such a framework scientific exegesis can claim its proper role and function and place itself in the service of the Biblical text's meaning *for us* (Mestes 1993:14).

*Finally, the common people are putting the Bible in its proper place, the place where God intended it to be. They are putting it in second place. Life takes first place! In so doing, the people are showing us the enormous importance of the Bible and, at the same time, its relative value — relative to life* (Mestes 1993:15).

Kahl writes that what is needed is a community of intuitive and critical interpreters both of whom understand and appreciate that they come to the Biblical texts from different perspectives that are equally valid. Academic readers should be challenged by their conversations with peripheral readers, while intuitive interpretations should likewise be challenged (Kahl 2007:154). West says that we can only move beyond “speaking for” and “listening to” if we are willing to enter into a “speaking with”. This requires that socially engaged Biblical scholars remain constantly alert to, and interrogative of, the own positionality and that of the discourse partners, so as to ensure that the mediating process of representation remains visible (West 1999:52-53).

For a Biblical interpretation to become meaningful within a particular community of interpreters, it needs to be both culturally plausible and relevant in a given life context or situation. Those theologians who do not share the same conceptualization of reality and the life conditions of a group of intuitive interpreters of the Bible should by all means refrain from applying a textual meaning to the situation of their partners. The responsibility and ability to do so lie solely with the intuitive interpreters (Kahl 2007:154).

David Lochhead indicates that a statement like “God identifies himself with the oppressed” is not at issue. What rather is at issue, is the *praxis* which is associated with this kind of affirmation (Lochhead 1993:130).

Instead of seeing faith as a matter of belief or feeling, faith should be seen as *praxis*. Faith, in relation to Scripture, is the commitment to listen to Scripture and to act on the word that is heard. Faith is presupposed in any genuine *applicatio* (Lochhead 1993:139).



An important prerequisite for group interaction is given by David Lochhead: A liberating and liberated reading of the Bible must, at the level of *explicatio* fulfil two conditions:

1. The method must be available to groups of ordinary people who wish to listen to the Bible as a part of their reflection on the reality in which they live and on their own relationship to that reality.
2. The group must be free and able to distinguish the perspective of the group from the perspective of the text (Lochhead 1993:132-133).

There is a growing insistence, particularly in the Third World, that interpretation should produce "practical" relevant results. The second insistence is that the situation of the reader functions as a co-determinant in the communication process (West 1991:43). Inseparable from the material and ideological conditions of the text are the material and ideological conditions of the reader. The ideological commitment of the reader stems from the class circumstances of such a reader, and has immense hermeneutical significance. Biblical hermeneutics of liberation is tied up with the political commitments of the reader. This means that all people dealing with the Bible should be aware that, not only is the Bible itself a product of class struggles, but it is also a site of the same struggles acted out by the modern-day oppressor and oppressed in our current society as they themselves read the Bible (West 1991:53-54).

A reading of the Bible as single text makes it more accessible to the poor and oppressed. This is also the way they *do* read the Bible. When the people approach the Bible without the mediations of the experts, the reading is one of unsuspected fecundity. Croatto's entire hermeneutic is an answer to the question of what happens when people read the Bible in a liberation process, or any other situation where people in a community is the subject both of history and of its own reading of the Bible (West 1991:137).

Barr indicates that there is a readiness in the Church to hear the Scripture as Word of God for today (West 1991:145).

There is no typical "ordinary reader". Ordinary readers are people who read the Bible pre-critically, but who are specifically poor and marginalized. Ordinary readers also include residual and grassroots groups (often illiterate according to Jonathan Draper)

(Anum 2007:8). Ordinary reader's modes of reading differ substantially from that of the trained reader. Something fundamentally different is going on in the modes of the ordinary reader. The majority of ordinary readers read the Bible pre-critically, by which is meant that this reader has no choice in how they read the Bible. They read it pre-critically because they have not been trained in critical methods. Almost all ordinary readers read the Bible pre-critically, while all trained readers read the Bible critically or even post-critically (West 1991:161). The ordinary reader may be politicized or conscientized and so have a general critical consciousness towards society and texts, but they do not have the historical and sociological tools to be critical of the Biblical text in the same way as Mosala, Gottwald, and Schüssler Fiorenza (West 1991:162). Ordinary readers are identified as the real subjective readers who read the text directly from his/her social context or location while the scholarly reader is identified as the one who stands back and acts as an objective critic (Anum 2007:9). Scholarly readers are furthermore typified as Western educated, middle-class persons, and as academic, literate and textual readers (Anum 2007:9). A last characterization is that the scholarly reader is identified as an objective/critical reader, and is normally a facilitator or enabler to ordinary readers (Anum 2007:10).

Riches argues that both ordinary and scholarly readers belong to a "community of readers" (Anum 2007:11)

The group leader should tread softly on sacred ground. People may be open to change, but one may not just charge ahead heedlessly. In such cases, signs should go up that say: Proceed with caution. The reason for this is that what is seldom recognised is that a change in practice and ritual carries with it the loss of the whole world of meaning (Richardson 1996:132).

Is there an example of smaller groups bringing about religious change?

Among Catholics in many parts of Latin America and the US where Hispanics are in great number, a grassroots movement of renewal is transforming the Church. This movement is the creation of basic ecclesial communities, or in Spanish *comunidades eclesiales de base* (hereafter CEB). Members of CEB's gather together to support one another in their growth in faith and their work for liberation from poverty and oppression. These communities are "basic" in a sociological sense: they are comprised of people in the *barrio*, where life is lived by families, most of which are at the bottom of the economic pyramid. They are "ecclesial" in a deeply theological

sense: they are communities that embody the notion of the Church as a "people of God" that takes nourishment from God's Word and puts its faith into action. CEB's are not merely subdivisions of parishes, but a new way of people being Church. There are thousands of CEB's throughout Latin America (Clifford 2001:164-165).

CEB's are broadly modelled after the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Freire's pedagogy called for teaching adults literacy skills while also raising political awareness. CEB members meet regularly, even weekly. The meetings do not follow a rigid structure, but are likely to include a welcome, hymn singing, prayer, and reflection on people's everyday lives in the light of Bible readings. Meetings often end with more singing and sharing of food and drink. The leaders typically teach literary skills with Christian ideas and political analysis woven into the lessons. This combination often leads the members of CEB's to work together to improve their living conditions or to give some service to people in need in their neighbourhoods (Clifford 2001:165).

Jean Gallo pointed out that lay leaders, many of whom are women, are the key to the continuity and dynamism of CEB's. CEB's are communities whose purpose includes action/ praxis. This praxis can take various forms:

In the religious domain it is catechesis, Bible study or planning a prayer week.

In the social arena it may be improvements to the neighbourhood, collective works, teaching the illiterate to read, doing political and legal education, creating and strengthening trade unions, or participating in political activities (Clifford 2001:165).

María Pilar Aquino describes the role of women in the CEB's when she says that although women have always done the majority of parish work, they were often not visible. Women in CEB's are slowly losing their anonymity and becoming "church-makers", making the Church's mission present in their own way as women. They are proclaiming the gospel, giving witness, leading celebrations, and engaging in action to transform their neighbourhoods and to forge unity through bridge building (Clifford 2001:165).

The CEB's give their members ways of living their Christian faith as communities of purpose. Many women have experienced these communities as places of welcome and affirmation where they are for the first time emerging as actors in the Church. The high level of participation in CEB's is astounding due to the fact that collaboration has replaced the centralization of authority in the clergy. The emphasis

on collaboration is likely due to the large participation of women in leadership in the CEB's (Clifford 2001:166).

In other places in North America, smaller groups also integrate religious feminism with ecofeminism. How is the sacredness of creation reclaimed in our own time? Ecofeminism provides a distinctively feminist response that calls for a conception of feminism that explicitly takes seriously the subjugation of women and the domination of nature by patriarchal male systems to the advantage of white, upper- and middle-class males (Clifford 2001:222).

Grassroots movements are very important in ecofeminism. Ecofeminists believe that they must transform human consciousness and the ways that people envision and relate to reality. Attention must be given to the thought patterns and language that people use to interpret reality and their place in it. The potential destructiveness of thinking should not go unchallenged (Clifford 2001:229).

What are the questions we need to address in our groups, which will help to create awareness and suspicion? Fiorenza lists the following:

#### QUESTIONS EVERY PERSON SHOULD ASK THEMSELVES AS READERS

1. What are your unreflected presuppositions?
  - What does your worldview, belief systems, experience, and unconscious assumptions entail?
  - Describe power relations, status differences, and ideologies in your community.
  - What are your values, prejudices, and emotions?
  - State your convictions, beliefs, goals and dreams
2. Study your intellectual frameworks and models
  - Understandings of scholarship, scientific investigation, interpretation, history, theology
  - Anthropological understanding, social theory, understanding of reality
  - Theory of language, representation, interdisciplinary reasoning
  - Understanding of objectivity, critique, hermeneutics, ethics
3. Values, Goals and Visions
  - Interpretation for whom and in which context

- Whose history: the history of men, wo/men, hierarchy, orthodoxy, or marginal groups?
- Which and whose perspectives and interests are taken for granted, are seen as important and are rejected?
- What and who is marginalized, trivialized, not mentioned?
- Which claims to universal truth and validity are made for a particular interpretation?
- Who has the power to authorize interpretations? How is this accomplished rhetorically?
- What appeals to authority are made and which ideals, utopias, and visions are appealed to?

(Taken from Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:199-200).

From the results listed in chapter 6 I find the above to be questions a group of lay believers are unable to answer without a facilitator, or not before quite a bit of study has been done in order to introduce feminist concepts and develop awareness.

Anne Bennet also has a list of questions she uses in group work. Her starting point seems to be the Name of God, and then the group proceeds from there.

In her groups, the understanding of God is based on God's name. We know that God is beyond human description (ineffable). We also admit that human thought is limited to human personal terms and experiences. The Hebrews did not use God's name (El, Elohim, Yahweh), for it was deemed irreverent. They drew from their historical experiences and culture to express God as Shepherd, King, Lord, Father, Judge, Ruler, Almighty, Everlasting, Omnipotent, Omniscient (Bennett 1989:50).

