

Doing Feminist Biblical Criticism in a Women's Studies Context

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Abstract

Can academic feminist biblical studies courses have a valid place within women's studies? This article examines how such courses, once housed in a religious studies program, have been refocused to equip women's studies students with analytical skills and to serve major themes in a women's studies curriculum.

Résumé

Les études universitaires bibliques féministes peuvent-elles occuper une place valable au sein des études sur les femmes ? Cet article examine comment ce genre de cours, autrefois inclus dans les programmes d'études théologiques, a été repensé afin d'inculquer aux étudiant-e-s en études sur les femmes, des compétences analytiques, et afin de servir les thèmes majeurs dans le cadre du curriculum d'études sur les femmes.

Introduction

Women's studies programs are characteristically multidisciplinary. They connect with a wide range of disciplines by placing women at the centre of inquiry. It is not uncommon to find courses on women and literature, history, politics, or science. Moreover, thematic courses on topics such as women and work, mothering and motherhood, or sex/gender and sexualities will frequently examine the topics from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. It is even possible to find some programs that look at women and religion. But it is rare to find a women's studies program that includes courses related to the discipline of biblical studies.

In addition to the fact that few women's studies programs would have the financial luxury to have courses in such a specialized area as feminist biblical criticism, other factors, such as the contested nature of the term "bible" (Davies 2004),¹ along with suspicion on the part of many feminists toward organized religions, may underlie this exclusion. Judith Plaskow (1997) observed that "women's studies in religion has been a bit of a step-sister within women's studies" (199) and she offered reasons why this should not remain the case. More than a decade later, however, the situation seems relatively unchanged. If women's studies programs see little need, or have little desire, to include feminist analyses of religion, the need or desire to include feminist analyses of religious texts such as the bible is even less.

The fact that so much work by feminist biblical scholars has been apologetic or recuperative in nature is a legitimate reason, in my view, for the ongoing suspicion about the discipline. Most feminist biblical scholars position themselves within Judaism or Christianity and thus continue to regard the biblical texts as sacred. They may acknowledge the patriarchy of the biblical tradition but, through their scholarship, many seek ways to recover the voices of women and/or exonerate the bible itself in some way (Russell 1985, 14;

Lerner 1986, 176–177; Tribble 1995; Frymer-Kensky 2002, 2006; Day and Pressler 2006, xvi–xviii). Such approaches are paralleled in non-feminist biblical studies, to the extent that Hector Avalos (2007) has called for the end of academic biblical studies as a discipline. Avalos argues that treating the bible as an inspired, revealed text that is religiously and socially valuable for guiding one’s life in the modern world constitutes “bibliolatry” and renders the work of such scholars illegitimate as an academic discipline (2007, 16). Avalos’ criticism would also apply to much of the work done by feminist biblical scholars. Within feminist biblical scholarship itself, however, a small number of scholars have taken a strictly secular approach. From the early 1980s, Esther Fuchs has been unapologetically exposing gender ideology in the Hebrew bible (1982; 1985; 1987) and has been a vocal critic of recuperative and neo-liberal feminist approaches (2008, 45). She is no longer alone in her approach. Athalya Brenner (1996), Susanne Scholz (1998, 2007), Cheryl Exum (1995), and Gale Yee (2003b) are among a growing number of feminist biblical scholars who engage in critical analyses that seek to hold the bible ethically and socially accountable and to expose its sexist, ethnocentric, homophobic, and patriarchal ideologies.

The relevance of the bible in North American society today may not be as obvious as it was to the nineteenth-century feminists who had no choice but to engage it in their struggle for equal rights. Nevertheless, the impact of the biblical tradition on contemporary society continues to be significant. Susanne Scholz (2007) has argued persuasively that feminist academic scholarship on the bible “has much to offer in understanding the world and women’s and men’s places in it” and in moving us toward the goal of transforming androcentric and hierarchical structures in our postcolonial world (123–125). Such scholarship needs to contextualize the biblical tradition and to uncover where it is at odds with fundamental human rights and democratic principles.

