

Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes
Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible

SECOND EDITION

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
Part 1: Background	1
1. Introduction	3
Part 2: A Story about Stories	35
2. The Story of Eve	37
3. The Women in Genesis	57
4. The Women in Exodus and Numbers	83
5. The Women in Joshua and Judges	98
6. The Women in 1 and 2 Samuel	123
7. The Women in 1 and 2 Kings	139
8. The Women in the Prophets	156
9. The Women in the Wisdom Literature and the Song of Songs	170
10. Subversive Women in Subversive Books: Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith	183
Part 3: Reflections	203
11. Summary and Conclusions	205
<i>Notes</i>	217
<i>Bibliography</i>	247
<i>Suggestions for Use in Religious Education Classes</i>	305

Preface

Clarence Newsome, former Dean of the Howard University School of Divinity, asked me to develop a course on the women of the Hebrew Bible. I had taught Hebrew language and other Old Testament courses but had not done any work in the area of feminist interpretations of the Bible. It was not that I lacked interest, since I considered myself a feminist. It was more for lack of opportunity. I was ready for a new area of research, and this one was especially intriguing. Womanism was a new concept to me. I was eager to learn about it from my colleagues Kelly Brown Douglas and Cheryl Sanders, both leaders in the emerging movement of black feminists.

As I began searching for books and articles, I discovered a wealth of material on methodological and philosophical issues as well as on individual biblical women. However, there was very little that surveyed the field in an easily accessible fashion for the general reader and student, and what little existed was not scholarly. Now that I have taught the course many times, I am convinced of the need for a book to bring together the latest contributions that feminist and womanist biblical scholars have made. The difficulties in such a project are daunting. Can so much material and so many points of view be represented adequately in the space of one book? Will such a book become immediately dated, as ever-new studies pour forth from the pens and computers of scholars? The answer to this second question is undoubtedly yes. Nevertheless, my goal is to present the fruits of feminist biblical interpretation in a way that will be accessible to the public as well as to the academic community for such a time as this.

My thanks go to Clarence Newsome, former Dean of Howard School of Divinity, who launched me on this field of study. I owe much to my students at Howard and to members of Providence Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia, where I was Associate Pastor for nearly fifteen years; to Southminster Presbyterian Church in Oxon Hill, Maryland, where I was a summer pastor; to St. Marks Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., Fairfax Presbyterian Church, Church of the Covenant, Vienna, and Burke Presbyterian Church in northern Virginia, where I lectured and received helpful feedback; and to the educators of National Capital Presbytery to whom I presented some of this material. They stimulated my thinking and asked important questions of the texts. I am indebted to Howard University, which provided me a research

grant to work on this book. I am grateful to Jeff Hamilton of Westminster John Knox Press, my first editor, who saw the value in this book when it was still at an early stage, and to all the staff there who shepherded this book in its first and revised edition through to the final stage. I especially thank Stephanie Egnotovich, the executive editor at Westminster John Knox, for encouraging me to revise and update this book. My thanks also go to my colleague Dr. Cheryl Sanders, whose thoughtful reading of the first edition helped me formulate more clearly what I wanted to say and who encouraged me to ask hard questions about womanist scholarship.

Most especially I must thank my husband Jeff Nicoll, whose thoughtful, sometimes challenging, but always supportive comments and questions have contributed immeasurably to this new edition.

Part 1
Background

1

Introduction

This is a story about stories. It is a story about feminist and womanist interpretations of sacred stories. Women's stories in what Jews call the Hebrew Bible and Christians term the Old Testament¹ are very powerful. They have profoundly affected women's self-understanding and men's perception of women. In the nineteenth century, women who dared to speak in public (which was considered unseemly) were labeled "disobedient Eves" or "Jezebels."² Abby Kelley, a Quaker and radical abolitionist, was especially disturbed when this latter epithet was hurled at her.³ Black women have disproportionately been called Jezebel, suggesting that they are more sexual than other women. Women's stories in the Hebrew Bible have also been used in positive ways. Angelina Grimké, another prominent abolitionist, held up biblical women such as Miriam, Deborah, Jael, Huldah, and Esther as exemplars for women to emulate.

Even in dawning years of the twenty-first century, biblical stories of women still influence the way women think of themselves and the way the rest of the world thinks about them. Much of this influence is negative. Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, and other female biblical characters represent seduction and evil.

Today both women and men feel liberated when they hear new readings of these stories. Both men and women are disturbed when they hear about some of the more atrocious stories of female victimization. Both are excited when they hear some of the more "feminist" of the stories, especially when they have not been exposed to such readings before. Stories have been used against women, but stories can also provide tools to use in the struggle for wholeness and dignity.

A great deal of work has been done in the last third of a century by feminist biblical scholars on women's stories in the Hebrew Bible. This research has produced new and exciting readings of the stories, whose traditional interpretations have been foundations for Western negative attitudes toward women. Was Eve really the terrible temptress and was Rebekah the demonic deceiver depicted in many a traditional interpretation? Is Ruth the "sweet little thing" we find in children's Bibles, or does her story undercut the narrow religious attitudes of its day and perhaps even of our own? These and many other areas have been explored, debated, and reconceived by feminist and womanist scholars. Before the 1990s very little of these discussions had reached the woman or the man in the pew or even the pastor or seminary student, in part because the sources are scattered among various scholarly journals and in part because, until recently, such work was suspect even in academia.

At the time *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes* was first published, I believed the time had come to share with the people in the parish the fruit of the last quarter century of work. Not all questions had been answered, not all problems solved, but enough progress had been made that a vast amount of refreshing, exciting—sometimes disturbing—material needed to be shared broadly, freely discussed, and evaluated by those whose lives are touched by these issues in very practical ways. A dozen years later, the need is still there, and fortunately many voices are now singing in this choir. Before, my voice was soft and in many ways uncertain. Now, I want to sing a little louder and with new conviction.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FEMINIST STUDIES OF HEBREW SCRIPTURE

The roots of feminist interpretation of Scripture lie in the nineteenth century in the women's rights movement. Opponents of that movement used the Bible to buttress their opposition to it. They interpreted the story of Eve's secondary creation from Adam's rib to mean that woman is subordinate to man. They understood her leading role in eating and sharing the forbidden fruit with Adam as indicative of the evil and subordinate nature of women.⁴

By the 1830s and 1840s some women's rights activists were becoming articulate about the need for a different approach to biblical interpretation.⁵ Not only were white women active, but African American women were also understanding the Bible in new ways. Jarena Lee, a member of the American Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, felt the call to preach and found biblical support for her position.⁶

In the 1880s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a committee of women compiled *The Woman's Bible*⁷ in an effort to counteract the oppressive use of the

power of the Bible against women. Although it did not use the then-new techniques of higher criticism (based on the assumption of multiple sources of the Bible rather than Mosaic authorship), it was a serious effort at a new understanding of the Scriptures.⁸

In the late nineteenth century many feminist Christian voices dealt with the Scriptures and debated traditionalists. Few of these women were trained biblical scholars, although some of their arguments foreshadow later, more sophisticated versions of their approach.⁹ It was not until 1894 that the first woman became a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the biblical scholarship “establishment.”¹⁰

In the early part of the twentieth century women made significant contributions to biblical scholarship. Nevertheless they were not advocating new approaches that we would today call feminist.¹¹ Treatments of women in the Bible came from women outside the profession. Dr. Katherine Bushnell, medical missionary to China and Women’s Christian Temperance Union leader in the late nineteenth century, wrote¹² *God’s Word to Women*.¹³ Reverend Lee Anna Starr, a Methodist minister in the early twentieth century, wrote *The Bible Status of Women*. Both believed that the Bible, when properly translated and interpreted, presents a vision of the equality of the sexes.¹⁴

In the 1960s a few more voices were heard. In 1964, Margaret Crook, professor of religion and biblical literature at Smith College and thirty-nine-year member of the Society of Biblical Literature, published *Women and Religion*. She raised the issue of the male domination of the Judeo-Christian tradition and urged women to take an active role in reshaping the faith.¹⁵

In 1967 Elsie Culver, a professional lay church worker, wrote *Women in the World of Religion*. She pointed out the lack of research by modern biblical scholars on women’s status and roles in the biblical culture and suggested the importance such research would have for contemporary women.¹⁶

Feminist hermeneutics did not really develop momentum until the 1970s, often considered the beginning of the second phase. At first, the approach was to restore the proper meaning of biblical texts by exposing the masculine-dominated and often misogynist interpretations of Scripture. In books such as *The Liberating Word*,¹⁷ by Protestant theologian Letty Russell, interpreters assumed that once the veneer of patriarchal interpretation was removed, the Bible would be liberated from sexism.