What images come to your mind when you hear words like Shepherd, King, Lord, Father, Judge, Ruler, Almighty?

Why do we think of God in terms like this? Does this language about God do something different to men than women, since men are more often fathers, shepherds, kings, lords, judges and rulers than women? How would you name human creatures if you were to name them? Is your naming partial, or is it inclusive of all women and all men? Is your naming a symbolic naming that draws meaning from a past event or figure? How would you name God? Is the naming you think of limiting? How is the naming related to your own experience? What images, what relationships, does the naming you choose call forth? (Bennett 1989:50-51).

The above reflecting is an illustration of the way of working, the process women engage in as they deal with theological issues. Women reflect and share, reflect and share. This flows into questioning-sharing for weeks, months, years, and not just an hour (Bennett 1989:51).

Is there a local example where group work is successfully done with the aim towards liberation? I myself have worked with a group of women like myself: Afrikaans, middle-class, white, ranging in age from 25-55. For this reason I cannot say too much from own experience about the way in which black women utilize the text in their contexts. For this, I refer to the work of Gerald West, who writes on the praxis of contextual Bible study and makes the claim that this is indeed liberating for the people involved. Contextual Bible study takes place within the framework of liberation hermeneutics. The framework of commitments that encompasses contextual Bible study include:

- 1) A commitment to begin the reading process from the experienced reality of the organized poor and marginalized, including their language, categories, concepts, needs, questions, interests and resources.
- 2) A commitment to read the Bible communally "with" each other, where power relations are acknowledged and equalized as far as possible.
- 3) A commitment to read the Bible critically, using whatever critical resources are available, including local critical resources and the critical resources of Biblical scholarship.
- 4) A commitment to social transformation through the Bible reading process (West 1999:25-26).

His groups seem to consist of mainly black women, although a lot of black men also participate. What typically happens, is that the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) is contacted/approached by a particular group to participate with them in Bible study or theological reflection (West 2001:172). The Bible studies are normally conducted during seven workshops with people from a number of different contexts, the majority of whom are from poor and marginalized communities. A common feature of all workshops is that most of the participants are politically conscientized. For each of the groups the Bible is a significant text and Bible study a serious religious experience (West 1999:26).

Once the organized group has ownership of their project, the ISB joins them in a workshop. Usually, the workshop is based on a theme or issue that is of vital concern to the group, like, for example, violence against women (West 2001:172).

He names the Ujamaa Centre, a community development and research centre within the School of Religion and Theology in the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This centre began with work on the text of 2 Samuel 13 as early as 1996 as part of its work with local communities of the poor, working-class and marginalized. The Ujamaa Centre brings together socially engaged Biblical scholars and theologians with ordinary readers of the Bible, be they literate or not (West 2004:36).

West describes contextual Bible study as an essentially communal process in which local community resources for interpreting the Bible and the specialized interpretive tools of Biblical scholars are used together to "read" the Bible. He places "read" in inverted commas because ordinary interpreters of the Bible differ in degrees of literacy and because literacy is not required of every participant (West 2001:173).

Doing Bible study in a way that equalises the power relations between academic and ordinary Bible readers is central to the praxis of the Ujamaa Centre (this is contextual Bible study). Contextual Bible study has a commitment to begin with an understanding of reality as it is perceived and experienced by poor, working-class, and marginalised sectors. It furthermore has a commitment to read the Biblical text corporately and critically, as well as a commitment to plan together for particular acts of social transformation. Within this framework, familiar Biblical texts are read in unfamiliar ways, and unfamiliar texts, especially the neglected ones, are highlighted (West 2004:37).

The primary function of the socially engaged Biblical scholar (I call this person a facilitator/theologian) is to conscientize the people, and "break the culture of silence" in order to enable them to create their own language. Writing on work amongst Black Africans in the South African context, West states that he has been forced to acknowledge that the poor and marginalized do indeed speak, that they are not silent even though they may appear so. Their apparent subservience and silence is precisely this, an appearance. Behind the mask of compliance are many finely crafted "arts of resistance" (West 2001:174). Subversive acts like poaching and pilfering and deconstructing discourses like trickster tales and satiric stories are a constant reminder that all is not as controlled as it appears. The poor and

marginalized are not as constrained at the level of thought as we might have imagined, though in situations of strong surveillance and domination they are often severely constrained at the level of action (West 2001:175).

The socially engaged Biblical scholar (facilitator/theologian) is called to read the Bible with them, but not because they need to be conscientized and given interpretations relevant to their context. No, socially engaged Biblical scholars are called to collaborate with them because they bring with them additional interpretative resources which may be of use to the community group (West 2001:175). West states that the communities he works with are eager to have socially engaged scholars work with them, but that they are not really interested in conversing with the academy. When West asked them if they would like to read what Biblical scholars wrote about collaborative work, the group expressed polite interest but eventually declined to actually read any of the essays (West 2007:3).

West writes that, because black Africans were confronted, converted and catechized with particular parts and particular interpretations of Bible, it is these that have constituted the raw material of their interpretative and appropriative acts. The resources of socially engaged Biblical scholars and theologians open up, through the contextual Bible study process, additional parts of and perspectives on the Bible. Neglected and forgotten texts become available; those parts of the canon ignored by the missionaries and colonialists are now read; alternative forms of access to the very edges of the tradition are found; and the received readings of well worn texts are disrupted and deconstructed. The plurality in interpretative perspectives that constitute Biblical studies today open up and offer unexpected places of connection with the Biblical tradition. In short, our additional reading strategies and tools provide increased capacities for interpretation and appropriation (West 2001:178). Within this activity, the Biblical scholar needs a "conversion from below". West uses the term "conversion" to indicate that being of use to others is not easy. Offering the self and the own resources can be costly, and choosing collaboration instead of conversation can be painful. Overall, the Biblical scholar may experience the control not being in his/her hands, but in the hands of the group (West 1999:55).

West notices a readiness with which ordinary Black African "readers" have embraced the otherness of the resources offered by the scholar, and to him this shows the openness of these readers to the critical resources. Contextual Bible study is committed to a critical reading of the Bible, and to this, the audience is open. The way in which black African readers have taken up these critical resources



demonstrates that they have not abandoned the array of interpretative resources they already possess (West 2001:179). It must also be noted that not only scholars re-use Biblical sources as resources. Although they do it differently, ordinary readers of the Bible use Biblical sources regularly to construct the "working" readings and theologies that they live by. This process of re-using received sources is also a part of the Biblical tradition itself (West 1999:75-76).

West gives an illustration of the method used in his groups:

Increasingly the ISB has been invited to participate in workshops organized by women's groups on the theme of violence against women (West 2001:180). West indicates that they work with the *organized poor*, which means that they work with groups who are internally structured and have a clear sense of identity. They only work with groups that can "talk back" (West 1999:108-109).

In workshops with this theme they usually work with 2 Samuel 13.1-22. The text is read aloud to the group as a whole, and a series of questions then follow:

1. Read 2 Samuel 13.1-22 together again in small groups. Share with each other what you think the text is about.
2. Who are the main characters in this story and what do we know about them?
3. What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?
4. How does Tamar respond throughout the story?
5. Are there any women like Tamar in your Church and/or community? Tell their story.
6. What is the theology of women who have been raped?
7. What resources are there in your area for survivors of rape?
8. What will you do now in response to this Bible study? (West 2001:180-181).

After each question, the groups discuss the questions and give feedback, which can be written down on a white board or any medium that enables all to see the answers and discuss it. Creativity is encouraged, with feedback ranging from verbal feedback to song, dance, pictures etc.

West describes the effects of this Bible study to be substantial. Women are amazed that such texts exist, are angry that they have never heard it read or preached, are relieved to discover they are not alone, and are empowered because the silence is broken and their stories have been told. The above method shows a detailed contextual Bible study process. The study begins and ends with what can be called "community consciousness" questions. Questions 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8 draw up on the

readings and resources of the local community group. By using small groups and writing up all responses the contributions of all participants are affirmed. Habitually, responses to question 1 elicit the public transcript; participants offer interpretations they have received and which they feel are safe to proclaim publicly. They know what they are expected to believe about the Bible. However, there are usually some responses which are more ambiguous and which potentially provide space for more authentic interpretations — interpretations that articulate something of their “working” theologies. If the group becomes a safe place, if there are resources to articulate what is often incipient and inchoate, and if there are resonances with others in the group, then gradually elements of “working”, “lived” faith may be more overtly and vigorously voiced and owned (West 2001:181-182; 1999:124-142).

These questions are the contribution of the socially engaged Biblical scholar (facilitator/theologian), and provide resources for repeated returns to the text and more careful and close reading (West 2001:182). West admits that in many instances ordinary “readers” want access to resources that are only available to the “trained” reader (West 2001:182;1999:124-142).

According to West, literary type questions almost always lead into socio-historical type questions, and this is important since it indicates the need ordinary readers have to locate faith in real concrete contexts. But by beginning with literary-type questions and by allowing socio-historical-type questions to emerge from the participants, the powerful presence of the Biblical scholar is held in check (West 2001:182-183;1999:124-142).

Critical consciousness questions facilitate a more careful and close reading of the text than is usually the case among ordinary “readers” (West 2001:183).

The concluding community consciousness questions (5, 6, 7, and 8) ground the Bible study firmly in the life of the participants. In responding to these questions, community consciousness and critical consciousness fuse and fashion faith interpretations that make sense and which are an expression of the “lived”, “working” theologies of ordinary believers (West 2001:183;1999:124-142). The scholar also plays a role in this process. The role of the Biblical scholar is to trace lines of connection between Biblical texts and between Biblical texts and other ancient texts; they also trace lines of connection between Biblical texts and the worlds that produced them. Socially engaged Biblical scholars go further by overtly tracing lines

of connection between Biblical texts and contexts and the texts and contexts of present communities of the poor and marginalized (West 1999:77). Whether or how these incipient and inchoate faith interpretations are articulated depends on how safe the contextual Bible study process is. In safe places women who have been touched by Tamar tell their stories, help and hold the pain of their sisters, and plan for the transformation of their Churches and communities. Unfortunately, not all Bible study groups are safe, and so women may remain silent, waiting still. But the potential is there, implicit within the contextual Bible study process for the articulation, owning, and acting out of those interpretations and theologies that ordinary "readers" of the Bible live by (West 2001:183;1999:124-142).