It is this kind of secular feminist biblical scholarship that I think has a rightful place in the context of a women’s studies program. My interest in this issue is pragmatic. It has

arisen from the fact that, since 1996, the two feminist courses I teach on the Hebrew bible have been located in the Women’s Studies program at the university where I work, thereby making our program atypical in this regard. Women’s Studies did not choose to include my courses. Rather, it inherited them when the religious studies department in which I had been teaching was disbanded by the University Senate.

The move to Women’s Studies called for some reshaping and refocusing of my courses and for a rethinking of their relevance for women’s studies students. I now see at least three benefits of including feminist study of the bible in a women’s studies context. The first is that biblical criticism is an ideal site for introducing students to research methods, feminist methodologies, and the interaction between the two. The second is that it allows women’s studies students to develop skills for critically analyzing bible-based arguments that might be employed during debates on contemporary social issues such as same-sex marriage, gay/lesbian rights, or women’s social roles. The third is that new research strategies gained from women’s studies can be applied to the feminist analysis of the bible to provide insight into how it is being understood and used in contemporary society.

Changing Contexts, Changing Focus

The students who take feminist courses on the bible as part of women’s studies are quite different from those I taught in religious studies. Whereas religious studies students generally brought some knowledge of the bible to the classroom, students who take the courses as part of women’s studies generally do not. On the other hand, the students I used to teach in religious studies rarely had any awareness of feminism, while those I now teach in women’s studies have at least some knowledge of feminism, and those above first year have considerable knowledge. The one characteristic the two groups share is that neither has had exposure to an academic, non-confessional, non-theological approach to the study of the bible.

My biblical courses are at the second- and third-year levels, and the majority of students enrolled in them are women’s studies

majors or minors. Many have already taken my introductory course, *Women and Religion*, and thus have an awareness of the role religions have played in the historical subjugation of women. For the most part, these students do not consider the biblical text religiously authoritative and are open to learning and applying critical analytical methods to it.

In addition to feminist biblical courses, I was asked by Women's Studies to develop and teach an upper-level core course, *Feminist Frameworks for Research*. This course, which I have taught for the past decade, has been an enormous challenge because of my lack of formal training in women's studies and because of the multi- and inter-disciplinary nature of women's studies. The course demanded that I familiarize myself with feminist research in disciplines ranging from sociology to science and from languages to law. Developing this course proved to be very helpful, however, in allowing me to see more clearly how I could redesign my biblical courses so that they could better serve the needs of women's studies students. At the same time, teaching this course also showed me how qualitative research could become a productive research tool in feminist biblical studies.

Feminist Biblical Studies for Women's Studies

First and foremost, my biblical courses now must support the learning outcomes, skill sets, and attitudes our Women's Studies program is committed to develop in its students. These learning outcomes require, among other things, that our graduates "know how power structures of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, ability, religion and class interlock." Skills our graduates should possess include reading, thinking, and listening critically, applying feminist theories and concepts in everyday life, and recognizing the need for social change and being able to formulate a plan to implement change. We are to instill in our graduates an attitude of being willing to work for social change on behalf of women and to collaborate with others interested in social justice. My biblical courses thus needed to provide a lens for students to explore social power exerted by those who have used these texts across time, space, and cultures. Through the feminist critical study of the bible, women's

studies students should develop their own voices and should use what they learn to enact social change. This activism aspect of our Women's Studies program's mission was never a part of the teaching mandate in religious studies.

Women's studies students do not need to be on the cutting edge of biblical scholarship. They cannot be expected to be able to read biblical texts in ancient languages or to appreciate the intricacies of semantic discussions over individual Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek terms. But they do need to understand the central role the bible has played and continues to play in Western cultures. They can acquire a level of fluency with the tradition that will allow them to engage in informed debate with those who continue to use the bible as a roadblock to women's full equality.

In our Women's Studies program, most lower-level courses do not explicitly discuss methods and methodologies. These concepts are the focus of the third-year course, *Feminist Frameworks for Research*. Modern biblical studies, however, are heavily focused on methods, all of which they borrow from other disciplines (Knight 2004). These include historical (Miller 1976; Krentz 1975), sociological, anthropological and archaeological (Chalcraft 1997; Wilson 1984; Overholt 1996; Elliot 1993), and literary approaches (Robertson 1977; Petersen 1978; Exum & Clines 1993; Adam 1995; *The Bible and Culture Collective* 1995).

