Globethics Repository



The inspired Word of God?

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Wilding, Rowena
Publisher	Baptist Ministers Fellowship
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-03 12:31:49
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/159572

others the minister has set up a weekly eco-spot in the morning service (see Tonbridge Baptist Church Creation Care Tips on the web). The congregations of some churches have worked together to qualify as an Eco Congregation (www.ecocongregation.org). This organisation is now part of A Rocha which does mission in a number of places at home and overseas by helping local people improve the health of their environment (www.arocha.org.uk).

To live in a responsible way that cares for the planet and all who live in it may seem something of a chore to people who have not yet discovered the reality of God. For Christians who know his reality and his joy in the amazing world he created, it is a celebration and a sharing in his joy.

To quote John Stott again: '…our care of creation will reflect our love for the Creator'.

Joan Kearney is the wife of W. Philip Kearney, a retired Baptist minister. She can be contacted by email at joan@kearney.me.uk.

The inspired Word of God?

By Rowena Wilding

For hundreds of years biblical scholarship has been male dominated, but over recent decades the voices of women have demanded to be heard. Within the academy, feminist scholars have made much headway; but in the most part the church remains unaffected by feminist biblical interpretation and is still influenced by the archaic patriarchal structures of the biblical writers.

Feminism has a long history, and the driving force of feminist theology lies in a critique of male theology. Patriarchal thinking is exposed for its role in elevating gender differences to a religious, cultural and social level. Feminist thinking criticises exclusively male images of God, emphasises the predominant role of women in the life of Jesus, recovers female traditions in the Bible and establishes a profile for female spirituality and holistic anthropology. Feminist interpretation can broadly be classified into three groups, which are different enough to warrant separate discussion: the historical-critical study of female characters in the Bible, a hermeneutic of suspicion, and a hermeneutic of condemnation.

1. Historical-critical study. An historical-critical study of female biblical characters gives the women in scripture their voices back. The method is used by feminist scholars to emphasise that both men and women are created in the image of God, by examining major female characters. This exegetical work describes how these women play a much more important role in the Bible than we may have been led to believe.

This interpretation process is necessary within churches, because female Bible characters are not honoured. Ministry is male dominated, which has led to a lack of sympathy for these women, or at the least a lack of desire to challenge the normal androcentric readings. To read the text in a feminist way goes against the grain, which shows not simply the extent of patriarchy, but also its depth. To fight the desire to give up requires a true dedication to seeing the stories behind the stories, a reading between the lines, and an interpretation of what is *not* said, as well as what is.

2. Hermeneutic of suspicion. The second type of feminist exegesis, the hermeneutic of suspicion, is based on the female perspective that the biblical texts have not been handed down in their original form. A greater distinction needs to be made between the divine and the human (and androcentric) word. It is likely that the patriarchal tradition has resulted in the editing of texts that had strong feminist impulses, and has weakened or distorted the emancipatory content as a form of control, domination and oppression. In this form of exegesis, the final canonical shape of the text should not be accepted as normative. The task of exegesis becomes one of recovery of the original pro-feminine content.

The hermeneutic of suspicion is important in uncovering anti-feminist tendencies in the tradition. It also begins to work against one-sided male language about God. Biblical theology must continually face critical feminist questioning and work towards the elimination of patriarchal distortion. In a church setting this can have an extremely positive effect—considering the appropriateness of using 'Father' to refer to God and 'Lord' to refer to Jesus is pastorally (as well as hermeneutically) important, and can empower women within the church, and allow them to be fully a part of the community. Through it, all members of the community will be shown their worth, and the church can work towards being a place of equals, where all are encouraged to grow and serve, and all are loved by God who created man and woman in 'his' (or 'her') image.

3. Hermeneutic of condemnation. The third group of feminist interpreters uses a hermeneutic of condemnation. This method works on the assumption that the final

canonical text, especially that of the Old Testament, is irreversibly and offensively biased against women, and that no woman can interact constructively with scripture as it stands. Instead, women must draw a line under the hierarchical, androcentric structures of the church, distancing themselves from an incurably patriarchal religion, and search for a spirituality in which femininity can be respected appropriately. This approach is not only open to, but actively demands, the retelling of biblical narratives from a feminist perspective, and that biblical visions and commands be handled from a position of gender equality, expanded and embellished by emphasising the feminist traces that have survived the biblical tradition.

What value, then, can a creative, alternative, feminist rewriting of texts have for understanding the Bible? Many interpreters want to say that it is not possible for any sort of understanding to come from such a premise. It is a highly radical form of reinterpretation, but it has the potential to be useful beyond that for which it is given credit. The patriarchy of Christianity is, in itself, highly radical, and though I do not wish to 'declare war' on the scriptures, the importance of allowing women to have their own spirituality and to know God for themselves comes across more strongly in this hermeneutic than in any other. Used within a faith setting as a way to allow people to explore scripture through a different lens, this hermeneutic could empower women and help them not to feel 'other' or 'alien' in religion. Instead, the church becomes a safe place for women, somewhere that women can flourish and find their true potential.