*The readiness, in my experience, with which ordinary African "readers" have embraced the otherness of our resources demonstrates their openness to critical resources. However, the way in which ordinary African "readers" have taken up these critical resources demonstrates that they have not abandoned the array of interpretative resources they already possess. On receiving critical resources African "readers" do not become purists who pursue particular interpretative perspectives. They do not; they do not because they read for purposes other than the production of academic papers — they "read" for survival, liberation and life. Our offerings as socially engaged Biblical scholars may make a contribution to their struggle for survival, liberation and life, but our contributions too will be "re-membered" — whether we approve or not (West 1999:114).*

The contextual Bible study always begins with reality as it is perceived by poor and marginalized participants. Because critical modes of reading tend to create some distance between readers and the text they come second and serve whatever resources and readings are already present. However, the often urgent demands of the context usually holds forms of engagement and forms of critical distance together in a creative dialectic; the tentative testing and articulating of "working" readings seems to require the use of both local community resources for reading and critical modes of reading (West 1999:135).

What about the group member who sits quietly throughout the whole Bible study? In his 2004 article, West writes about a woman in a study group who made no contribution. The facilitator cautiously and respectfully probed the silence of this participant, and her reply was: *Unfundisi (minister), what does it help if I say what I feel and what I experience? You get in your car and go back to your manse (church home) but I stay here behind and starve to death and you are nowhere to be found.* This woman was

starkly stating that in contexts such as this, for women like herself, there was still not enough safety to tell their stories. Telling her story would indeed mean for her to be cast out from her family and the community resources, resulting in starvation (West 2004:41).

I referred to the work of Gerald West above, and was surprised at some of the results he listed. At this point I think one must pause and consider some of his results in dialogue with the results gleaned from my own group work and that of Janet Sprong. West seems to indicate that, by using contextual Bible study, the work of feminist theology is easily made accessible to the (lay) audience and that their reaction shows an eagerness to adapt feminist theology into their spirituality. What do we have in common as far as our results go, and where do we differ?

1. West indicates that his organisation is contacted by groups who want to expand their Bible study experience. In the case of myself and Janet Sprong, we recruited volunteers from our faith communities to partake in study. This is a case of: they did not come to us, we went to them. This in and of itself should already show a great difference: either West's audience is more eager to initiate voluntary Bible study, or his organisation (ISB) seems to be more neutral in commitment and thus more popular to contact, or his audience is already more advanced in theological thinking than others. He does state that his organization only works with groups who are able to "talk back". My own and Sprong's groups consisted of women we wanted to empower to do this eventually. They were not aware or able/willing to "talk back" at the start.
2. The people participating in West's groups are a mixed variety of literate abilities. The people attending our groups (my own and that of Janet Sprong) were all female, and all literate with at least a grade 12 level of schooling.
3. West indicates that the poor and marginalized have their own language and that they do speak. The people in my own group were not poor, but of average middle class background, and did not show a specific political or theological language vocabulary. They seemed to also need time to grow into (feminist) consciousness, emancipatory practice and a liberal God-view.
4. It is possible that my group and that of Sprong showed greater resistance to new images and thought patterns because their religious schooling might have been more intensely Calvinistic/Protestant. The more ingrained training is, the harder it is to get rid of or to alter it.

5. West indicated that the poor and marginalized have their own resources which they do not necessarily let go of once they are given new resources. This is the case in the white groups as well, with the added thought that it is possible that the resources of the white group, especially the doctrinal resources, might be more ingrained even. Chapter 6 offered more insight into the reasons why this should be so.
6. The black African audience is reported to have a readiness to accept the otherness of critical resources, which I did not find to be true of my own group, and which Janet Sprong also did not find in hers. Either Gerald West is dealing with a more advanced audience, or cultural, language and race differences seem to make a difference, or his audience is simply not eager to show their resistance to their facilitator.
7. From his writing one understands that West's audiences are open to a critical reading of the Bible. Though he never states the duration of a course (he mentions Bible studies that have been recorded over a period of six years in West 1999:143), and we are left in the dark about the length of time his audience has been exposed to their facilitator, each other and the material communicated, I find this remarkable. My own group was made up of learned people with no difficulty in communicating, and in all respects one could say they were more exposed to liberal views on life and religion, and yet they were resistant to the concept of dealing with the Bible in a critical way. Can it be true that a lesser learned audience can find this easier?
8. The black African audience does not necessarily abandon its old inherited interpretative frameworks and resources once they have learned or been introduced to new ones. This is something the groups have in common.
9. West writes about the feedback he gets from the smaller groups, and it sounds quite positive. I have found feedback in my own group to be more reserved. Sprong and her group met for a period of months and even she had to admit that people tended to give feedback they thought would be acceptable. Is his group very old and familiar with each other, their facilitator and the text?
10. He indicates that if a group is a safe place, and if resonance is found with other members, great spontaneity is achieved. This is probably true, but I have not found it to happen in a short period of exposure.
11. I have not found that the trained leader/facilitator/theologian can disappear. Sprong has also tried to incorporate a style where all members of the group share equally in leadership (circle style) but group members were not positive

in their participation. The women seemed to expect the leader/facilitator/theologian to take the lead, which they were willing to follow. My own members also had their opinions but were always more willing to follow my lead than take ownership for themselves. Can this be due to cultural considerations or can it be linked to the length of time spent together? Even West indicated that the group wants the input of the facilitator for whatever reason. The trained leader cannot just disappear.

12. The groups made up of white women were willing to discuss tenets of feminist theology and a critical evaluation of the text, but this was always shelved in a separate compartment of spirituality — one could say it was filed under “curiosities”. They found it interesting to consider, but did not integrate it into their lives or their spirituality or view of God and religion. West seems to show that his group were eager, willing and able to integrate learned textual criticism into their spirituality. This was not what we found. For the white women, it was a hard road and one not easily travelled. They did not find it easy to start questioning the old inherited traditions and interpretations, and admitted that it was often a painful process.

### 7.15. CONCLUSION

The need in religion and in especially religious study, is that practice and theory must be linked. Feminist theology is adamant that it be conceded, especially in the Church, that female (alternative) knowledge is equally valid knowledge. Feminism criticises malestream epistemology, but in its endeavour to be self-critical, it accedes that not all females are victims and not all males oppressors. Furthermore, victims of oppression can also victimise others.

A core realization is that society is patriarchal, and patriarchy springs from a dualistic world view. Simply integrating women into structures in the Church and society, does not solve the problem of patriarchy.

Feminist theology has three mainstream groups — Liberal, Radical and Postmodern, and incorporates other sciences, like Ecology and Justice. It is not a victim of Relativism, which holds that all opinions are equally valid. Feminism does not find Postmodernism *per se* to be constructive.

The ideal of Feminism remains the liberation of the oppressed. Liberation is individual, but also communal. Feminist theology affirms all women, while problematizing their diversities. Even Feminism falls prey to exclusivism, and must be continually criticised.

South Africa poses unique limitations and challenges to a study of Feminism. We do not read objectively, and we must become enlightened readers. Feminist theology wants to teach the reader to read against the grain/ideology of the text. It practices intertextuality, and does not hold the Bible or Theology as science to be objective. It is partisan and biased, yet strongly objective. In the Church, Feminist theology is faced with the danger of assimilation.

The exercises of hosting groups and introducing an audience to feminist theology, as has been proved in chapter 6, shows that feminism is not easy to accept for all people. In this work, I have tried to make intricate academic arguments more basic and understandable for the reader. My group work has shown me that this has not always been successful. My dream was to impart knowledge to all, not just the seasoned academic, and make the study field accessible and offer a guideline of teaching feminist theology.

The language of feminist theology has not always been understandable for the lay believer, and the role of a facilitator could not be skipped altogether. I wanted to also test the adaptability of the theology of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to/for a South African audience. We had to ask questions unique to our own context: What is the nature of power? Who has power in South Africa? Are women bereft of power? Do women want power? What does "power" mean to women? Are women oppressed in South Africa? What do they understand under this concept?

Feminist theology itself should always be criticised. Fiorenza does wonderful work in the field of feminist theology, but how acceptable is her theology to a non-Catholic audience? Women were open to her insights, but it seems that time plays a great role in making this theology something that the believer does naturally. For the Afrikaans, middle-class, white female believer, our inherited brand of pseudo-Calvinism is too deeply ingrained to be quickly discarded. Is Feminist theology itself at all accessible to a lay person? The answer is indeed yes, but this is a long road that is not walked for just a few weeks. How does the theology of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza open the text of the Bible to the audience? Women were

surprised to learn that they can be at all suspicious of the text, and this will need a lot more time to incorporate into the reading strategy. The traditional way of reading and understanding the text (the malestream way) is still too deeply ingrained.

If each brand of Feminism articulates its own meanings and focus points, must a special brand of Feminist theology be developed for the South African audience? I would say yes, and in this regard a great leap can be made by incorporating some of the tenets of Ubuntu theology and the methods of contextual Bible study as used by Gerald West. One is faced with the challenge, however, that Ubuntu is not something that comes naturally to the White believer with her/his individualistic background, while the Black African believer lives and breathes Ubuntu as a way of life.

The acceptability for using extra-Biblical texts was measured on the audience, and they proved to be resistant to the concept and practice. Once again, the background of Protestantism plays a big role and extra time is needed to educate believers more.