Feminist analyses of the bible reflect this diversity of approaches and methods but do so in the context of an awareness of methodology and the role that ideology plays in any analysis. For this reason, I came to see my feminist biblical courses as having an intrinsic connection to the course on *Feminist Frameworks for Research*. While the latter attempts to illustrate a range of methods and methodologies across many disciplines and in many subject areas, the biblical courses could serve as a preparation for this by concentrating the discussion of methods and methodologies on one subject, the bible. They could be constructed to illustrate how choices about methods and methodologies combine to produce different insights when applied to the same text or issue. Moreover, because recent feminist biblical criticism has been heavily literary in nature, my biblical courses could

serve to balance the heavy social science emphasis that characterizes the Women's Studies program at my institution as a whole.

My feminist biblical courses now begin with an explicit discussion of methods and methodology. In much of the feminist literature outside of biblical studies, these terms are used interchangeably. Some feminist theorists, however, make a clear distinction between them and it is their work I find more useful for my biblical courses. I draw upon the work of Sandra Harding (1987) who raises the question of what makes research "feminist." Harding sets out a clear distinction between epistemology, methodology, and method (see also Eichler 1997). Her distinctions are helpful for understanding what makes biblical criticism feminist and for understanding the myriad of feminist analyses we now encounter.

For Harding, epistemology is a theory of knowledge or a justificatory strategy. It answers questions about who can be a knower, what can be known, and what counts as knowledge. She describes methodology as a theory and analysis of how research should proceed, while she sees research methods as simply techniques or tools for gathering evidence. Harding argues that there is nothing inherently feminist about evidence-gathering techniques. What makes feminist analysis distinctive is to be found in the epistemology and methodology it employs. For her, it is not enough simply to add women to traditional research in order to make it feminist. Instead, research is feminist when it uses women's experiences, diversified by ethnicity, class, culture, and multidimensionality (Naples 1999), as new resources for research and when it generates the questions or problematics to be investigated from the perspectives of women. Feminist research is research that has a new purpose: it is research for women, research that provides women with explanations of phenomena that they want and need to know about. These are the concepts and principles I use to structure my biblical courses.

My second-year course, *Women and the Bible*, asks students to read a set of biblical texts that include women characters and/or stories that have played significant roles in the construction or maintenance of gender hierarchies in a number of different societies. They are asked to develop questions

about the text that arise from a feminist methodology. This means, in part, starting from their own experiences as women or as men who are becoming conscious of women's experiences. What does it mean to read these texts as women or from the perspective of women? Whose interests are served by the texts? How does ethnicity or class or sexual orientation impact the way one encounters the texts and/or the characters in the texts?

The main method or data-gathering tool in this course is literary analysis since students do not have sufficient knowledge of ancient history to do historical analyses. To investigate the text as a literary document, students are provided with an outline of data that would be literary in nature, namely, data relating to plot, characterization, voice, narrative point of view, tone, meaning, etc. We discuss the differences between treating the biblical text as a literary text and treating it as a theological text, between treating it only as a human construct and treating it as divine revelation. There is a strong tendency for students to ask "why" questions for which no data can be gathered. For example, in some stories, students want to know why god did, or did not, do this or that. This kind of a question has no answer apart from a hypothetical one. But if they can see the deity as a character in a story, a character created by an author, they can gather data about what this character does and assess what impact the action has on the plot and/or on other characters in the story. The goal is to develop the sense that biblical texts were written by men who constructed the characters and the plots of the stories. From this perspective, they can inquire about the motivations of the authors or the impact of the constructions on the readers of the texts.