Soon it was recognized, however, not only that past interpretations were sexist but that many of the texts themselves also presented serious problems. For example, how do we handle the difference between the way God reacts to Sarah’s and to Abraham’s incredulity at the news of an impending old-age pregnancy (Gen. 17:17; 18:12)? How do we deal with the fact that for many purposes women were viewed as little more than chattel? These and other questions raised the issue of biblical authority. How could a book that

included so much that ran directly counter to feminism be accepted as authoritative, religiously or culturally? In one form or another, this question has dominated much feminist biblical thought in what some view as the third phase of feminist biblical criticism, beginning in the 1990s. Before considering this crucial question, we will first define what is meant by feminism and womanism and related terms.

DEFINITION OF FEMINISM

Feminism has a long history. No one definition would satisfy all feminists; rather, a range of understandings is needed. Nevertheless feminism may be broadly defined as a point of view in which women are understood to be fully human and thus entitled to equal rights and privileges. In no sense can they be considered subordinate or inferior.

Most feminists would agree that differences exist between men and women. Clearly, reproductive and other physical differences exist. Growing scientific evidence also shows that the female brain and the male brain develop differently because of differing hormonal influences.¹⁸ In addition, it is evident that culture has provided different sets of experiences for women and for men. Perhaps differently developed brains, different experiences, or some combination of these has resulted in different perspectives. Although not all women have had precisely the same experiences and women's brains are not all identical, there is some commonality, as well as some important differences, in the experiences that have shaped women of all races, creeds, and social classes.

Many people, both men and women, agree on a theoretical level with the proposition that men and women are morally equal.¹⁹ Being a feminist usually involves something more than assent to this principle. Feminism includes an awareness that society's norms are masculine and that to be a woman in such a society involves marginality. Since humans are adaptable, women are able to identify themselves with the masculine norms, just as members of ethnic minorities often identify with white norms.

As a child growing up in North Carolina, I was not aware that I had an accent. I heard the national commentators on television, and they sounded normal. I thought I sounded normal too. Therefore I reasoned that I sounded just as they did. Only when I went to college in Massachusetts did I become truly aware of my southern accent. Once recognized, it quickly disappeared. I cannot even imitate it anymore!

We might think that people would automatically experience life and literature from their own particular vantage point. In reality, the dominant culture trains everyone to identify with white males. For example, one of the Ten

Commandments prohibits coveting a neighbor's wife. In spite of the fact that the norm is male, the Ten Commandments are accepted by Jewish and Christian women as authoritative. Many women do not even notice that they have to edit this commandment in order to make it fit their situation. The continual process of translating directions to fit their concepts may result in women's alienation from themselves. It is analogous to the experience of ethnic minorities who rarely see positive role models from their ethnic group. Many are trained to think of themselves as unattractive, poor, and criminal. As a result, both ethnic minorities and women often must learn all over again how to be themselves.

A few years ago I read a very good book on the ministry. I assigned it to one of my classes at Howard University School of Divinity. Some of the students also liked it very much, but two women students noticed how sexist it was. Once they pointed it out to me, it was obvious, and I regretted that I had assigned the book. I had simply focused on the main points the author was making and ignored the sexism. I identified with the male norm so easily that I didn't even see the problem.

Feminists want to change the way people experience both life and literature. We want everyone, men and women, to be aware of the sexual codes in life and in books, even in the Bible. We want readers to notice not just the Moseses, the Davids, and the Solomons. We want them to consider also the Miriams, the Bathshebas, and the queens of Sheba. We want to unmask sexism and any other codes that are oppressive.²⁰

Some feminists view the goal of the feminist movement as the ascendancy of women. Others take the position that equality and reconciliation are the aims for which we should fight.²¹ The former group includes many separatists. Men are excluded, and most Christians in this camp reject existing religious institutions as hopeless. Mary Daly, a former Roman Catholic, is a good example.²² Very few feminist biblical interpreters today share this perspective, in which both men and traditional organized religion are completely rejected. More now may be termed post-Christian, or culturally rather than religiously Jewish. These feminists are not closely identified with a confessing faith tradition but still view the Bible as their cultural heritage. As Carole Fontaine puts it,

[W]e must continue to deal with the Bible because it is ours. That may sound too self-evident to be meaningful, but, restated the Bible is part of the religious and literary heritage of Jews and Christians. To jettison it because we see it with all its pits and valleys, all its byways into oppression, is to lessen our understanding of how we got where we are and what we are up against on the paths that we now choose to travel. Give up the loving intimacy and restored paradise of the Song of Songs? Do without the active, compassionate women of the book of Exodus? Throw aside the first

successful slaves' rebellion in recorded history? Live without the creation celebrated in Proverbs 8 or Job 38–42? Give up Jesus, the Jew who envisions a new humanity, demonstrating that there may be another paradigm of maleness, another way to be human, perhaps even another way to understand God than by the traditional means of structures of domination and submission? Never.²³

These feminists are also open to men with feminist perspectives, who believe in and are also working toward sexual equality and reconciliation. Although most of the commentators whose views are discussed in this book are female feminists, a few male feminists are included because their work, in my view, has contributed substantially to the work of feminist criticism. André LaCocque and David Gunn are examples of male feminists.

A significant portion of the work of all feminists is the analysis of present and past cultures regarding their failure to recognize women's full value and their oppression of women. Only as problems are named and their dynamics understood in detail can we develop strategies for overcoming them. At the same time, some of this analysis has been marred by a tendency to judge ancient cultures by modern standards in a way that does not take into account the economic, social, technological, and other constraints that shaped the peoples of the past (and the present, for that matter).

As early as 1982, but especially in the 1990s, the term "postfeminism" gained prominence. Like feminism, postfeminism is complex and multifaceted, but in general views feminism as no longer relevant. Some postfeminists criticize feminists for forcing women into a victim mentality; others suggest that many women agree with feminist goals but do not identify themselves as feminists, perhaps because of the stridency of some feminist voices; still others believe many women have become disenchanted with feminism and want traditional domestic roles. There is some truth in each of these critiques, even though they may be criticized for being simplistic. At the same time, postfeminism itself has suffered as a result of being viewed as overly right-wing and reactionary. As long as gender-based discrimination continues to exist, feminism will continue to have a reason for being and will continue to evolve, in part in response to critiques such as those leveled by postfeminists.²⁴

DEFINITION OF WOMANISM

Since womanism is less well known than feminism, we will consider it at greater length. Cheryl Sanders writes this in an opening essay for a roundtable discussion:

Womanist refers to a particular dimension of the culture of black women that is being brought to bear upon theological, ethical, biblical and other religious studies. These new interpretations of black women's religious experience and ideas have been sparked by the creative genius of Alice Walker. She defines the term womanist in her 1983 collection of prose writings *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. In essence, womanist means black feminist.²⁵

Some may ask why a special new name is needed. There are many varieties of feminism. Why can't black feminism be one among many? In responding to Sanders's roundtable essay, Shawn Copeland answers this question:

The adaptation of the term signals the acute and seething dissatisfaction of African American women scholars at the "stepsister" treatment we, and indeed all women of color, have received from white feminists inside and outside the church. The embrace of the term womanist by African American women scholars signifies our demand for serious, sustained, and substantive dialogue with white feminists. Such dialectic is crucial given Walker's *first* definition of womanist: "A black feminist or feminist of color." The very term, then, implies black women's reworking of the notion and term *feminist*. . . . It seems to me that black feminists and/or womanists seek a new and common ground from which all women and men may vigorously oppose racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, class exploitation, intentional limitation of the disabled, and—I add, as Christians must—anti-Semitism.²⁶

Not only have black feminists felt like stepsisters but they also have felt isolated from one another. Michelle Wallace wrote in 1982, before the beginning of womanism:

We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.²⁷

Womanism is a banner under which black feminists celebrate their unique identity. Cheryl Gilkes describes her reaction to the new term this way:

When I first read Alice Walker's definition of "womanist," it engendered the same joy and sense of good feeling within me that I felt that day, now twenty years ago, when I acquired my "Afro" (a hairstyle I still wear). It just felt good. It fit. It provided a way of stating who I was and how I felt about a lot of things.²⁸