My own position is that feminist theology is as likely to fail its main ideals as any other theology. In as far as traditional theology has left the faith community with a history of misogyny amidst valuable theological insights, so does feminist theology show traces of elitism, exclusivity etc amidst its own valuable theological insights of the value of women and the equality of all people before God. From my personal dogmatic background, I am inclined to agree with the critique offered against feminist criticism by Byrne. It is a grave mistake to handle the religious arena in the same way as the political arena. Despite the feminist creed that the personal is political, the life of faith should be lived in a radically different dynamic — isn't that the point of being a Christian? Note that no mention of gender comes into play here at all. It is a miscalculation and oversimplification to merely assume that great faith traditions are in totality completely negative towards women and therefore deserve no further attention. Centuries of theological insight did at least focus on more than just the evilness of women, and the ground is rich for mining and retrieval of all positive traditions, while keeping hold of the critical perspective. It is also in my opinion quite possible to have a critical feminist perspective coloured with the insight that human beings are fallible, and so is their theology. This is true for all sides of the theological equation. Since humanity is fallible, it should be beneficial to be able to ascribe to an authority outside of human experience as the penultimate Good or Divine or Righteous. From my personal dogmatic background I would argue that such a



source is to be found in the Biblical text, and that it is quite possible to use this text in a critical manner as commentary on all issues of life.

In order to come full circle in the hermeneutic dance, I once more look back at the questions listed in chapter 1 and answer them from the context of looking back over this study with all its elements of theory and praxis. When I measure the piety of the lay believers I came into contact with during my focus group, and reading the work done by people such as Janet Sprong and Gerald West, I come to the conclusion that we still have far to go on the road towards feminist criticism and a liberative piety. Especially the "ordinary" white, Afrikaans, Middle-class woman (reader) seems to be stuck in the same place her foremothers found themselves during previous centuries. This woman has not progressed much, and the main reason for this is her lack of knowledge about her history (her forgetfulness). Nobody was interested in teaching her since her internalized guilt and oppression suited the patriarchal hierarchy of her religious as well as social institutions well. The time has come for this woman to awake spiritually, become self-aware, and take an active step towards the liberation of her mind, her religious life, her body and her overall social position. In the life of this believer, feminist theology does not even exist, and she is unaware of the possibilities it may have for her in her growth towards full human dignity. Another question pertained to the ability to read a text critically with all that entails. The focus group was able to grasp the idea of hidden aspects in the texts, and found these with pleasure when pointed out to them. The time it takes to create an aware reader was against us — it does not come overnight and it is not an easy road. Reading closely and critically proved to be a tiring, time-consuming exercise since it presupposes the ability and willingness to lay off all ingrained tendencies to read with the patriarchal grain of the text. The people in the group were accustomed to taking the road of no resistance, and found it to be difficult and taking a lot of effort to break away from this mind-frame. Fiorenza's reading strategy helps people to become self-aware, critical readers, but this, again, takes time to internalize and adopt into the reading ability since it does not come naturally at first. Believers were receptive to Fiorenza's hermeneutics, but were unwilling to question the authority of the Biblical text. This led to specific constraints as far as the results of critical reading were concerned. Even West states that his own audience, consisting of mostly Black South Africans (they seem to be primarily Zulu readers), saw the text as the Word of God. It is not impossible to teach the principles of a hermeneutics of suspicion to lay believers, but their ability to adopt it into their religious life takes time. This assimilation/internalization does not happen immediately. Some aspects of this

hermeneutics are painful and get rejected. A last question touched on the role of the facilitator (West calls this person the engaged Biblical scholar). It is not completely possible to stand back and become invisible. The role of the facilitator seems to be more needed in the white Afrikaans audience. It is possible that this is so because I specifically wanted to train the members to read with a hermeneutics of suspicion and teach them in the principles of a feminist theology. West does not expressly indicate that he does this. In this regard, a facilitator might prove more central.

Can feminist theologians reach women on other continents and in other circumstances, or is Feminist theology limited to the life of the specific theologian? I felt deeply touched by the work of some feminist theologians, especially the theologians from Africa. Some statements made my hair stand on end while others made me nod in agreement. The work of these people cannot be ignored, and once one starts to dialogue with them, this becomes a deeply challenging religious exercise.

In the end, the theological goal, dream and hope remain universal. Nelle Morton talks of a "whole theology" which is what we all want. "A whole theology" can come when all the people of the world speak freely out of their own experiences, can hear and be heard, can touch one another to heal and be healed. "A whole theology" thus is articulated by hearing one another to speech...to new creation (Morton in Njoroge 2002:47).

I have drawn up a list of questions accompanying each chapter. The idea is that these questions and their discussion can open up the process of critical thinking and problematizing. I have found the theory on its own to be insufficient to the first-time reader, and that a list of questions may help to get the thought processes into action. The following questions presuppose interaction with a group leader/facilitator who is more learned/experienced in feminist theology, and who can guide group thought into a direction of liberative and suspicious thinking. In this regard, I concede that these questions may not be as easy to answer as I had first hoped. However, as groups meet and people become more accustomed to the thinking processes of a hermeneutics of suspicion, these questions will prove to be easier to answer and discuss.

## 8. ADDENDUM

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION ACCOMPANYING EVERY CHAPTER

#### GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS TO CHAPTER 1

1. What are your views on what it means to speak and write in a scientific way?
2. Are your views in any way excluding the manner in which other people may be "scientific"?
3. What gender do you identify with the following:
  - Reason
  - Emotion
  - Logic
  - Body
  - Irrational
  - Understandable
  - Communicative
  - Strong
  - Loyal
  - Activist
  - Political
  - Spiritual
  - Theology
  - Jesus
  - God
  - Holy Spirit
  - Church
  - Pastor
  - Priest
  - Minister
  - Government
  - Ruler
  - Evil
  - Sinister
  - Mystical
4. Theorise about the harm that Feminist Standpoint Theory can do in society and in our view of Self (male and female).
5. Name three women that you know well. In what way do they differ on religious conviction, cultural mannerisms, ways of communicating, expressiveness and conservatism?
6. Name three ways in which your local Church shows its concern for women, children, elderly, and oppressed people.
7. In what ways was the early Church a departure from the religious practices of the day?

8. Do you feel comfortable when you differ from authoritative bodies on certain issues?
9. When you read something, do you believe it to be true just because it is printed and you read it? Can you name one case where you have questioned what you read in the recent past?
10. Name three factors that may influence the way you write an essay at any given time.
11. Is truth and meaning the same thing? Discuss.
12. How do you feel about the statement that the Bible authors had ideas, ideologies and agendas, and wrote that into the Bible?
13. Thinking of the early Church, can you find a few differences with your current Church?
14. What two main focus points did feminism bring to science?
15. How does feminist theology view  
Relativism  
Objectivity and  
Subjectivity?
16. Looking at Sandra Harding's work, where would you have placed your own view of knowledge up to now?
17. Discuss what the humility in feminist theology might mean to the growth of the Church's intellectual work.
18. Thinking back on your education, have the sciences you have been taught ever merged at some points? Was one ever brought to bear on the other?
19. Identify three areas where women are oppressed in your culture. Does this also have an effect on how the earth is handled?
20. Discuss how these ecological principles can subvert hierarchy, capitalism and the exploitation of the ecology.
21. How can God's command to rule/care for the earth be practiced in your community? Give three examples.
22. What links with other sciences can help the ecology?
23. How sensitive is your community to eco-justice / ecojustice? Is this principle practised?
24. Can you identify ways in which the earth is mistreated in your community? How can Scripture lead people to love the earth in these circumstances?
25. Discuss various ways in which your local Church can sensitise believers to nature and our responsibility towards it.

26. Make a list of five marginalised / oppressed groups. What do they have in common and how do they differ?
27. Is the feminist movement the answer to all women's problems? Name three areas that are problematic.
28. What is the greatest danger facing feminist theology in the Church itself?
29. Thinking of yourself, do you find it more comfortable just discussing a topic rather than actually having to change your life because of it?
30. What topic do you heatedly advocate, while it does not change / touch / affect your own life (e.g. AIDS, alms, tithing etc.)?
31. Compare today's paper, your favourite magazine and favourite book. How do they differ with regards to circumstances in which they arose, writing style, ideology of the text and durability of the message?
32. Have you always been sure of the meaning of a Bible text, only to find out that an alternative reading is possible? What text was this and how did this alternative knowledge affect you?
33. What assumptions underlie the way you read the Bible? Touch items like structure, order, meaning, essence and autonomy.

## **GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS TO CHAPTER 2**

1. Discuss the past of your own family. Were they rich or poor, what work did the women do, how many children did they have, did they go to school and until what age, (what) did they study afterwards, and what became of them. Identify the different histories between the men and the women in the family.
2. How, would you say, can women overcome the problem of their invisibility in history? How can you help to rectify the situation of women's invisibility in history?
3. Why would you say it is significantly important to know what the people who make up your past, achieved and did?
4. Can you identify modern attitudes in your Church that handle women and men differently? How about perceptions about infidelity, infertility, work importance, etc? Are men and women completely equal in the eyes of your Church and community?
5. How can your Church address the difference in religious roles for men and women? How can women be drawn into executive Church roles, and how can men be sensitized to the dichotomy of religious roles in the past and present?
6. How would you incorporate a more pronounced feminine presence into corporate worship (Church services) and private religion (personal Bible study)?
7. How can you claim the actions of Jesus to justify a more female-friendly religious environment?