For some students, the very idea that they can question a religious text like the bible from their own experiences is empowering. With their literary-critical tools, they can identify with women characters and discover how many lack names or identity, voice, or autonomy. They can observe how ethnicity and class shape relationships among characters and how the narrative perspective of the texts evaluates such characteristics. They can explore the ideologies that drive the texts, constructing many female characters as passive or as active characters whose actions serve male

interests. They can examine legal texts that construct women as property or prophetic texts that metaphorically associate female sexual promiscuity with Israelite religious infidelity. For the majority who have never read much of the bible before, these discoveries can be shocking. At the same time, these discoveries often also give them significant insights about the patriarchal world of the twenty-first century. Some students relate their discoveries to advertising, music, film, and the internet, as well as to their own social and political environments. By the end of the course, most have developed a sense of the impact the biblical tradition has had and continues to have on the fabric of contemporary Western society. No matter how disconnected a feminist might be from religion, it is virtually impossible to escape the impact of the biblical tradition. At the end of this course, students are able to read biblical texts in a controlled and disciplined way, they can develop questions aimed at collecting specific kinds of data from the texts, and they are able to identify and assess critically some of the ways the patriarchal elements of the biblical tradition continue to shape their lives.

In the third-year course, I ask students to go beyond their own readings of biblical texts to examine some of the approaches that have been developed by feminist scholars in this field. In selecting articles, I look for ones that have explicit discussions of feminism, methodology, and methods, and/or for ones that address major themes currently reflected in our women's studies curriculum. Recently, in support of the joint degree in Women's Studies and Social Work offered at my university, new courses have been developed that focus on abuse in the family and violence toward women. These are themes that I was easily able to incorporate since they are well represented in the biblical tradition and there has been much feminist work on them.

I begin the course with articles that discuss methods and methodologies, such as Phyllis Bird's "What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist: A Qualified Answer" (1998) and Pamela Thimmes' article that poses the same question (1998). Bird's article is very helpful insofar as her discussion of feminism emphasizes diversity and inclusiveness and establishes the connection between feminist work and social

change. She argues that women's experiences are the primary source for feminist analysis. Like Harding, Bird contends that methods are not feminist *per se* (e.g., literary criticism as opposed to historical criticism). Rather, it is the way in which a method is used, the methodology that is determinative. For Bird, the two key methodological criteria that characterize a feminist analysis are a systematic gender analysis and a critique of androcentric and patriarchal privilege. These two components must be used to make sense of women's experiences and to provide a more adequate account of gendered human nature and history.

Thimmes is also very explicit in saying that it is methodology that makes a feminist analysis feminist. Like Bird, she emphasizes the centrality of difference and the social location of the researcher. The recognition that there is no "view from nowhere," no "objectivity" in the traditional sense of disinterested, value-neutral research, is very much in line with Harding's (1992) argument that the weak objectivity of positivist epistemologies needs to be challenged and replaced by the strong objectivity in feminist standpoint epistemologies. Differences and social locations are then elaborated by introducing students to the voices of scholars such as Kwok Pui-lan (1993), Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995), and Nyasha Junior (2006) who make explicit how racial, social, and geographical contexts are integral to a researcher's interpretive standpoint.

After these articles, I asked students to consider an article by Gale Yee, "The Author/Text/Reader and Power: Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies" (2003a). This article offers an accessible introduction for women's studies students to the fact that all scholarship on the bible must start with an act of reading and that in biblical studies, researchers have focused their reading on one of three areas: the historical and social factors that contributed to the production of the biblical text, the text itself, or the reader of the text. Yee also challenges the notion of value-free scholarship and highlights the role of methodological assumptions and values in the choice and use of particular methods. Her work raises the issues of power and ethical responsibility in reading religiously and socially influential texts such as the bible.

Next, students read Adele Reinhartz's article, "Feminist Criticism and Biblical Studies in the Twenty-First Century" (1997), which sets out some of the special problems encountered when one attempts to bring feminist analysis to biblical studies. Reinhartz shows her readers how feminist biblical criticism is about much more than just finding women's stories in the bible or reconstructing women's history. She introduces them to the possibility of radically rethinking and re-evaluating the very norms and canons of biblical criticism, of transforming the whole system. Since Reinhartz finds little that supports such a challenge to central authority or that positively values diversity of voices within the bible itself, she opts for re-writing biblical stories to make them more suitable to the task. The exercise of re-writing biblical texts is one I have included for many years as a final examination question in the second-year Women and the Bible course.