Womanism as defined by Alice Walker, in the preface to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, has four parts. The term derives from the adjective "womanish," as opposed to "girlish." A mother says to her daughter, "You acting womanish," meaning that she is acting grown up, but in a way that is willful, courageous, audacious, even outrageous.²⁹ This does not mean that acting womanish is bad; nor is the mother who describes her daughter this way a bad mother. Emilie Townes explains:

Having been a participant in such dialogue in my youth, I can attest that the mother involved is far from resigned to such independent behavior. As a true mentor, she endeavors to encourage, restrain, and guide assertions of moral autonomy, liberation, and sexuality in a hostile society. She is an active participant in the liberative process, but also a circumspect guide. Both women are in tension, yoking dynamically the quest for personal growth and liberation with collective struggle.³⁰

The second part of Walker's definition has to do with the womanist's relationships with other adults. The womanist loves other women, sexually or nonsexually, but is also involved in the struggle to liberate her people from oppression. Womanists are not separatists.³¹ The third part of the definition lists the things womanists love: music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the folk, and themselves. The last part of the definition compares womanism and feminism. Womanism is to feminism as the color purple is to lavender.³²

Precisely how black feminist Christians should use the womanist label and four-part definition is a subject of much debate in the womanist scholarly community. This much is clear: there is more to womanism than celebration. Sanders writes:

As early as 1985, black women scholars in religion began publishing works that used the womanist perspective as a point of reference. The major sources for this work are the narratives, novels, prayers and other materials that convey black women's traditions, values and struggles, especially during the slavery period. Methodologically, womanist scholars tend to process and interpret these sources in three ways: (1) the celebration of black women's historical struggles and strengths; (2) the critique of various manifestations of black women's oppression; and (3) the construction of black women's theological and ethical claims.³³

Womanism is something more than feminism for black women. It is more colorful, exuberant, and audacious than its white counterpart.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between white feminism and black womanism is in the attitudes toward men. White women feel less solidarity with white men in particular and men in general than black women

feel with black men. White women tend to view white men as the problem. Womanists are concerned about sexism within African American men in particular and men in general. Nevertheless, the common history of the suffering of black women and black men because of their ethnicity forms a strong bond between African American women and men. The experience of slavery and the ways in which that institution tore the fabric of black families apart, sexually exploited black women's bodies, and denied the manhood of black men left deep impressions on African American culture. Thus there is a tension within womanism between the desire to fight sexism and the solidarity felt with black men.

This tension is one of the reasons that since the early nineties, black feminism has emerged as an alternative name for womanism. Womanism tends to support bonds between black men and women, minimizing the problems of the oppression of black women by black men, while feminism (at its best) focuses on the connections among women of all backgrounds in their common fight against marginalization.

In addition, according to Patricia Hill Collins, womanism is associated with black nationalism with its claims of racial superiority. Walker's famous "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" suggests that black women are womanists, while white women are merely feminist. However, working from a slightly different definition of black nationalism, Pearl Cleage believes that black feminism and black nationalism need not be at odds, because dedication to the freedom of black people includes working for the political, social, and legal equality of women, who constitute the majority of blacks.³⁴

Nevertheless, black women are in a bind. Claiming the womanist label tends to distance them from global women's issues, while choosing to be called black feminists may similarly put off some within the African American community. Collins suggests that perhaps the time has come to get beyond naming, by applying the central ideas in womanism and black feminism to analyzing gender issues in a range of relationships within black communities. She also recommends shifting the perspective from women's oppression to the gender-specific ways institutionalized racism works. This also helps reduce defensiveness, as it recognizes that "just as feminism does not automatically reside in female bodies, sexism does not reside in male ones."

Collins concludes with these thoughts:

Finally, despite the promise of this approach, it is important to consider the limitations of womanism, black feminism, and all other putatively progressive philosophies. Whether labeled "womanism," "black feminism," or something else, African American women could not possibly possess a superior vision of what community would look like, how justice might feel, and the like. This presupposed that such a perspective is arrived at without conflict, intellectual rigor, and political struggle. While black

women's particular location provides a distinctive angle of vision on oppression, this perspective comprises neither a privileged nor a complete standpoint. In this sense, grappling with the ideas of heterogeneity within black women's communities and hammering out a self-defined, black women's standpoint leads the way for other groups wishing to follow a similar path. As for black women, we can lead the way or we can follow behind. Things will continue to move on regardless of our choice.³⁵

One additional term needs definition. *Bosadi* (womanhood) is the name of choice of African–South African women. *Bosadi* interpreters are concerned with what ideal womanhood should be for African–South African women. Five elements are involved:

1. A critique of elements that oppress women in African culture and revival of aspects that uplift women
2. A critique of elements in the Bible that oppress women, while highlighting liberating elements
3. Awareness of the interplay of postapartheid racism, sexism, classism, and African culture that shape the reading of the Bible
4. Awareness of the African concept of *botho/ubuntu*, which stresses the unity and communality of all Africans, which means that the liberation of all African women requires the involvement of all Africans, both men and women
5. Awareness of the significance of the family, which however should not be interpreted to require rigid gender roles³⁶

Whenever I have had access to the work of womanist, black feminist, *feminista*, *mujerista* (Spanish for “feminist” and “womanist,” respectively), Asian, and *Bosadi* feminist biblical scholars, I have included it. I celebrate their insights and contributions to our understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, in the early twenty-first century, postcolonial biblical interpretation by men and women from around the globe has emerged in solidarity with feminist perspectives as a vital new approach that shares much with feminist methodologies and agendas. This can be seen especially clearly in the title of Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner's edited volume *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*.

HERMENEUTICS

With working definitions of feminism and womanism in hand, we turn now to hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. The insight that dominates biblical scholarship today is the recognition that neutral, objective readings of

texts, religious or otherwise, are a myth.³⁷ What have masqueraded as neutral readings were actually biased in the direction of the dominant group, that is, white men of a particular class, nationality, and time. They were no more neutral than feminist readings, and perhaps less so, because they were unaware of the point of view behind the interpretations. At the same time, at least some feminists value the *goal* of objectivity, especially in terms of trying to understand what women's lives were like in the past, even if we must acknowledge that in matters of history complete objectivity is an impossibility.

MY LIFE EXPERIENCES

Because our life experiences affect the way we interpret texts and interpretations of texts, I will describe my background briefly. I grew up in North Carolina and was raised as a Presbyterian in a family where religion was very important. My family is white and middle class, but that does not tell the whole story. From my mother, Helen DaVault Ogden, I received a grounding in Hebrew Bible stories. She read these stories to me nightly from a book that became so tattered that we covered it with pink floral wallpaper to keep it together. I still remember the print vividly. When the book disintegrated further, we finally discarded it. For years I longed to know which children's Bible storybook had such a profound impact on me.

After my mother read these words in the first edition of this book, she found a copy of the book we had used, Jesse Lyman Hurlbut's *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible*, and gave it to me for Christmas. Originally copyrighted in 1904, it was recopyrighted by his son Charles C. Hurlbut in 1932 and 1947. The author told Bible stories to his children and their children and their friends for fifty years before writing the stories down for additional generations to hear. In reading through this book now, I am fascinated to see that though the stories are told from a precritical point of view, women do not fare too badly. Eve eats the fruit first, then gives to her husband who eats, but she is not vilified. Rahab is included, though not her profession. The story of David and Bathsheba's affair is omitted. Ruth and Esther are there with positive roles.

Hearing those stories over and over again, I learned to rejoice when through God's power the weak overcame the strong. I also learned from my mother a profound concern for the dignity of every human being. When I was a teenager, my mother was a leader for a black Girl Scout troop. Today she is deeply concerned about the rights of Palestinians in Israel.

My father, Henry Allen Ogden, gave me a strong sense of control over my destiny. He impressed upon me the conviction that I could do whatever I set my mind to. These seeds later sprouted into a sense of self-worth in spite of

what my culture told me. In his retirement my father, who worked as an engineer and manager during his professional years, has found tremendous satisfaction in doing a variety of service projects utilizing his carpentry skills. His concern for helping people has made a deep impression on me.

I am also grateful for the intellectual awakening that my high school English teacher cultivated in me. I can never thank Leslie Pearse enough for what she did for me. She taught me how to think critically and ask the right questions.