8. What does your Church do to support single mothers, raped women, HIV positive women, workless women, elderly women, ill women, lonely women, career women etc?
9. Identify various cultural differences between Africans and Westerners in South Africa which affect women greatly. Do these issues also affect men, and if so, in what way?
10. Problematize the challenges surrounding translation of the Bible for cultures who do not have a view of the divine as totally separate from creation.
11. How can you make a difference to the current situation of violence in various forms? Can you also identify types of violence that have not been discussed (eg violence to the earth)?
12. How can you impart a hermeneutics of suspicion to others in your community?
13. What can be done to make the South African economy more appreciative of women and their economic produce?
14. How can the unrecognized economic input of women be valued, and how would you raise the status of this type of work?
15. Discuss the past of your own family. Were they rich or poor, what work did the women do, how many children did they have, did they go to school and until what age, (what) did they study afterwards, and what became of them. Identify the different histories between the men and the women in the family.
16. How, would you say, can women overcome the problem of their invisibility in history? How can you help to rectify the situation of women's invisibility in history?
17. Why would you say it is significantly important to know what the people who make up your past, achieved and did?
18. Can you identify modern attitudes in your Church that handle women and men differently? How about perceptions about infidelity, infertility, work importance, etc? Are men and women completely equal in the eyes of your Church and community?
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24. Problematize the challenges surrounding translation of the Bible for cultures who do not have a view of the divine as totally separate from creation.
25. How can you make a difference to the current situation of violence in various forms? Can you also identify types of violence that have not been discussed (eg violence to the earth)?
26. How can you impart a hermeneutics of suspicion to others in your community?
27. What can be done to make the South African economy more appreciative of women and their economic produce?
28. How can the unrecognized economic input of women be valued, and how would you raise the status of this type of work?
29. To which of the understandings of Church presented do you find yourself drawn? If none are attractive to you, why is that the case?
  - a) The Church is the gathered *fellowship of believers, the people of God*.
  - b) The Church is a *sacramental mystery* of God's abiding presence in the world.
  - c) The Church is the *prophetic voice* challenging societal injustice.
  - d) The Church is the *visible, hierarchically structured institution* embodying an apostolic succession that can be traced back to Peter and the other apostles.
  - e) The Church is the *invisible presence of the reign of God* within the heart of the individual believer (Clifford 2001:175-176).
30. What is the status of women within your own Church? In what areas are women allowed decision-making powers? Are women serving on committees in the Church where they wield influence, or are they there in a supportive role? Do women in your Church have authority and influence, or is your Church mainly run by and steered towards male principles?
31. Is the main body of believers in your Church made up by women, and, if so, in what age group do they fall? Would you say that a breakdown of your faith community would show most women to be single mothers? If that is not the case, identify the breakdown of figures in your Church according to lines of children, adults male and female over 18, and couples married, people divorced and of what sex.
32. Does your Church offer any program specifically tailored towards the needs of women in the Church? Could you identify a specifically female need that a Christian woman may have? Does your Church offer any program that could be identified, however loosely, as a female community coming together to share herstory? If not, how could you facilitate the creation of such an internal body?
33. In your judgment, are there valid theological reasons for ordaining only men to be priests and ministers? Is this judgment informed by specific Biblical passages or is it influenced by historical and cultural factors? (Clifford 2001:175-176).
34. Are you drawn to any of these positions?



- f) The ordination of women flows logically from Gal 3:28 and the affirmation that for those baptized into Christ, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus.
- g) The ordination of women is not appropriate unless all of the manifestations of patriarchy in the Churches are changed, such as clerical hierarchy, only male language for God, and non-inclusive language in reference to people in prayers and hymns — for example, the use of the generic “man” rather than “men and women”.
- h) The non-ordination of women must be upheld because it has a two-thousand-year tradition that began in New Testament times. Women have many opportunities to use their gifts in the Church without being ordained priests or ministers.
- i) Advocacy of women's ordination is not an expression of feminist rebellion against male authority, but rather a symptom of a far-reaching cultural revolution that is not likely to be reversed (Clifford 2001:175-176).

35. Is the notion of basic ecclesial communities attractive to you? (CEBs are small groups of lay people coming together for the sake of Bible study and support in faith — in that manner it could be identified with the cell group movement in Protestant Churches). Do you believe that the praxis emphasis of CEBs is appropriate for your faith tradition, albeit Catholic or Protestant? (Clifford 2001:175-176). Does the cell group movement possibly offer the opportunity for women to raise consciousness and explore herstory?
36. How would herstory and the remembrance of women be influenced if men were to partake in group discussions? Do you think it is possible for men and women in the same cell group/CEB/discipleship group to become sensitive towards the issues of feminist theology and to raise consciousness? In what ways would you motivate your answer?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS TO CHAPTER 3**

The base of the following questions was taken from the work of Anne M Clifford who lectures on the topic of feminist theology. Where relevant, the South African context has been drawn in. The aim of these questions is to indicate how the tenets of feminist theology actively influence everyday life.

1. Do you believe that the ecofeminist argument that a connection exists between a patriarchal domination of nature and of women is valid? Motivate your agreement or disagreement.
2. What are your understandings of hierarchical dualism and egalitarian holism? Give an example that illustrates each of these approaches to reality.
3. Is envisioning “Nature” as a sacred home something to which you are attracted? Could you offer alternatives to such a view of nature? How do the various different cultures in South Africa relate to nature?
4. Sallie McFague's major contribution to Christian ecofeminist theology is her metaphor of the world as the “body of God”. Do you find the notion that the earth is embodied by God thought provoking? In your opinion, does her metaphor mutually help Christian theology and feminism to recover the sacredness of the Earth?

5. Have you ever thought about God, the Creator, as the absolute Owner of the Land who entrusts it to those persons who actually need it to sustain life?
6. North Americans are part of the 25% of the world's people whose lifestyle consumes 75% of all energy used. Knowing that the world's resources are limited, what is your response to this statistic? How can you economise on your own resource consumption? How sensitive is your community to energy consumption? Is it possible, and in what way, to educate people to consume more conservatively? How does consumption look in South Africa and the broader African continent?
7. An important element of ecofeminism is grassroots response to ecological problems. Do an ecological audit of your local area or university. Are there ecological concerns to which you can respond? What would you identify as three major ecological concerns that are unique to the South African context?
8. Can children be taught to pick up all garbage they come across? Has this been successfully implemented in your community? Do you have any suggestions of bringing a sense of responsibility for cleaning up after themselves to people in a religious context?
9. Interview some of your friends and acquaintances about how their patterns of consumption of goods may be affecting people in other communities. Do you know where your rubbish goes to and under what circumstances people interact with it (pick it up, salvage it, scavenge it)? Look at the labels in your clothes to see where they are made, and consider who made them and under what working conditions they were made. Would it be wise to actively start supporting the campaign launched as Proudly South African?
10. Summarize the story line of these selections in your own words:
  - i. Judges 11:1-11 & 29-40
  - ii. Judges 19
  - iii. 2 Samuel 13
  - iv. The Book of Susanna in the Apocrypha.
11. Then consult at least two author's views on them. Why were these texts accepted into the Biblical canon? Are there parallels to these stories in contemporary life?
12. Compare the interpretation of the following texts in at least two authors/commentators:
  - i. Leviticus 15:19-32
  - ii. Deuteronomium 22:13-30
  - iii. Deuteronomium 24:1-5
  - iv. Numbers 5:11-31
13. What is your response to the content of these texts and to the positions of the authors you consulted?
14. In Elizabeth Cady Stanton's day, the Bible not only influenced religious life but also political life in the US. Do you believe that the Bible is still influential? If so, why? What is the influence of the Bible in the South African context? How can its influence possibly be expanded and utilized in our own liberation struggles?
15. Where do you locate yourself in the spectrum of opinions on the Bible? Do you believe that the Bible is beyond questioning because it is God's Word? Do you

think that bringing questions to the Bible, including critical ones, can be beneficial for Christians?

16. Why do feminist Biblical scholars argue that objectivity and value-neutrality are not possible when interpreting Biblical texts? Do you agree with them?
17. Take a survey among your family and friends on the women they know in the Bible. Do any of them interpret the stories of Biblical women in ways compatible with interpretations offered by feminist theologians? Conduct a similar survey regarding men in the Bible (Taken from Clifford 2001:90; 216; 258-260).

## **GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS TO CHAPTER 4**

1. Explain what hermeneutics is, and what reconstructionist feminists mean by a "hermeneutics of suspicion", a "hermeneutics of remembrance", a "hermeneutics of proclamation" and a "hermeneutics of creative actualization".
2. Do you have a favourite Bible story? If so, locate it in the Bible and apply a hermeneutics of suspicion or remembrance to it.
3. What is the main insight that separates feminist theology from liberation theology?
4. How relevant is historical criticism for the lay believer? How relevant is it in the practice of interpretation, and how important is it to do a historical critical analysis of a Biblical text when preparing to preach/teach from it?
5. Identify some key areas in the Bible where women play no role, but where they seem to be imagined and included under the male characters, like the covenant, for instance.
6. Can you think of stories where there might be a double female voice in the text?
7. Discuss the possible female voice in the story of Tamar.
8. How would you suggest people reconcile in the areas of misogynism and racism in South Africa? How would reconciliation look around a topic like rape or domestic violence, or even abandonment or failure to pay maintenance?
9. Do all the people in your personal sphere of influence read? Do they have access to books, or the Bible in their own language? How far are people removed from the Biblical text in your sphere?
10. How would you go about introducing the practice of suspicious reading to an audience in your own social circle? How would this differ from introducing the topic to other circles, like elder people, mixed language groups, lower income economic groups etc.
11. How would it be possible to maintain the integrity of the Bible against a hermeneutics of suspicion? How would you defend the Bible as Word of God? In what ways would this seem important to do to you?
12. Where does your own focus lie — behind the text or in front of/on the text? Explain your position.

13. Can you identify instances in your own religious experience where you are confronted with the need to create a canon-in-the-canon?
14. How would you realize the vision of women-Church in your own community?
15. Which of Fiorenza's hermeneutical principles are already being practiced in some way or another in your own Church?