The women's Bible

In 1895 *The women's Bible* first appeared in New York. It was the first volume of a work that created both sensation and indignation. It was put together by a group of women wanting to take texts and chapters of scripture which referred to women, or 'in which women are made prominent by exclusion',[1] and revise them to create a commentary that 'teaches the equality of women'.[2] *The women's Bible* came into being primarily through the labours of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was marginalised by womens' rights movements because her work was too radical a step for most to follow.

Stanton was appalled at the degree to which the Bible was used as divine authority for the religious and political legitimation of the injustice visited on women. She was convinced that this process contradicted faith in a divine being who, in wisdom and rationality, orders and rules the world and who should not be thought of as uninterested in human rights. It was such thinking that caused her in 1887 to initiate the project of a 'women's Bible'. She gathered about two dozen women for the project who were versed in literature, history and, like herself, Greek—though none was trained in theology or

biblical studies. The aims of these women were far more basic than theological scholarly pursuits—they simply wanted to unmask the church's misuse of the Bible and to undermine thereby its wrongly held authority.

The structure of the work follows the order of the biblical writings, yet they are not commented on sequentially. The texts are either assessed through summary retelling (*eg* Ruth) or studied in terms of selected sections (*eg* Matthew). On the one hand, such selections focus on passages that were used in the US to legitimise the inequality of women before the law, on the other hand, they recall passages that would permit a wholly different perception of women. While Stanton herself produced the base text around which she coordinated the contributions of other women, it is in some of these other contributions that we find the important ground work for feminist biblical scholarship in more recent years.

Devereux Blake sees the problem less in the biblical texts themselves than in the history of their interpretation, in which they have been badly distorted.[3] Her approach is to elevate the stories of women—a clear forerunner of the redemptive historical-critical feminist studies of biblical texts. A similar approach can be found in Ellen Battelle Dietrick's attempt to excavate a 'her-story' over and against the 'his-tory'. Finally, the perspective of Clara Colby shows a different approach; her notes on Genesis make it plain that for her, in keeping with what was beginning to be known at the time as 'new thinking', the Bible is no longer the word of God in the sense of an authority that encounters humans 'from outside'. Colby seeks, rather, to discern the symbolic content of these writings to show how they correspond to the processes of human self-discovery.[4]

These sentiments have been echoed by those who use a hermeneutic of condemnation. Stanton was concerned mainly with pitting enlightened reason against the historically limited men's word of the Bible and in this way advancing the public discussion of the equality of women—the beginnings of a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion. Though *The women's Bible* was quashed and disappeared until the mid-1970s, more recently the works of these women, which comprise the first venture into feminist biblical hermeneutics, are finally being explored as a legitimate attempt at biblical revision. These were the first women to take the Bible and explore ways in which the text could be used to preach equality for the genders.

Despite *The women's Bible* being a revolutionary piece of work, created well over a century ago, the church is still dominated by male leadership and is still hostile to women. As long as biblical interpretation is steeped in the patriarchy from which the text arose, women will be unable to grow to their full potential within the church. A

century ago, women were fighting for equality within society; for the right to vote and the right to work; the suffrage movement was in full force, until finally in 1928, women were awarded the right to vote on equal terms with men. Now, nearly 100 years on, women in the church are going through the same struggle: the right to be in leadership, the right to be treated as equals to men. Gender-inclusive translations of the Bible are slowly beginning to be used in church settings, meaning that the constant process of translation, to which women have had to become accustomed, is coming to an end. This is a step forward, but it is not enough.

The feminist critique now challenges the very system of hierarchy itself. To question the hierarchical ordering of church ministry seems to some to be questioning the need for structure and indeed the rootedness of the church in Jesus, rather than in man. Belief in the church as a Spirit-filled community, however, sustains hope that a new birth can take place and that the church may become within and for the world a place 'where the good news of liberation from sexism is preached, where the Spirit is present to empower us to renounce patriarchy, where a community committed to the new life of mutuality is gathered together and nurtured, and where the community is spreading the vision and struggle to others'.[5]

Sustained by this hope, feminist critique, be it historical-critical, a hermeneutic of suspicion, or a more radical separatist condemnatory form, presents patriarchal and hierarchical structures in the light of the church's liberating mission. It proposes methods of exploring that mission, the scriptures, and the community itself, in ways that free the tradition from the harmful, oppressive influence of patriarchy, and includes the experience of women so that the church may truly become a community of liberation and equality for all humanity.

Rowena Wilding is minister of Waterfoot (Edgeside) Baptist Church in Rossendale and can be contacted on rowena.wilding@gmail.com.

Notes to text

1. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The women's Bible*. Reprint edition, 1988, p 5.

2. *Ibid*, p 9.

3. This is quite clear in her first entry in *The women's Bible*, in which she explores Genesis 1:26-28. Her route is to expose the inaccuracies of the scholarship that has gone before, pp 16-19.

4. *Ibid*, pp 31-33, 35-37, 47-50.

5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*. 1993, p 213.