Beyond the seeds my mother planted in me as a child, my consciousness began to be raised about racial issues when I went to Howard Divinity School. I chose to go there, not because of any particularly liberal ideas, but because my personal circumstances brought me to Washington. I wanted to go to a university-related nondenominational seminary, and Howard is the only one in Washington.

The consciousness-raising process continued over thirty years of living in Washington, D.C., where my children attended public schools that were more than ninety percent black. My return to Howard as a faculty member fifteen years ago accelerated the recovery from racism. Howard Divinity School is an exciting, cutting-edge seminary with some of the sharpest students and faculty anywhere.

My feminist consciousness also gradually developed as a result of experiences of mostly subtle, but some not so subtle, sexism and sexual harassment in the church, where for almost twenty years I served in various capacities as an ordained Presbyterian minister. The opportunity to teach a course on women in the Hebrew Bible at Howard immeasurably contributed to my acceptance of my own feminism.

Graduate training was a formative time for me intellectually. My PhD is in Semitic languages (Hebrew, Akkadian, Arabic, Ge'ez—the classical language of Ethiopia, etc.) from the Catholic University of America. My dissertation was a rhetorical critical study of Jeremiah 50–51. While at Howard, I learned about African American culture; at Catholic University, I experienced and came to appreciate Catholic culture for the first time.

My experience of Jewish culture has been more limited. I have attended services in Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations and have officiated at a number of interfaith weddings with a liberal Reform rabbi. Jews from Austria, Russia, and Georgia (formerly part of the Soviet Union) are friends my family made because of our common involvement in music and art.

The metropolitan Washington area is increasingly multicultural. Among my friends have been women born and raised in the Dominican Republic, Thailand, and Canada. My adult children's friends include Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos. Although such friendships do not make us

experts on the cultures of our friends, they do change our perspectives in important ways. When I wrote this book I was married, but after over thirty years of marriage my former husband and I divorced. I was single for several years and have recently remarried. My daughters graduated from college and law school and are embarking on work in law firms. I am now much freer than ever before to pursue my intellectual and creative interests.

ASSESSING DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS

The recognition that interpreters bring different life experiences to the reading and interpreting task does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Several criteria may be used to judge the quality of an interpretation: internal consistency, logic, coherence with the text and with the stated interpretive principles of the interpreter.

An example from history may be helpful. In the nineteenth century, it was common for Southern slavery apologists to use the Bible as justification for their position.³⁸ Today we find it difficult to understand how they found warrant in Scripture for this cruel practice. Certainly slavery exists in the Bible, but slavery in ancient Mediterranean cultures was of a different sort than that practiced in the United States in modern times. In addition, although the biblical authors took slavery for granted, as they did that the earth was flat, this does not mean that the Bible is proslavery any more than that its view of the shape of the earth is normative.³⁹

Is the modern consensus that slavery is immoral correct? I believe that it is. The apologists for slavery drew false conclusions from the biblical materials they used. There is a lack of coherence between text and interpretation. Today, most biblical readers recognize that a form of slavery existed in biblical times and was accepted as part of life. However, nothing in the Bible suggests that slavery as it evolved in the modern world is morally acceptable, and much suggests its immorality. Thus we may say that the contemporary understanding of the Bible's position on slavery is more nearly correct than the one espoused by the advocates for slavery. Some interpretations are better than others. Contrary to popular opinion, one cannot prove everything one wants to by the Bible. Such "proofs" are based on proof-texting: taking texts out of their literary and cultural context, as well as ignoring other, equally relevant, biblical texts.

Although some interpretations do not stand up to close scrutiny, there are many gaps in the text that leave room for more than one interpretation. Such texts are said to be polyvalent or multivalent. The author who originally wrote the text or the editor who brought it into its final form presumably had something specific in mind, but the text as it stands is open to more than one interpretation.

Sometimes we are not even aware that we are filling in a gap. A personal example will illustrate. When I was teaching an adult Sunday school class on Esther, I commented to the class that Vashti was expected to present herself to a drunken male audience with nothing on but her crown. My class was surprised. They had not read the story that way at all. When we looked at the text closely, we discovered what it said: "On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold" (Esth. 1:10–11). The text does not explicitly say that Vashti was to appear wearing only her crown, but it is possible to read the text this way.⁴⁰ My Sunday school class got a good laugh out of this, because I, the minister, had read the story in a more risqué way than they had and in a way that was not strictly necessary.

Although we may fill in some gaps in a number of ways, the cultural context of the stories provides some constraints. We need to be careful that we do not unconsciously read contemporary values into the ancient stories. We also should not fill in literary gaps in a way that is inconsistent with information in the story. There is not an endless number of acceptable readings, and not all readings are valid.

We may distinguish between emic and etic readings. Emic readings involve looking at the story from an insider's perspective, as much as is possible, given the distance in time and geography from the text. Etic readings, on the other hand, view the narrative from an outsider's perspective. For example, an emic reading of the biblical high valuation of women's roles as mothers understands that in a subsistence farming economy women's birthing and nurturing of children, especially the males, who could devote more manual labor to the farm operation, was of great economic importance and thus practically was highly valuable to the community. In addition, the fact that most women probably did not live much past thirty meant that women did not have a long life span in which to do much other than domestic responsibilities and some physical labor in the fields. An etic reading from a contemporary Western feminist perspective is not as appreciative of this high valuation because of the modern awareness that women have many more gifts and talents to offer than simply giving birth and taking care of children. Both the emic and the etic reading have validity; together they are more balanced than either one alone.

Heather McKay, in reacting to some of the more negative etic readings suggests that

it is time to resile from the recent (and current) practice of blaming and apostrophizing male-authored and androcentric texts. Admittedly this has been a necessary procedure . . . , but the procedure should now be mod-

ulated, if not abandoned. That negative and angry stance will no longer serve the purpose of forward-looking feminist scholars who wish to move beyond a rhetoric of blame and who wish to foster the creation of, and be able to work within, a gender-neutral, or, better, a both-gender-friendly, climate of discussion in biblical studies.⁴¹

In a similar vein, although dealing with a slightly different issue, Alicia Ostriker advises:

Yet if a feminist's stance toward Scripture is inevitably adversarial, it can also be more than that. For to diagnose is not to heal. If our object is to retrieve from the palimpsest of patriarchal narrative what the narrative attempts to bury and deny, we may seek for traces or tracks of the female story. Reading with the eyes of desire, we may peer between the lines for a lost past, and we may discover fresh and transforming meanings within supposedly familiar stories. Further, remembering that the Bible was—whether inspired from above or not—written down here below, by human beings over a period of millennia in acts of composition not so very different from our own, we may want to recognize how filled it is with gaps and fractures, and take advantage of its contradictions. When we do so, we cease to posit a simple polarity or adversarial relationship between male text and female re-writers. Instead, we begin to discover that our revisionist interpretations of the Bible are not simply forbidden by the text and tradition we are challenging. They are also invited and supported.⁴²

The pluriform nature of interpretation is sometimes disturbing to modern believers. Even more upsetting is the discovery that biblical texts do not always give a uniform or consistent picture. Kathleen Farmer comments on this situation as it exists in Proverbs, but her words could be extended to the entire Hebrew Bible:

I suggest that the literary conventions of Israel were quite different from our own, that those who collected the “words of the wise” and those who found them worthy of inclusion in our canon of Scripture were not as concerned with unanimity or consistency as we often are. Studying the texts themselves leads to the conclusion that plurality of thought was not merely tolerated but was actually embraced and celebrated by the wise and those who held them in esteem. We modern readers ought not to expect the biblical writings to conform to our own literary notions of propriety.⁴³

Between the postmodern awareness that all interpretations are influenced by the context of the interpreter and that the texts themselves are often multivalent and inconsistent, on the one hand, and the human yearning for handles on the truth, on the other, tension exists.⁴⁴ What we accept as truth are the readings that resonate with our experiences. These resonances are not just

individual. They are to some degree conditioned by the various communities of which we are a part.⁴⁵

Human knowledge is limited. Nevertheless we can be aware of our limitations and simultaneously have firmly rooted convictions. Such convictions empower us to work energetically for the benefit of the larger human community.

FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

Feminist hermeneutics may be defined as the interpreting of texts with the principles of feminism in mind. To put it another way, feminist hermeneutics is the business of reading texts with sensitivity to issues of gender. That, however, is a rather cold definition of an enterprise that is anything but emotionally cool. Phyllis Trible has a wonderful definition: "a critique of culture in light of misogyny."⁴⁶ Renita Weems broadens the focus: "A challenge for marginalized readers in general, and African American women in particular, has been to use whatever means necessary to recover the voice of the oppressed within biblical texts."⁴⁷ It should be added, however, that not all feminists are looking at gender issues with the assumption that everything was negative; some are seeking to understand ancient women's experience with less judgmental lenses. Nevertheless, the fact that they are interested in what the world was like for biblical women still sets them apart from traditional mainstream biblical scholars who rarely concern themselves with the clues in texts relating to women.

The energy for feminist hermeneutics comes principally from the experience of women, many of whom are painfully aware of living in a society in which the norm is still largely masculine, in spite of a great deal of progress. For womanists and other nonwhite feminists, the pain is intensified by the awareness of the Eurocentric nature of the norm.

Yet even the interpretation of our experience as oppressive comes in part from the Judeo-Christian tradition with its liberation themes.⁴⁸ So we critique the tradition with tools derived from the tradition in the first place. Christians, Jews, and scholars from other faith traditions, as well as those not identified with any religious community, are involved in feminist interpretation of biblical texts. Blacks and whites, as well as people from Asian, Latin, and other ethnic backgrounds, are making important contributions. Each brings a slightly different perspective to the work, but all share in the bond of struggle against sexism.

Renita Weems has addressed the issue of womanist hermeneutics. Her approach, cited above, suggests that womanists may use many different

approaches to interpret texts and that the focus may be on any characters, men or women, who are especially marginalized or oppressed.

Mexican biblical scholar Elsa Tamez believes that interpreters need to gain distance from traditional interpretations. This distance will make it possible to come closer to the text. She suggests that Latin American readers will then be able to take into account their own particular experiences as they read the Scriptures. In particular, Latin American women need to distance themselves from what she describes as the “macho culture.” Latin American women also read within a framework of poverty, malnutrition, repression, torture, Indian genocide, and war. Finally, Latin American women need to bring their perspective to bear not just on texts about women but on the entire Bible.⁴⁹

Kwok Pui-Lan, a Chinese Christian feminist, reads the Bible in a non-Christian world and questions whether the Bible contains all the truth. She measures the authority and meaningfulness of the Bible within the context of her Christian community. She uses Asian cultural and religious traditions and sacred texts as the context for biblical reflection and sees the social biography of her people as the key for biblical interpretation.⁵⁰

Similarly, Chung Hyun Kyung believes that Asian women’s theology must locate God’s revelation in the lives of Korean people in order to overrun the legacy of the Bible’s colonizing function, which served to make Asian Christians dependent on Western biblical interpretation.⁵¹

CONTRIBUTIONS OF FEMINIST INTERPRETERS

Some of the areas in which feminist interpreters have made important contributions are:

1. Beginning a systematic investigation into the status and role of women in ancient Israelite culture
2. The rediscovery and assessment of overlooked biblical traditions involving women
3. The reassessment of famous passages and books about women, such as the book of Ruth
4. The discovery of feminine biblical images of God
5. Developments in the area of translation principles relating to women’s concerns⁵²
6. Consideration of the history of the reception and appropriation of biblical texts about women, in various cultural settings, especially in art, both graphic and cinematographic, literature, and most recently music

Another area that feminists in general and womanists in particular could fruitfully address is biblical women with special ties to Africa. I have tried to do some of this work in this volume, but much more needs to be done.

PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy, a term that feminists frequently use, needs clarification before we move on. Most of the words that feminists employ to describe “the problem,” such as androcentrism, misogyny, and sexism, are used with their ordinary dictionary definitions. The word “patriarchy” is different. Technically, it means the rule of the father. In feminist literature, it includes androcentrism, misogyny, and sexism.

Not all feminist interpreters are satisfied with the word patriarchy.⁵³ They contend that it is emotionally charged and somewhat vague. Because it is used so frequently by feminist interpreters, however, I will use it in its generally accepted meaning of “male dominated” and “oppressive of women.”

However, I want to challenge some of the modern blinders that sometimes prevent contemporary readers from a fair assessment of ancient culture. Gut reactions need to give way to knowledgeable, critical reflection on biblical texts and the ancient milieu in comparison with the modern world. For example, as discussed above regarding emic and etic readings, biblical women who produced many children, especially male children, were highly esteemed. In a premodern agricultural setting, sons were valuable economic commodities. Today, in the modern Western economic world, children are economic liabilities, though highly valued for other reasons. Is modern culture’s tendency to value women who bring home large paychecks, especially when their work may be drudgery, any more humane than the ancient world’s esteem of fertile mothers? In both the ancient and modern context, economics matters. It shapes our values and choices.

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

For post-Christian, culturally Jewish, and separatist feminists, Scripture has no religious authority. For feminists who identify themselves with a faith tradition tied to the Hebrew Bible, however, the issue of the authority of Scripture is very important. This matter has been debated for centuries. The development of higher criticism in the nineteenth century started heated discussions that continue in some religious communities to this day.

Feminist studies of Jewish and Christian Scriptures have provided a new focus for these issues. The problem is: How can a feminist accept a sacred literature that includes so much that suggests or even sanctions the inferiority of women? Either the sanctity of the Scripture or the principles of feminism are called into question. Tribble puts it this way: "I face a terrible dilemma: Choose ye this day whom you will serve: the God of the fathers or the God of sisterhood. If the God of the fathers, then the Bible supplies models for your slavery. If the God of sisterhood, then you must reject patriarchal religion and go forth without models to claim your freedom."⁵⁴

For most feminist Jews and Christians, the basic tenets of feminism are nondebatable. How one understands the Scriptures is open to consideration. On one end of the spectrum are those who can find no way of resolving the tension between feminism and the Bible. For them, the Bible is irremediably androcentric, irredeemably sexist. Many feminists in this group do not wish to renounce religion entirely, only the sexist forms of it they find oppressive. Mary Daly is the leading example. Women of this persuasion are finding spiritual nourishment in the worship of goddesses, drawing from ancient sources. Although philosophically their position may appear extreme, the insights of these women are touching the larger American spiritual community.

Those who do not categorically reject the Bible deal with it in a number of ways. One of the most helpful discussions comes from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.⁵⁵ She outlines three basic approaches and a number of categories within the first two. The first one, she says, is used by feminists who belong to conservative churches, although these methods are used by feminists who consider themselves liberal as well. The more conservatively inclined Christians hold to the traditional belief that the canon forms an inerrant unity in which there can be no theological inconsistencies. Schüssler Fiorenza outlines five hermeneutical strategies within this first approach:

1. The *loyalist* approach uses a hierarchy of truth method. For example, many feminists believe that the admonition to submission in Ephesians 5 should be understood as mutual submission and that it must be understood in the light of Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
2. A *universalist* and *essentialist* approach is used by some feminists, often in conjunction with the loyalist approach. Texts that are timeless, such as Galatians 3:28, take priority over texts that speak to a particular historical situation, such as 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, which enjoins women to wear a head covering or a certain style of hair.