## **GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS TO CHAPTER 5:**

### **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT EVE**

1. Briefly discuss how the story of Adam and Eve was presented to you. Give particular attention to the role of the woman in the downfall of humankind, elements of trickery and judgment, and who the victim is seen to be.
2. Who has historically been blamed most for the Fall of humanity into sin?
3. The creation of Adam has never traditionally been put into relationship with the earth as a "female" word/concept. Discuss the various ways this male-from-female image plays with our traditional understanding of male and female roles.
4. Discuss how the portrayals of God doing "female things" alter your understanding of the creation text.
5. The first man has never been linked to a woman. Showing the earth to be female, and the creative process to mirror birth, does this change the way you as a reader relate to Genesis 2?
6. Though woman is created from the man, she is also complementary to the man. Discuss how the theology of woman being created from man, has allowed theologians and society to make her inferior to man.
7. How does the wordplay of the man being called *'is* instead of *ha'adam* make him and the woman *'issa* more complementary?
8. It is also possible to see Eve as a voice in the text that refuses to be silenced. Discuss the various ambiguous positions she is placed in: it is not good for the man to be alone, and she is created as helper without definition of what this means. He names her but does that in itself signify dominance? She makes mistakes but she reasons and decides. God does not seem to give much attention to her and yet she remains central to the story. Discuss Eve as a marginal voice that refuses to be subverted.
9. What have you traditionally thought about the fact that Adam names the animals and later gives Eve a name? How has this influenced your perception of the relationship between men and women?
10. Discuss whether Adam naming all things is an expression of his rulership or whether feminist thought can subvert this understanding.

11. How can the ambiguous wordplay between man/woman/earth help to illustrate the necessity of balance when it comes to relationships between man/woman/earth?
12. Discuss the implication of the awareness that came after eating from the tree. Touch areas like social roles, sexual awareness, productivity, gender roles etc.
13. In what aspects of the life in Eden do Adam and Eve share common roles?
14. Is it possible to step back into interpreting Adam and Eve as a single unit in Eden? traditionally they have always been seen as separate entities. Does interpreting them as unity (humankind) change the perception of the text?
15. Looking at what Adam and Eve share as an heroic unit, solves problems of dominance and superiority. How can this message be brought to the religious community?
16. Consider whether Eve's motivations were ever traditionally discussed when bringing up the circumstances of the Fall. Also consider how lack of attention to the positive evaluation of Eve's interpretive skills, have influenced women's view of themselves and their role in a broken creation.
17. Discuss different items that the insight the woman desired, might signify. Give attention to things a woman specifically might mean by insight. Do the ideas of men and women differ when it comes to what insight means, and, if so, in what instances?
18. How does Eve as moral decision maker change the slant of traditional interpretation of her role in the Fall? Discuss ways in which this new interpretation can subvert traditional meanings of her role in the Fall and how this can be utilized to emancipate women's religious as well as social position and experiences.
19. Traditionally Adam is depicted as the victim of Eve's "bad" action. When one looks closely at his reaction when communicating to God, and the lack of communication between God and Eve, Eve starts to stand out as the victimized party. Yet her dialogue does not fit the bill. Is Eve strong or weak? How can the poor and oppressed identify with Eve?
20. The text seems to put a distance between Eve and God that does not exist between Adam and God. Discuss how, from the beginning, tales like this serve to alienate women from God and create a mentality of guilt in religion.
21. The text seems unclear on the exact meaning of some of the sentences God gives man and woman. How have they traditionally been understood by your religious community?
22. Traditionally women have been pictured as more passive and less passionate than men. On the other hand, they have also been seen as creatures easily swayed by passion and possessing lustful and erotically harmful qualities. Discuss how Genesis and the lack of clear definition of female desire contributed to these conflicting views.
23. Can you identify cultural and religious instances where it is still unacceptable for a man to listen to a woman?

24. What is your experience of the rulership of the man over the woman? Give particular attention to your upbringing and the situations in your various family relations.
25. Does Genesis seem to favour one human being in relation to God over the other? If so, can you identify religious instances where this still reverberates?
26. Eve refuses to fit the bill. Discuss how her various actions up till chapter 4 can be used as example for people struggling to find a mandate for their own religious emancipation.
27. Discuss how the fact that Eve names her children and gives God acknowledgement for creating them together with her, can be used to subvert teaching that man is ruler due to having named the creatures of earth.
28. Classically, Genesis is used to give the definition of what a healthy married relationship should look like. How does a critical look at Genesis negate this teaching?
29. Various ideological motives have been identified in the Eden story. How does the knowledge that the writer was not objective, impact faith?
30. How can the fact that Eve interprets her own world and makes her own decisions, impact the lives of women who have been dominated all their lives?
31. What was Eve really punished for? How clear is the text about this?
32. God does not seem to fully turn his back on the woman. There is no objection on His part when she claims Him as partner in chapter 4. What actions of Eve could be seen as spiritually positive?
33. Traditionally we are made to believe that there are two options: the way of traditional meaning or the wrong way. Eve exposes other possibilities to us. How can her example help us to start thinking more critically?
34. In what ways does the story of the garden help to generate a positive relationship with God and the Bible?
35. What are the implications of stating that we do not know all the exact meanings of a text?

## **LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS**

1. Read the story of Genesis 19 and give an account of your first impressions of Lot's actions concerning his daughters.
2. How has this tale traditionally been explained to you and what amount of attention has been given to the obvious uncomfortable elements of the tale? Have they been ignored or glossed over?
3. Discuss in the group how the different genders may relate to this story in different ways. Give attention to aspects of the relationship between fathers and

daughters, the status of fathers in society, what the authority of fathers over daughters is allowed to be, etc.

4. How does the situation of these pregnant girls speak to modern society? What can a sensitized reader do to combat the trend of blaming the victim in a story like this?
5. How can the story of Lot and his daughters be told in the Church without offending females and how should it be presented to mixed audiences of fathers and daughters?
6. Discuss the motivations the daughters had for sleeping with their father and having his children. How might their motives have been influenced by a patriarchal society?
7. How does the tale of Lot inform your understanding of ancient society?
8. Can you identify some of the presuppositions you yourself have brought to your experience of this text?
9. In what ways are your current (modern) views influencing your ways of reading and understanding texts in the Bible?
10. What is the instinctive impression of the theme of the story? Is first thought that the tale is about hospitality, homosexuality or something else?
11. Current society is focused on the individual, while ancient society was built around the group. Discuss how these differences can help explain certain difficult texts. Give special attention to other aspects like modern individualistic experience of religion as opposed to ancient religion, and modern ways of reading and interpreting.
12. Discuss what the different expectations of your various cultures would be when it comes to the issue of hospitality. Give attention to items like ways of greeting, seating, what food would be served, accommodation etc.
13. Discuss rape in your culture. How does your culture deal with perpetrators, victims and possible offspring? Also discuss how/whether this issue is addressed within your Church.
14. How does your own family experience other cultures, religions and social groups? What views does your family hold of people who are different from you/strangers?
15. Is current society suspicious or embracing towards strangers? Given the current situation in South Africa specifically, how would you have reacted to the situation if you were in Lot's shoes, and how would your actions have been if you were one of the townsmen?
16. How would you go about reducing someone's status and shaming them?
17. Have you ever suffered humiliation? If so, describe this experience to the group.
18. It is commonly accepted that rape is a deed of violence and not passion. It is also described as an act of abusive power. Discuss how the possibility of rape

colours the world for males and females and how the genders live differently with the reality of rape.

19. It is commonly accepted that Lot offered up his daughters because they were of little value in ancient society. Looking at the text from group-orientation perspective, shows how women may have been central to society through their ability to give birth primarily. In modern society, women are supposedly equal to men in human value. How is this enforced/refuted in modern media? Where does the worth of a woman lie today? (Compare musical lyrics, advertisements, TV shows, sports etc).
20. Discuss the problematic reaction of the townsmen when they refuse to violate the women.
21. Suddenly the story of Lot begins to cast a light on xenophobia and not homosexuality. Can you name instances of xenophobia in your own family life?
22. How is xenophobia addressed in your religious community, if at all?
23. In South Africa a situation of lawlessness is prevalent to the day. How does this influence the effect of xenophobia amongst people?
24. Xenophobia would have to be linked to stereotypes in society. What stereotypes do you hold of other races, cultures and genders?

## **THE NARRATIVES ABOUT HAGAR**

1. In this tale, women find identity and worth through their children. Identify where this is still a prevalent view in various South African cultures.
2. The Biblical woman traditionally has little jurisdiction apart from authority over her own slave. Discuss how Sarai, despite being female, also becomes an oppressor of the socially weaker party.
3. Being female does not guarantee a person's just rulership. In what ways does this text undermine confidence in female autonomy?
4. God comes to Hagar's aid. How does this act serve a liberating purpose?
5. Gruber's new interpretation has God urging Abraham to listen to his wife, with him failing to do this. How does this reading shift the traditional understanding of the characters?
6. In what ways does the modern Church fail to listen to the voices of women? Give attention to the fact that women also form part of the Church.



## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE**

1. What would a good test of faith be?
2. Is it legal to sacrifice something that does not belong to you exclusively? What about other cultures?
3. Discuss possible reasons why the story has no women present.
4. Abraham's faith is tested without mentioning Sarah. How does this privilege male believers?
5. Problematize the way in which women would relate to the actions taken by Abraham.
6. How does the story strip the role of mother of executive authority?
7. What does the story imply about different authority as well as ownership structures in the family?
8. Discuss Biblical paternity. Is the mother equally exalted in comparison to the father? Who is seen as more responsible for giving birth — whose child is it?
9. How does the implied lesser authority and ownership of the mother still reflect in society today? Does it differ among cultures?
10. How does the modern Church affirm the authority of mothers, if at all?
11. Does the Bible show daughters and sons to be of equal value? Discuss with examples.
12. How does the privileging of sons in the text impact girls in religious experience?
13. How did the obedience of Isaac to Abraham, and Abraham to God, influence religious women in their submissiveness as well as independent choice making?
14. The tale condones blind obedience in light of possible murder. How has this unconsciously influenced the ability to question God and criticize the Bible?
15. How does this story serve patriarchal purposes?
16. How can this tale be refocused to show a liberating angle?

## THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RACHEL

1. Discuss how men and women's ability and channels to communicate differed in the Ancient Near East.
2. How did a culture of soft-spokenness, gentle submission and turning of the cheek influence women's ability to demand justice on various levels?
3. Can women today get the same justice as men?
4. How does this story privilege the dispute between men, while underplaying the women's dispute, and how did this influence the view on importance of women's issues in the Church?
5. Despite traditional interpretation and exclusive focus on the male conflict, the story itself is giving the women a voice on various levels. Discuss the ways in which the writer wants to draw attention to the importance of the women's complaint.
6. Consider how this story condones the various ways in which a woman is to get justice when she is not allowed the same channels for retribution and reconciliation as a man.
7. The story points out that a woman cannot even demand what she wants in the same way a man can. In what ways is this true in modern society?
8. Rachel's actions imply a distrust in Jacob's ability to act on her behalf. It is almost as if the writer is subtly exposing the self-interest of the male. What new interpretations can be gleaned from this view?
9. The text does not judge Rachel for her action. In what way can this be liberating to women?
10. Identify oppressed groups in your society who do not have access to platforms of justice.
11. In what ways was Rachel not able to confront Laban about her inheritance?
12. Can you identify situations in modern society where a woman cannot confront a man directly to demand justice for herself?
13. In what ways is Rachel using laws that restrain women, in her interest?
14. Can you identify cultural conceptions about the conduct of females that may be constrictive to their ability to communicate, speak their mind and make demands?
15. Consider whether the following statement is true: *Women have to manipulate to get what they want.* If this is found to be so, what could be the reasons for this?
16. Is female ambition generally seen to be as important as male ambition?
17. Identify cultural expectations that could hamper female ambition.

18. In what ways has the Church hampered women to speak and demand justice?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DINAH'S RAPE**

1. Discuss how the extraordinary (liberated) female activity and introduction is immediately stomped by male rape. What are the consequences of this action?
2. Discuss how the fear of force and rape inhibit women in their exploration of society.
3. What is your most violent fear?
4. Discuss how women are indoctrinated with fear of physical violence (like rape) from an early age.
5. Identify alternatively male and female fears surrounding rape.
6. How does rape serve to objectify the victim?
7. Discuss rape in terms of power/domination, and lust/desire.
8. The story later states that he loved her. How does this statement serve to legitimize the rape?
9. Does there exist any sympathy for the male, and if so, on what level?
10. In a country where rape is rampant, how can this text be used in the Church?
11. What is the role of the Church with regards to rape victims?
12. Is your local Church addressing the issue of rape or is it being ignored? If it is receiving attention, in what ways is this problem addressed?
13. How does the story of Dinah affect women when they read this?
14. Does the text show a clear condemnation of this rape?
15. The text seems to be giving scant attention to the rape itself, and more attention to various male reactions and actions afterwards. How does this conspire to make the rape itself trivial, and the woman almost obsolete?
16. How would your understanding and interpretation of this text change if you take the side of the victim?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT TAMAR**

1. Consider the various underlying patriarchal motives to the Levirate Law. Was this law only instituted to protect the widow?
2. This text could be seen to be in paradox with itself on various levels. Compare how Tamar the righteous and justified prostitute is contrasted to the unjust hypocrite Judah.

3. The story remains within the grip of patriarchal interest. How does Tamar's actions remain within the typical patriarchal boundaries expected of and set for women?
4. Despite the above, a dialectic element remains in the righteous way Tamar is portrayed. Discuss feminist keynotes in the text.

## **THE WOMEN IN THE LIFE OF MOSES**

1. How did you traditionally read this tale, and what tools could be used to understand it better?
2. What stands out in your mind as the highlight of Moses' life, and why?
3. Describe how the use of so many female characters stands in contrast to other Bible events.
4. Could this writer be less androcentric than others?
5. How does this tale at the same time affirm and negate the status of women?
6. How does the text privilege women in the power struggle (against Pharaoh)?
7. What does this text infer about the potential power of female resistance?
8. What form does female resistance take?
9. The story of Isaac highlights paternalism and the son's position. In what ways does the Moses tale contrast and balance that?
10. Are modern women recognized in any way for furthering the careers of influential men?
11. Are you aware of influential women, and can you name them?
12. This story is unique in its depiction of women working together. How can this be emphasized in society?
13. In what ways can you resist the writer's views of the role of women in the tale?
14. These women are shown to peacefully serve the higher ideal/agenda. What is this agenda, and is it in female interest?
15. What would be the most effective way to disarm possible resistance to your ideas/ideals?
16. How could this same tale of women's involvement place them in bondage and render them powerless?
17. Who is shown to have more potential power to influence events?
18. Would you trust female power in the form of opinion and influence blocks?

19. What at first seems to be a liberating text, is fraught with patriarchal interest. Identify these motives.
20. How do women become accomplices to the agenda of the text?
21. Can you identify examples in your own family life where women are content to serve androcentric ideals?
22. Can you identify values in your family life which are patriarchal?
23. In you own family life, what rewards do women get for their complicity to the patriarchal value system?
24. In what ways can women in your family life resist these patriarchal values?
25. Can you identify some of these values as being mirrored in the values of the Church and society?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DEBORAH**

1. Has the fact that Deborah was a judge who had the authority to make judgments over all members of her society (male and female alike) ever been highlighted in your respective Churches?
2. How would you defend the possibility of a female author for the book of Judges, or at least this section of the book?
3. How can the wordplay in Deborah's song be used to enable the liberation of women or the emancipation of oppressed groups?
4. How can the example and action of Deborah be used as example of a strong woman for other women to follow?
5. How effective is the complete silence about Deborah in general religious experience, or the lack of upholding her female example for an inclusive audience, in silencing the voice of women in the faith?
6. In what ways can Deborah be used as example of women with religious and social authority and mandate?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT JAEL**

1. How has Jael been presented to your Church audience in the past?
2. The text stands as bane for female autonomous action. How can this be expanded into ideas where sermons (towards a mixed audience) are concerned?
3. How can Athalya Brenner's contribution about the mixing and intertwining of male and female worlds be used to bring about a more harmonious gender balance in the general lives of members of a congregation?

4. How can the polemic against rape be expanded from information given in the text and the wordplay used in what happens between Jael and Sisera?
5. Jael becomes aggressor instead of being a victim. Her possible rapist is killed by her own hand, and the text does not condemn her. How can this affirmation of the woman be used to help women overcome the stigma and fear surrounding rape?
6. What does this tale reveal about the possible author of the story?
7. In what ways can this tale be called "feminist"?
8. How can the story be used as paradigm of the marginal's victory over the establishment?
9. How does the character of Jael challenge the traditional view held of women and their role?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER**

1. What female trait is most valued in a patriarchal society? Explain your opinion.
2. The text moves at a pace too fast to give the reader opportunity for sympathy for the daughter. Name ways in which the pace can be slowed down or even halted, in order to create pauses that may lead to empathy or sympathy.
3. How can the story of the daughter be incorporated into a possible ritual of passage for modern young women, from immaturity into adolescence?
4. In what ways might such a rite of passage be valuable to young female members of the Christian faith?
5. How can the act of creative imagination be utilized to make herstory heard in this tale (making unheard female voices come to the fore)?
6. What are the implications if the text is allowed to focus simply on Jephthah, and if effort is not made to listen to the daughter's voice?
7. What are the implications of the tale's tendency towards an ideology of unquestioned paternal authority?
8. Feminist writers point out that the daughter was claimed by patriarchy rather than by women as banner. How can this be resisted? How can women claim this daughter, and why should they?
9. Discuss the various ways in which modern young women are sacrificed.
10. How aware is your social group of such modern day sacrifices?
11. Problematize the various differences between this sacrifice and the sacrifice made by Abraham, and the would-be sacrifice of Jonathan. How do these differences help in making women feel less valued as human beings in the faith?

12. How can the aspect of this victim being blameless be brought into connection with the sacrificial death of Jesus?
13. How can her death, placed in alignment with that of Jesus, serve to make women feel more worthy and have a faith experience of greater value as women?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT DELILAH**

1. What ideas do you form of a woman being described as "a Delilah"?
2. Can you think of a male comparative term to Delilah?
3. List the things you know about Delilah off the top of your head. Is there textual evidence to support what you know? Do you really know much about her?
4. Reading as a male, what would be Delilah's worst transgression?
5. Reading as a female, what would be Delilah's worst transgression?
6. Delilah is discarded as soon as Samson is captured. In what way does this serve to treat her unfairly?
7. Have women suffered because of the ingrained resistance to Delilah?
8. How can this tale and handling of Delilah be used to expose the ability of the reader to presuppose much information unconfirmed by the text?
9. By simply reading "with" the flow of the text, assumptions are kept in place. Name a few ways in which one can resist the flow of the text.
10. Think of the ways you classify women in your own life and mind. Into what categories do they fall?
11. Thinking about a woman you classify in a negative sense, what led to this classification?
12. What could you identify as the moral of the story?
13. Would the moral of the story be the same for male and female readers? If not, how would it differ?
14. What do you think were Delilah's motives for betrayal of Samson?
15. Discuss how these motives would change if she were a prostitute, wife of Samson, loyal and patriotic Philistine, or even an Israelite.
16. In the tale of Deborah and Jael, the women are praised for their deeds. Can you offer possible explanations for the Philistine's lack of praise for Delilah's deed?
17. What do you find frustrating/unsatisfactory about the ending of the story?
18. How would you end the narrative, were you the writer?