After this introductory section on methodology and method, the focus of the course shifts to issues. I have students read sets of two or three articles, grouped on the basis of the methods they use. In some cases, I use articles that examine the same biblical text using the same or very similar methods of analysis, but that reach very different conclusions. In other cases, the articles might be applying different methods to the same or similar texts, but achieve different results. Students are asked to figure out the authors' implicit or explicit starting assumptions, the notion of feminism underlying the analysis, and the methodology and the method or methods being used. None of this requires knowledge specific to biblical studies. Instead, it draws on their knowledge and skill sets from women's studies and illustrates how these can be applied to investigate areas unfamiliar to them.

When trying to link this course to the other courses on violence and abuse, I have chosen articles relating to texts such as Genesis 34 (a story about Jacob's daughter, Dinah), Judges 19–21 (a story about a Levite priest and his concubine), Genesis 19 (the story of Lot, his daughters, and his wife), Hosea 1–3 (a text using the prophet's marriage to Gomer as a model of the relationship between the deity and Israel), and Ezekiel 16 and 23

(texts in which the prophet portrays the cities of Jerusalem and Samaria as whores, physically punished by the deity for faithlessness).

For example, the articles on Genesis 34 debate whether or not Dinah was raped by Shechem, a local prince. Students read the contrasting articles by Susanne Scholz (1998) and Lynn Bechtel (1994). They can appreciate how Bechtel uses an analytical framework from anthropology while Scholz looks at the issue through an historical lens. Scholz's work is particularly useful insofar as it illustrates how religion connects to other areas of society by examining ideas of rape in nineteenth-century German biblical commentaries and in forensic medical textbooks from the same period. She then sets this discussion in the context of contemporary feminist discussions of rape, discussions that would be familiar to most women's studies students.

For Genesis 19, students read work by Ilona Rashkow (1993, 2000), who uses psychoanalytic literary theory to examine the father/daughter relationship in the story through the lens of Freud's seduction theory. Like the work of Scholz, Rashkow's articles make evident the role of the bible reader and how interpretations by influential men like Freud have had real consequences in the lives of women today.

I also include a set of articles that offer feminist readings of the Adam/Eve story in Genesis 2–3. Culturally, this story has had far-reaching impact on the lives of women for centuries in the Western world. Though difficult reading, I have often paired the work of Jerome T. Walsh (1977) with that of Phyllis Trible (1978) to provide a vivid illustration of the difference a feminist epistemology and methodology make to the analysis of a biblical text. From the standpoint of a male cleric in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church who examines the text with a non-feminist methodology using the method of rhetorical criticism, Walsh finds it a story about the creation, loss, and re-establishment of a divinely intended hierarchal social order that places man above woman. From the standpoint of a Protestant female academic who examines the text with a feminist methodology using the identical method, Trible finds the hierarchical domination at the end of the story the consequence of sin, an oppression to be overcome and most certainly not the divine intention. Their shared

method leads them to find remarkably similar rhetorical patterns in the text but the conclusions drawn from these data are starkly different. Together, these articles vividly bring home the point that it matters a lot who is applying an investigative method and how the method is applied.

By the time students have read Mary Shields' deconstruction of the sexually voyeuristic and violent metaphors in Ezekiel 16 and 23 (1998, 2001), Gale Yee's extension of the analysis of sexualized tropes to issues of ethnicity and colonialism in those same Ezekiel texts (2003b), and Athalya Brenner's work on propaganda and pornography in prophetic literature, which includes a discussion of the meaning of those terms in the contemporary context (1996), women's studies students have no doubts about the relevance of feminist biblical criticism to their own lives.

Doing Feminist Biblical Critical Research in a Women's Studies Context

Having my courses relocated to Women's Studies has not only led to changes in my teaching, but also to a new direction in my research. All of my previous work has been literary-critical or theoretical in nature. Developing the course on Feminist Frameworks for Research required learning about qualitative and quantitative methods more commonly used in the social sciences and almost never used in biblical studies. The only feminist qualitative analysis of a biblical text that I was aware of was Stuart Charmé's study of children's interpretations of the Adam/Eve story (1997). Charmé's findings directly challenged the claims of Tribble (1978) and supported literary arguments I had made about the message of Genesis 2–3 (Milne 1993). Charmé showed that even young children not directly influenced by the male interpretive tradition understand this story to be one that promotes a sexist ideology. Their responses strongly suggested that the problem is rooted in the text itself, not just read into the text by sexist/patriarchal traditional interpreters as Tribble claimed.