3. The *compensatory* strategy seeks to balance the androcentric nature of Scripture with emphasis on stories of strong women, feminine imagery, and so forth.
4. The *contrast* strategy involves making a contrast between biblical culture and contemporary culture. For example, to compare Abraham's action of passing Sarah off as his sister, with all its attendant sexual danger for Sarah, to the insights of modern feminism on rape, is to compare not just apples with oranges but apples with camels.
5. The *redemptive* strategy seeks to redeem Scripture from patriarchal confines, similar to the third strategy. The redemptive method involves gathering texts that show signs of feminine strength and retelling the stories in memory of the victims. This approach has been used extensively by Phyllis Trible.⁵⁶

Schüssler Fiorenza's second approach describes feminists who recognize the pervasive androcentric character of Scripture and who seek to isolate a central authoritative biblical principle that validates equal rights and liberation struggles, which in effect creates a canon within a canon. Four strategies within this approach can be discerned:

1. Some feminists seek a liberating theme, tradition, text, or principle from the Bible as *the* hermeneutical key to interpreting the Bible. For example, Letty Russell suggests "God's promises for the mending of creation."⁵⁷
2. Another strategy sees the Bible becoming authoritative in the interplay between the ancient world that produced the text, the literary text itself, and the modern reader of the text. This position, as proposed by Sharon Ringe, rejects any criteria extrinsic to the biblical text for evaluating the various biblical texts, believing instead that the Bible contains its own critique. For example, the principle of "no harm" can be gleaned from Isaiah 11:6–9.
3. A third strategy, called a hermeneutics of *correlation*, recognizes that the Bible does not explicitly articulate a critical feminist norm. Theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether express such a norm, for example, "the full humanity of women," and then correlate it with a biblical principle such as the prophetic dynamic in the Hebrew Bible.
4. A fourth strategy suggests, in effect, canonizing women's experience as a kind of third testament.⁵⁸

Schüssler Fiorenza suggests a third alternative to the conservative and "canon within a canon" approaches. In both of these approaches, authority is located in the text. Her approach sees authority located in what she calls woman-church, essentially the feminist women and men who seek or experience God's liberating presence in the midst of the struggle for liberation.⁵⁹

She writes: “A critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation therefore abandons the quest for a liberating canonical text and shifts its focus to a discussion of the *process of biblical interpretation* [emphasis hers] that can grapple with the oppressive as well as the liberating functions of particular biblical texts in women’s lives and struggles.”⁶⁰ She says that this approach includes four “key moments”: a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of historical interpretation and reconstruction, a hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation, and a hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization.

The hermeneutics of suspicion “scrutinizes the presuppositions and interests of interpreters, and those of biblical commentators as well as the androcentric strategies of the biblical text itself.”⁶¹ The hermeneutics of historical interpretation and reconstruction attempts to reconstruct history in such a way that marginalized and subordinated “others” can be visible. The hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation “assesses the oppressive or liberatory tendencies inscribed in the text as well as the functions of the text in historical and contemporary situations.”⁶² The hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization “retells biblical stories and celebrates our biblical foresters in a feminist/womanist key.”⁶³

The authority of the Bible is both a personal, emotional issue and an intellectually demanding one. Some feminists have rejected the Bible’s authority because of its androcentrism. Many others have sought ways in which the liberating messages of the Bible may be heard without accepting the sexism found in significant parts of the Scriptures. None of the methods has won universal acceptance. Ultimately each of us accepts as authoritative those texts that ring true within the context of our experiences.

METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

Related to the issue of the authority of Scripture is the question of what methods feminist interpreters use in approaching the texts. The vast majority of feminist biblical scholars are trained in what is called the historical-critical method. Although we can debate, using the words of the African American poet Audre Lorde, whether her master’s tools can dismantle her master’s house, the consensus is that these tools are essential, if not sufficient.⁶⁴ Within the historical-critical method, Katharine Sakenfeld delineates three approaches.⁶⁵ These methods are not rigidly separated. They are sometimes used in combination.

The first approach is literary criticism. Trible is the best-known practitioner of this approach. Her type of literary criticism is called “rhetorical criticism.” The literary critic studies the text to determine what the words and combinations of words mean.⁶⁶

There are many forms of literary criticism. Among them are narratology and speech-act theory, utilized by literary critic Mieke Bal. This very technical kind of literary approach is difficult to summarize briefly. The results of Bal's work will be included in the chapters below, but a description of her method is beyond the scope of this book. Poststructural literary theories emphasize the reader's response to the text rather than either the author's (or the editor's) intention or the text itself.⁶⁷

The second method Sakenfeld calls "culturally cued literary reading." This approach reads the text in its social context. In contrast to the first method, which looks at the text without much reference to the historical or social setting in which it was written, this second approach is acutely aware of the need to interpret texts in the context of the social world that gave rise to them. Esther Fuchs and Renita Weems favor this method,⁶⁸ which is widely used today. Gale Yee's sociological methodology also fits into this category.⁶⁹

The third approach focuses more on historical inquiry than on literary study. Using archaeological evidence, data from other ancient cultures, and comparative sociological and anthropological models, scholars such as Carol Meyers and Phyllis Bird try to reconstruct an accurate picture of women's lives in ancient Israel.⁷⁰ Eleanor Ferris Beach, who begins with iconographic evidence, and Susan Ackerman also belong here. Of the three approaches, this has the fewest practitioners, in part because the data is so limited and the training more technical than in other approaches.

Because the Hebrew Bible is written in an ancient Semitic language, biblical scholars must concern themselves with philology, or what the words mean. Determining the correct meaning is not always easy, because biblical Hebrew is a dead language (as is the Koine Greek in which some of the apocryphal stories are written, as well as the New Testament), and many words occur only a few times, some only once. Context and comparisons with similar words in other related languages sometimes provide clues. Several important studies by feminist scholars involve a philological approach.

Other disciplines of biblical studies are sometimes used, such as textual criticism, which is the study of the ancient texts that underlie the translations used in churches and synagogues. In addition, because many feminist biblical interpreters are persons of faith and some are ordained ministers, theological and ethical approaches are often combined with any or all of the above.⁷¹ Some interpreters also apply various types of psychological models to the stories.

Because many of the stories of the biblical characters are probably a mixture of history and fiction, most feminist biblical scholars do not attempt to reconstruct the historical persons. Most restrict their efforts to studying the stories from a literary perspective, with more or less reference to what is known of the history and culture of the period. Those who approach the material historically

usually are trying not so much to reconstruct individuals as to understand women's roles at various points in the history of ancient Israel.

WOMEN'S STATUS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Most of what we know of women's status in ancient Israel comes from laws and stories in the Hebrew Bible. Before we turn to the biblical stories about women, it will be useful background to look at what the biblical laws tell us about women's status.⁷²

Biblical law is very different from modern law. There are several collections of laws, from different historical periods and of different types. None of these collections is comprehensive. A common ancient Near Eastern culture (including southwest Asia and north Africa) is assumed, including patrilineality (descent traced through the father), patrilocality (the wife moving into the household of the husband's family), extended family, polygyny, concubinage, slavery, and the double standard. However, biblical laws exact harsher penalties for sexual transgressions than their counterparts in other ancient Near Eastern law. Similarly, laws that sought to maintain the exclusive worship of Yahweh were quite severe.

Most of the apodictic laws, those written in direct address, such as the Ten Commandments, were written to and for males. "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" is clearly not addressed to women. The casuistic laws similarly began usually with the phrase "If a man [ʾiṣ = male] does X . . ."

The basic unit in Hebrew society was the family, headed by the father; it was called "the father's house." The religious community in turn was made up of adult males, all those who had been circumcised. These are the people Israel, who are also the warriors. This community shaped the laws that aimed to preserve the integrity of the family, where the family is frequently identified with its male head. Laws protected the man's rights against external and internal threats. Sometimes laws were concerned with dependents' rights.

The woman's primary responsibility was to bear children for her husband. Adultery by a married woman was punishable by death. Infidelity by the husband was not considered a crime, unless it was with a married woman. Brides were supposed to be virgins. If found to have committed fornication, they could theoretically be executed. However, a man who violated an unmarried woman had simply to marry her. Prostitution was tolerated, although female prostitutes were outcasts. Divorce was practiced, but only as a male prerogative.

Normally, property was passed from father to son. Ordinarily, only when no sons were available could daughters inherit, and then they were required to marry within their clan. As a result, the property would remain within the

clan. Their sons would eventually inherit the property. A related legal institution was levirate marriage. In this arrangement a (sonless) widow mated with her brother-in-law to obtain heirs for her dead husband.

Before marriage, a woman was dependent on her father for support. After marriage, she relied on her husband. If her husband died and they had no children, the property would revert to the husband's clan. The widow was then expected to return to her father's house. This apparently was not always possible. As a result, widows were often the subject, along with orphans and sojourners, of prophetic pleas for aid.

Only men could be priests. Only males were required to attend the three annual pilgrim feasts. Women were also frequently prohibited from participation because of ritual uncleanness from menstruation and childbirth. The period of impurity observed after a son was born was seven days, but after a daughter, fourteen days. Other laws placed greater monetary value on men than on women. For example, Leviticus 27:1–8 lists the different amounts of shekels required to release males and females of different ages from vows relating to religious service. It must be recognized, however, that because of men's greater physical strength they were able to contribute more labor than women or children could. In the contemporary world, children and senior citizens are often charged lower prices at restaurants or theaters, but this does not mean that they are considered either less or more valuable.⁷³

On the positive side, children were told to honor both father and mother. Most of the laws about impurity were egalitarian in theory, if not in practice. Laws that dealt with major ethical, moral, and cultic sins did not discriminate on the basis of sex. Both men and women could undertake binding religious obligations. However, a father or husband could annul the vow of a daughter or wife if "family" interests dictated.