## **THE LEVITE'S WIFE**

1. The various feminist contributions on this text brings to the fore the plurality of feminist opinion, and the critical nature thereof. How can feminist theologians be critical of the work of their colleagues, while avoiding the traps caused by differences in cultural and economic backgrounds?
2. Discuss the various layers of victimization and the different victimized parties that are at work in the text. Can you add to those from own experience?
3. Discuss the reasons why the woman might have fled to her father's house, and the reasons why the Levite might have followed her.
4. Discuss all the various powerplays involved in the days of feasting.
5. What would have been the religious justification for the Levite to throw the concubine to the mob?
6. Problematize his action in not rescuing her, not opening the door for her, not offering her safety.
7. What is the significance of the text mentioning her hands on the doorstep?
8. What do you make of the Levite's harsh treatment of her, his spoken words after finding her there on the doorstep the next morning?
9. Discuss the various meanings held by her dismemberment at the hands of the Levite, and the fact that pieces of her body got sent around the country.
10. The Levite speaks to the gathered Israelites after sending the concubine's pieces across the land. Discuss the ways in which his discourse is evasive of his own actions and role in her death.
11. How does this story speak to women about the value of a female body in comparison to the value of a male body?
12. In what ways can this text be redeemed for women, and used as affirmation of their value as human beings?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RUTH**

1. Would you rate the oath of Ruth as a famous passage in the Old Testament?
2. In your religious context, how has this oath been presented to you and in what ways is it being used currently?
3. Do you always think of this oath in the context of two women, or do you bend it to suit different circumstances?
4. When looking at the story of Ruth in general, which relationship in the book received more religious covering:  
Ruth/Naomi, or



## Ruth/Boaz.

5. In what ways does Ruth's oath change in meaning when these words are taken from a female/female context and placed in a female/male context?
6. Discuss the implications of theology's lack of focus on this specific female/female relationship.
7. In what ways could the loyalty of Ruth to Naomi serve to strengthen, highlight and mandate greater contact between women?
8. Would you say that women share strong relationships when compared with their relationships with men?
9. Thinking about general society, would you say that female relationships are more characterized by cooperation, companionship, or competition?
10. Describe the ways in which a patriarchal system of theology and interpretation hijacks the real central moment of the book.
11. By being silent about the implications of Ruth's oath for female relationships, women in faith and women in general are downplayed as far as their power to stay loyal and committed is concerned. How can you rescue this text and use it to empower women?
12. Has this text traditionally been used in a way that could empower women?
13. How can this text lift the status and regard of women in the Church?
14. Discuss the interesting play between the ideal of the text to make the man "save the day", and the unusually strong female characters who seem to "save the day".
15. What is the logical moral of the tale, and has it been handled as such traditionally?
16. This text more than any other can serve as a challenge to traditionally understood gender roles. How would you use it to broaden people's perspectives on relationships between opposite and same genders, as well as marital and familial roles?
17. Traditionally, Boaz is painted as the proverbial knight on the white horse. Is this really accurate? Discuss.
18. Ultimately, the book does revolve around sons and continuity through them. Is it possible for the tale to escape the confines of male interest?
19. Thinking of modern woman, is she herself in her relationships with self, other women, men children, work etc, able to escape male-centred goals?

## THE NARRATIVE ABOUT ESTHER

1. How was Esther presented to you as Biblical character in the past?
2. Discuss in your group two variances between the way a woman would solve the problem of threat to her community, and the way a man would. Are there marked differences or not? Can you point out how women treat the AIDS threat different from men in modern day South Africa?
3. Is your group open to the possibility that women might act in ways different from men, with the same goals in mind?
4. Are the members of the group open to the suggestion that there might be more than one way to reach an objective, or does the group have an outlook that is more aligned with a possible male way of acting?
5. How did women in your own cultural group's past handle being in lesser positions of value and authority in society?
6. Name a few typically female survival tactics, used by women to use situations to their advantage.
7. Esther is called beautiful. How has this influenced your assessment of her other abilities?
8. How can Esther as strategist be upheld as example for women to follow and aspire to?
9. Esther is a paradigm of a child who listens to elders. Can you name some examples of male children who submit to authority of those over them and older than them, used in Scripture as example for boys?
10. How would you use the tale of Esther to facilitate dialogue between different races in this country?
11. Arzt showed through research that children identify with the character they share a gender with. How does this information influence the way you will communicate Biblical narratives in future?

## THE NARRATIVE ABOUT MICHAL

1. Did your children's Bible paint Michal in a positive or negative light? How do you remember her, and with regards to what action?
2. Michal's feelings turn from love to hate. The text does not say exactly what brought about this change. Speculate in your group about the things that might have brought about this change.
3. Tradition and the text states that David was the beloved of God. He also loved Jonathan very much. How did his actions disprove any love for Michal?
4. How is blaming Michal for not being in line with God's plan a simplification of her suffering?

5. Can you identify any modern woman who might share Michal's plight of abandonment and apathy at the hands of her marriage partner?
6. How would sympathy for Michal taint the view held of David?
7. How can Michal be redeemed as a woman who lived amongst impossible contradictory tensions?
8. How does Michal's isolation from other women make her more vulnerable?
9. How does Michal resist the pull of the patriarchal writer?
10. How does Michal's venture outside to confront David serve to dissuade women from taking active steps towards their own happiness, freedom and autonomy?
11. How can Michal be used as example for women?

## **THE NARRATIVE ABOUT BATHSHEBA**

1. In what ways has the story of Bathsheba been used to blame women for sexual infidelity?
2. In modern South African society, who bears the responsibility for sexual safety and offspring? Motivate your answer.
3. The nature of what transpires between David and Bathsheba is never painted as possible rape. How would the possibility of rape colour your appreciation of David?
4. How do later clues in the text make the possibility of rape more plausible?
5. How does God show sympathy for Bathsheba in this tale?
6. How do the traditional male commentaries in blaming the victim, impact the lives of modern women in matters of rape and unwanted advances?
7. What can be done to redeem this text for the honour of women over their bodies?
8. What can be done to lessen the responsibilities resting on women surrounding matters sexual?
9. Discuss the significance of the fact that God does not blame Bathsheba for what transpired. How can this be utilized to create more male responsibility?
10. If more is made of David's blame, how would this impact the stigma on men and women respectively with regards to infidelity?

## GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS TO CHAPTER 6

1. Complete these sentences:  
     God is...  
     God is not...  
     Are you aware of the possible sources of what you have written from your own personal history?
  
2. Circle the letter for the images for God to which you feel attracted; star those to which you feel resistant.
  - a) Father
  - b) Mother
  - c) Holy Spirit
  - d) Jesus Christ
  - e) Father, Son and Holy Spirit
  - f) The Dancing Three
  - g) Judge
  - h) Good Shepherd
  - i) Friend
  - j) Liberator
  - k) Healer
  - l) Mystery
  - m) Creator
  - n) Redeemer
  - o) Lord
  - p) Woman Wisdom
  - q) *Sophia* Incarnate
  - r) Encompassing Presence
  - s) Cosmic Energy
  - t) Love
  - u) Goddess
  - v) Covenant Maker
  - w) Black Christ
  - x) God of Life
  - y) God of the Poor
  - z) Add your own image that does not appear above
  
3. Which of the above that you circled are the most and least important to you? Write a few sentences explaining why.
  
4. What connotation do you give to YHWH, ("I am who I am")?
  
5. Is the depiction of the relationship of the divine Three in the Trinity in the image of *perichoresis* (the round dance of three equal persons) a helpful alternative to the presentation of God as Father Almighty, Son of God, and Holy Spirit, Lord of Life?
  
6. What is your reaction to the womanist image of Christ as a black female done by Janet MacKenzie?
  
7. What is your response to the Latin American feminist emphasis on the God of Life?

8. Do you believe Mary Daly's statement "If God is male, then the male is God" is valid where the issue of males and females imaging God is concerned? (Anne M Clifford 2001:130).
9. Has it ever been an issue or a problem in your faith life that Jesus was a man?
10. Was Jesus only a man, or was He only a man for a short while?
11. In the mind of you as woman, was Jesus firstly a man and secondly God, or vice versa?
12. What jumps to mind first when you think of Jesus?
13. In the Afrikaans language there is no such a generic term as "man". Could this have an influence on the problem for the Afrikaans community? Is it possible that the problem is smaller for communities without such language?
14. Have you ever been treated or spoken to by the clergy in such a manner that made it clear that the maleness of Jesus affirms their maleness as clergy or gives them as men priority or superiority?
15. Would you be willing to die for this impersonal, theorized god/idea/description?
16. Do you experience women as hating men? Detesting men? Being exasperated by men in particular?
17. How would you describe your relationship with your father, grandfather, husband, brother, uncles, cousins, and male colleagues?
18. Does a woman sacrifice much to be loved by a man? What would be the nature of her sacrifice as woman? Can you name specific things she gives up when marrying, for instance?
19. Would one slap away the saving hand because it is a male hand? If it were a female hand?
20. Is Jesus as man really such a big problem and stumbling block? Is this not a case of reverse sexism? Is the gender of Jesus more important than the deeds He came to do?
21. What are we to make of people growing up in a post-patriarchal order? Do they find patriarchy in religion an equally great stumbling block?
22. Are we in a post-patriarchal order in South Africa? Motivate your answer.
23. Do we name God or does He name Himself?
24. Are you a person interested in religion/spirituality, or do you identify yourself as Christian specifically? Would this identification influence your views on the authority of the text and its mandate to be prescriptive?
25. Would it be equally easy to believe in simply God/good, or do you specifically believe in Jesus?

26. Must we come to Scripture with a suspicious mindset? Motivate your answer.
27. Must we come to Biblical interpretation with a suspicious mindset? Motivate your answer.
28. Christians cannot read the Old Testament without the additional perspective of the New Testament. In the light of this, God cannot be painted as the kyriarchal monster of the Old Testament, but rather the One who died in our place and who clothed Himself as servant to us. How does feminist theology address this angle?
29. Do theologians have a hidden agenda? Would it not be the most amazing ego-trip to be able to define, name and declare the reconstructed god? How did theologians in the past misuse their power as a power to name and identify God?
30. Who makes up the Church? Who forms the main identity of the Church?
31. To whom does God address himself in the Bible? Who does the Bible want to reach? Who makes up the target audience? What does the Bible wish to achieve?
32. Why do we have this constant need to define God over and around the descriptions He has already given? Is that what theology is trying to do?
33. Is it possible that the desire to dominate and rebel could be at the very centre of feminism? On what basis would one disagree?
34. Is the main core value of feminism maybe power in the hands of the female gender? How can this be proven to be a wrong conclusion?
35. Is it acceptable to concede that human beings are self-centred and selfish? Are we sinful or not? Are all human beings equally able to sin? How does such an admission, if made, influence the view of the influence of human thought?
36. Who makes the rules about what is good or acceptable? Is it me or popular culture or God?

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