Charmé's work was refreshing because it did not speculate on how children might understand the story but rather listened directly to what the children said it meant to them. As David Clines (1997) has pointed

out, very few biblical scholars have been interested in what the bible means to ordinary readers. They are much more interested in constructing their own meanings. But in the context of women's studies, it is of particular importance to discover how ordinary readers understand and use biblical texts in contemporary society. One of the most troubling aspects of the biblical tradition is the extraordinary amount of violence toward women it portrays. It seemed to me that a qualitative study like Charmé's could be used to explore how modern readers in our society understand and relate to this violence.

Therefore, I conducted a small study that investigated what the story in Judges 11 means to ordinary adult readers not trained in biblical scholarship (Milne 2009). This story includes an episode in which a father, Jephthah, sacrifices his daughter in order to fulfill a religious vow. The story has been subjected to many feminist analyses, so, in part, I was curious to find out if feminist insights about this story were getting outside the academy and having any impact on the way people receive the text. Do readers link the daughter's fate to the wider issue of male violence toward women? Do they notice the daughter's lack of a name and lack of an independent voice? Do they see the daughter as a male literary construct made to espouse the values of patriarchy by the male author/narrator? Do they read with the ideology of the text or are they resistant readers, using a feminist lens in their readings?

The study had 12 readers, 6 male and 6 female non-women's studies university students. Half of each group claimed affiliation with a religious tradition and half claimed no affiliation. They were asked to read the story and respond to a set of questions about its content and characters and the feelings it created in them as readers, and to indicate what they would change in the story if they could.

The results of the study were troubling if not surprising. Only one, a male religious subject, saw Jephthah's vow as a mistake and his sacrifice of his daughter in fulfillment of it as wrong. However, he placed the entire responsibility on Jephthah as an individual, not on the social or religious system. Non-religious readers were somewhat more uncomfortable

with the climate of violence but none offered an explanation of its cause. They were also somewhat less inclined to accept the narrative perspective, perhaps because the text was not authoritative for them, but none made this explicit in their responses.

Overall, there was no evidence that feminist analyses of this text had made an impact on these readers. There was little critique of the idea of human sacrifice or of the violent treatment by a father of his daughter. This exercise has raised many new questions about how the biblical tradition functions today and how those functions might be influenced by feminists and feminisms. Because the biblical tradition continues to underlie so much in Western legal and cultural traditions, we need more feminists who are both willing and competent to interpret this text and to challenge its use in limiting the lives and freedoms of women today.

For their part, biblical scholars need to pay more attention to how the bible is actually understood and used rather than on constructing interpretive arguments that are far beyond the comprehension of most readers. Women's studies can provide a context and environment where these two goals can be accomplished.

Endnotes

1. The English word "bible" derives from the Latin and Greek *biblia*, meaning "books." The term was used by early Christians for the collection of sacred writings of the Church. Although Jews will use the term, it is not the usual way in which Jews refer to their scriptures. The term is contested insofar as there is no one collection of books universally regarded as sacred scripture. There is no one bible but rather several different "bibles." The Jewish collection of sacred books, more typically referred to as the *Tanak*, contains none of the material in the Christian collection known as the "New Testament." All Christian denominations agree on the content of the New Testament but they differ on the content of the "Old Testament." Catholic and Orthodox Christians have more books and extra material in some books than do Protestants. The Protestant Old Testament contains the same material that is in the

Jewish *Tanak* but it is arranged and divided differently. The term is contested in another way within academic communities with respect to how it is studied. Until quite recently, almost all biblical scholars studied the text from within a confessional context and privileged one or another version of the bible, treating it as a sacred text. More recently, some scholars have insisted on a secular approach to bibles, treating them as any other ancient literature would be studied academically and not assuming any reality beyond the text itself such as the existence of the deity referenced in bibles. Among scholars who take a secular approach, many are now writing "bible" rather than "Bible" to indicate that they are not according it special status within the corpus of ancient Near Eastern religious texts.

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