The legal situation for ancient Israelite women was not very attractive. Bird summarizes as follows:

The picture of woman obtained from the Old Testament laws can be summarized in the first instance as that of a legal non-person; where she does become visible it is as a dependent, and usually an inferior, in a male-centered and male-dominated society. The laws, by and large, do not address her; most do not even acknowledge her existence. She comes to view only in situations (a) where males are lacking in essential socio-economic roles (the female heir); (b) where she requires special protection (the widow); (c) where sexual offenses involving women are treated; and (d) where sexually defined or sexually differentiated states, roles and/or occupations are dealt with (the female slave or captive as wife, the woman as mother, and the sorceress). Where ranking occurs she is always inferior to the male. Only in her role as mother is she accorded status and honor

equivalent to a man's. Nevertheless she is always subject to the authority of some male (father, husband or brother), except when widowed or divorced—an existentially precarious type of independence in Israel.⁷⁴

If the legal situation of women in ancient Israel makes your blood boil, take a few deep breaths. Some of the stories we will consider will make these laws appear to be generous. Yet we should not be quick to judge. The modern world and ancient Israel are so different that it is easy to condemn. It is more difficult, but more helpful, first to understand. Then we may be in a position to evaluate.

THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF HEBREW WOMEN BEFORE THE MONARCHY

One voice that has been raised in this direction is that of archaeologist and Hebrew Bible scholar Carol Meyers.⁷⁵ She sees the emphasis on women's maternal roles as deriving from economic necessity. The Hebrews needed to produce many children to survive in the primitive agrarian society that existed in the early years of their community. She argues for the existence of much greater equality between the sexes in the premonarchic period than later. She suggests that changes in women's status may have been caused by the centralization of monarchy, which was in turn precipitated by external threats.

On the basis of archaeological finds, some biblical data, and a cross-disciplinary approach to interpreting the various data, Meyers paints a picture of a decentralized society, in which a little new technology made subsistence in the highlands of Palestine possible. Cisterns were used to catch scarce rainwater. Hillsides were terraced to prevent erosion and preserve as much moisture as possible. Both women and men had to contribute to the huge amount of labor needed to build and maintain the terraces and to sow, cultivate, and reap the crops. In this situation, lots of children were needed to increase the labor supply. A high birthrate was also a hedge against frequent losses to disease and war. As a result, women spent a large amount of time and energy in childbirth and related activities. Nevertheless they still provided around forty percent of the labor, not counting their work in childbearing and infant nurture, which also contributed to the economic viability of the community.

In this decentralized society, the split between domestic and public life that later occurred was nonexistent. Men and women worked side by side interdependently to survive. Meyers depicts a life of hard work, but of much greater equality than we might have expected in this early period in biblical history.

THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF WOMEN DURING THE MONARCHY

The social-scientific literature about women's lives during the monarchy is meager. It may be that women lost power and status during this period of more centralized government. This is the view of Naomi Steinberg.⁷⁶ Carol Meyers believes that because most people continued their agrarian life style, the changes from the premonarchic to the monarchic period may not have been dramatic.⁷⁷ Women transformed crops into edible forms, produced clothing, and nurtured children, all time-consuming work.⁷⁸ Some women also worked "outside the home," weaving fabric, working for the palace as cooks, bakers, couriers, and perfumers, and in the arts as singers, dancers, and poets.⁷⁹

THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF WOMEN AFTER THE MONARCHY

The postexilic period has generally been thought of as a low period for women. This is largely because of the negative attitudes expressed especially toward foreign women in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, Tamara Eskenazi disagrees. On the basis of evidence from Elephantine, a Jewish colony in Egypt, she writes:

These documents from Elephantine begin to sketch legal and social roles for women that we do not normally ascribe to biblical or postexilic communities. They show women in the Jewish community who are able to rise from slavery to a position in the temple, to divorce their husbands, hold property, buy and sell. The documents also confirm the fact that daughters inherit even when there is a son. Consequently, these documents compel us to revise some typical assumptions about women's roles in the postexilic era.⁸⁰

Eskenazi believes further that a similar legal situation may have obtained in Jewish Palestine. Her belief is based on one important supposition. Eskenazi and a number of scholars suspect that the real opposition to foreign marriages in the postexilic community was economic and political, even though the language used is religious and ethnic.

Accordingly, ethnic purity may be an excuse for a more pragmatic economic and social concern about loss of inherited land. This explanation for the opposition to mixed marriages is appealing. Its strongest support comes, in my opinion, not from the sociological or linguistic analyses, but

from Elephantine documents such as the ones we have discussed. *The fear of mixed marriages with their concomitant loss of property to the community makes most sense when women can, in fact, inherit* [emphasis hers]. Such loss would not be possible when women did not have legal rights to their husbands' or fathers' land.⁸¹

Eskenazi also finds references in Ezra-Nehemiah to women playing important roles. She notes that in Nehemiah 8:2–4, at the climax of the restoration of the temple, when the Torah is read publicly, both men and women are present. Unlike the first giving of the law at Sinai, when it is not clear that women were present, here they clearly are.⁸²

THE INTERSECTION OF SEX AND RACE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Many feminist interpreters have studied women's stories in the Hebrew Bible over the last thirty years. A few black biblical scholars have focused on issues of race and ethnicity in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Leading the way is African American New Testament scholar of Howard Divinity School Cain Felder, with his best-selling book *Troubling Biblical Waters*⁸³ and its sequel *Stony the Road We Trod*.⁸⁴

There are even fewer black female biblical scholars than black male biblical scholars in this country. Renita Weems has done pioneering work in this area.⁸⁵ Both Felder and Weems point out that racial prejudice does not exist in the Scriptures.⁸⁶ In the Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon) 1:5 the woman says, "I am black and beautiful." Modern prejudice, however, has been imposed on the biblical material. The passage just quoted has often been translated, "I am dark, but comely" (KJV) or the like, and understood to be a negative comment on people of African descent.⁸⁷ The context, however, suggests that she is ashamed of her sunburnt complexion, not of her natural hue. Song of Songs 1:6 says, "Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me."

Although racism as we know it today is a modern phenomenon, alien to the world of the Bible, the ancients were certainly aware of ethnic differences and experienced tensions that are not entirely dissimilar to modern problems. Nevertheless there was no animosity in ancient times toward people with darker complexions. To the contrary, Africans were highly regarded.⁸⁸

Therefore it is important that we not read into the biblical texts racist assumptions that are alien to the Bible. This is an excellent example of how important it is to be aware of our assumptions. Without such awareness, it is likely that we will transfer our modern attitudes back into the ancient texts

and thus misread the texts. Most white Americans assume that the biblical characters looked like them. This is evident in the pictures in children's Sunday school literature and even in adult material. For example, on the cover of Edith Deen's *All of the Women of the Bible*, three women, all obviously northern European, are depicted. Where is Hagar, the daughter of Pharaoh, or the Queen of Sheba? Even the matriarchs should not be depicted as though they were what we call white.

Beyond the biblical women who were clearly African, we know that the Hebrew people were mixed ethnically. Abraham and Sarah left their homeland in Mesopotamia and journeyed to Canaan. Because of famine, however, their descendants went down to Egypt, where they stayed for four hundred years, intermarrying with the Egyptians.

Joseph married an Egyptian woman by the name of Asenath. From that union were born Manasseh and Ephraim, two of the eponymous ancestors of the Israelite tribes. Moses himself was recognized as an Egyptian by his Midianite father-in-law's daughters. His name, as well as a host of other famous biblical characters, was probably Egyptian.⁸⁹ He was married to a Cushite, that is, a black woman (Num. 12:1). The crowd that left Egyptian bondage is called "mixed" by the Bible (Exod. 12:38).

Thus we may describe the Hebrews as Afri-Asiatics.⁹⁰ Today we would be more likely to call them black or mixed than white. The representations of the Hebrews presented in so many Sunday school booklets as white Europeans simply will not do.

Some years ago I saw a beautiful coffee table book of color photographic portraits of men who had been chosen by the author as modern-day representatives of the disciples of Jesus. Each portrait was accompanied by written text about the disciples. Of course, we don't know what the disciples looked like. Nevertheless I was intrigued by the attempt to depict what the disciples might have looked like. Following that model, I ask the reader to picture women as they may have looked in biblical times. These imagined portraits should not look like women of primarily northern European descent. Biblical women are people of color. If a picture is worth a thousand words, perhaps these portraits will help as much as the many words in this book to change the image of biblical women that we moderns carry in our heads. Although the ethnic mixtures of Hebrew women were not the same as contemporary African Americans, since they had more Asian and less European ancestry than most African Americans, they were certainly people of color.

As we study the women of the Hebrew Bible, we will take note of those whose ethnic identity is clearly African. We will also celebrate the ethnic diversity that is present in the ancient Hebrew community. This is important as one small way we can lay the foundations for the multicultural world into which we are moving.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Although this volume includes many feminist biblical interpreters, not every author or every book and article could be included. My choices are based on a number of criteria. First, I have included authors and their works that have been historically significant, even if their views are no longer widely accepted. My choices are not limited to interpreters with doctorates. Serious lay commentators as well as credentialed biblical scholars are included. I have tried to be inclusive of groups that have traditionally been marginalized. The work of men who share feminist principles and also the work of some women who may not be comfortable with the label “feminist” are included. I do not know personally all the authors I discuss. Few explicitly label themselves feminist or antifeminist. My choices are based on the content of their work. A few unpublished papers are included that I have heard at scholarly meetings when I felt the work was important and not covered by anything already in print. Inevitably, some feminist interpreters and their work have been left out. I hope that I have included enough, however, to give a good overview of this ever-expanding field.

HELPMATES, HARLOTS, AND HEROES: A WORD ABOUT THE TITLE

The title of this book describes many of the types of women we find in the Bible, but not all. “Helpmates” comes from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of Genesis 2:18. It refers to the role of woman as a helping mate or wife. For our purposes we will broaden the concept to include the role of mother, since wives were usually mothers as well. The term “harlots” is used here for the prostitutes of the biblical world.⁹¹ We think of Rahab and of Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, who played the harlot with Judah to obtain offspring for her dead husband. “Heroes” includes the Miriams, Deborahs, Ruths, Esthers, Queens of Sheba, and all the Hebrew women who stand out as acting independently or valiantly.

As inclusive as these three terms are, they do not quite cover everybody. They do not include Tamar, David’s daughter, who is raped. Neither do they cover Jephthah’s daughter, who is sacrificed by her father because of a thoughtless vow he made to God. Unfortunately, no appropriate term beginning with the letter *h* exists in English to cover such cases. We could call these women the harassed or the harmed, but these words are not strong enough terms. We need a word that means victim, the object of brutal behavior.

In an ironic way it is perhaps appropriate that the Hebrew women who were brutally victimized remain invisible in our title. The appropriateness lies in the reality that too often such victimized women are invisible. We do

not notice them in the Bible or in the modern world. We do not like to hear about their stories or to think about them. In spite of their omission in the title, they will not be omitted in this book. Their stories need to be heard.

Eve's story is so important that an entire chapter is devoted to her. Interpretations of her story have been incredibly influential. They have powerfully shaped the negative views of women in the Western world. The feminist interpretations that have developed over the last twenty-five years have provided much more positive readings of this pivotal story.

The women of the Hebrew Bible who are presented to us in historical narratives are considered in chapters 3 through 7. These stories read like history, and many readers assume they are history. Most biblical scholars, however, believe that these stories are a mixture of fiction and nonfiction. Ancient historians went about their task in a very different way from modern ones. Historical accuracy was not nearly as important to them as telling a good story and making an important moral point. The modern reader can rarely be certain how much of a story is historically accurate and how much is literary fiction. For the most part, feminist biblical interpreters do not seek the historical Sarah or Rebekah or Rachel. Most feminists concentrate on interpreting the literary characters that we meet in the biblical texts, rather than trying to determine their historicity.

The stories of the women presented in each chapter are briefly retold to refresh the reader's memory. Then the more significant feminist and womanist interpretations of the characters are presented.

In chapters 8 and 9, I stretch the term "women's stories" to include some prophetic reinterpretations of early Hebrew women and the personified female figure Wisdom.

In chapter 10, women characters in what many scholars believe to be purely fictional stories are presented. Here we find the stories of Ruth and Esther. The stories of Susanna and Judith are also included, even though they are not in the Hebrew Bible or in the Protestant Old Testament (though the Apocrypha was originally printed in a separate section in the King James Version). They are in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Old Testament and are similar in many ways to Ruth and Esther.

The final chapter summarizes and reflects. Although the main purpose of this book is to present the most important feminist interpretations of the most important women in the Hebrew Bible, a secondary goal is to evaluate both the biblical material and the feminist interpretations of it. There is both positive and negative material in the first testament as regards women, and some material may be seen as either positive or negative, depending on the perspective adopted.

It is my belief that the biblical short stories involving female heroes—Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith—are the most subversive of patriarchy. These sto-

ries are probably among the most recent material in the Old Testament. Although the movement in the Old Testament is not uniformly in the right direction, the end of the story is the best part from some feminist perspectives. It is part of the foundation for what follows in the New Testament. But that is another story.

Not covered in this book are feminist interpretations of feminine imagery of God, of other feminine imagery with exceptions noted above in chapter 8, or of men's stories. The reason for these exclusions is primarily that this book is focused on women's stories. In addition, I have not included much material on the ways the stories of biblical women have been interpreted through the centuries in literature, art, film, or music. Space simply did not permit entry into this fascinating work.

Another area not included here is work on possible feminine authorship of biblical stories. The reason for this exclusion is that few feminist authors have written much on this matter, probably because it is difficult to determine the gender of authors with any degree of reliability.

The best-known work on this subject, *The Book of J*,⁹² is hardly a feminist book. Harold Bloom argues that the author of one of the strands of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible), described as J by biblical scholars, was a woman. That sounds good, but the subtext of the book is a subtle put-down of biblical scholars in general and feminist scholars in particular. In one of the few reviews of Bloom's book written by a woman, Adrien Bledstein casts her review in the form of a letter to the author. She writes: "While readers may delight in your thesis that J is an ironic woman, part of your purpose is clearly blasphemy. You tweak the noses of biblical scholars; you tease feminists by presenting the greatest storyteller of the bible as a woman who in her urbane sophistication cares little about issues of injustice and oppression; you bait believers."⁹³ Although Bledstein disagrees with Bloom at many points, she likes his idea that J may have been a woman.⁹⁴ Most feminists generally suspect that the majority of the biblical authors and editors were probably men. However, Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes have devised a new approach to the question of the gender of authors. Recognizing that most biblical literature has undergone an extensive oral and written transmission, they suggest that to speak of authors at all is misleading. Rather, they propose looking for the F (feminine) and M (masculine) voices that can be discerned in the text. Examples of F voices include victory songs, wisdom speeches, love songs, prayers, birth songs, and naming songs. Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes's work breaks an impasse in feminist biblical scholarship.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it is still probably true that the Hebrew Bible reflects many more M voices than F voices. For the most part, it is an androcentric book filled with stories reflecting M concerns. In many ways it was a man's world. But some of us find in these stories a glimmer of something that

transcends the androcentrism. Thus we reenter that story world, focusing on the stories about women. We read these stories again in hopes of finding a word to liberate us from the past and to open the door to a better future.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel about feminism? If you consider yourself a feminist, which type of feminism do you prefer—the one aiming for equality and reconciliation, or the one seeking the ascendancy of women? Do you believe that women are inherently different from men (other than biologically)? morally superior to men?
2. Do you believe the Bible is sexist? If so, what is your attitude toward sexism in the Bible? Do you accept the authority of the Bible and want to find ways to rehabilitate it? Or are you so unhappy with the androcentrism of the Bible that you are moving away from it as a source of authority in your life?
3. Is either feminism or womanism attractive to you? Why or why not? Bear in mind that womanism is a term that womanists prefer not be adopted by people who are not African Americans. Do you feel a common bond with your sisters (or brothers) from other ethnic groups?
4. Which of the three methods of interpretation is most congenial to you: literary criticism, culturally cued reading, or historical investigation? (You may want to save this question until you have read part 2 and have seen a number of examples of each method.)
5. Where do you believe religious authority is located: in the individual believer, in the community of believers, in the Bible, or in some combination?