

*This article is an excerpt from the recent SCM UK publication Reading the Bible. For more on the book see the end of the article*

# Reading **Outside the Box:** From Reading the Bible

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*It is the opinion of most feminist theologians that the church has, historically, marginalised and silenced women, and that it has employed well-recognised techniques for doing so. One of the ways in which this has happened has been through the systematic writing out of women from scripture and history – that is to say they are omitted from the text, or when they are there, they are read through patriarchal eyes.*

Virtually all work in feminist theology owes something of its method to the approach developed by Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, which consists of four elements:

## **The hermeneutic of suspicion**

A feminist reading doesn't take at face value the implication that women were not present or took a purely supportive role, but asks where the women are and what they are doing. As feminists we hope to restore women to Christian history, but also the history of Christian beginnings to women. This method does not rely on finding new sources, but rather concerns itself with reading the sources we have through different eyes. All of this requires historical imagination, which allows us to use other information of the day to cast a suspicious eye on texts that seem to imply that women were not present or active.



## Proclamation

Feminists see liberation as a theme that runs like a thread through the books of the Bible, and as the core of Jesus' message. We therefore have a duty to proclaim those parts those parts that are oppressive to women as contrary to that message.

## Remembrance

As women, we need to grasp our own history as part of the biblical and historical narrative. Feminist scholars have tried to re construct women's history using clues within the biblical sources and other evidence from the same period which sheds more light on them.

## Creative actualisation

This places the lives of women in the biblical story as an ongoing narrative retelling the stories from a feminist perspective. In contrast to the historical approach, this uses imagination to engage with material that has often been damaging to women. Recognising that in most cases it may be impossible to come close to recovering the 'objective truth' of the stories, this approach explores alternative, liberating and redemptive readings of what might have taken place.

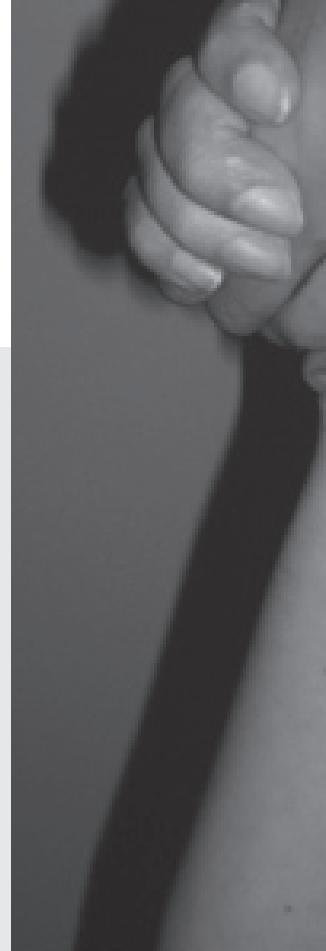
With that methodology as a starting point, may feminist scholars have focused their attention on biblical texts where women are specifically mentioned. The influential and provocative *Texts of Terror*, by Phyllis Trible, asked, 'What should we do with biblical texts that portray violence to women?' Should they really be read in church as part of an illuminating canon for the faithful? Lot offering his daughters to the crowd in order to protect his male guests, the Levite colluding with other males to bring about the rape, murder and dismemberment of his concubine, Amnon's rape of Tamar are all texts that give a clear message: the inferiority of women and their status as owned by men. This is compounded by the texts about cleanliness or otherwise of women and the price of virginity. What are contemporary women to do with such texts – surely cannot be conveying God? The problem that has been exposed through this approach is still hotly debated – does it mean that the texts are useless, only useful as an historical record of the bad old days, or are they still the word of God?

Amongst those not willing to abandon the texts to the traditionalists, there is also a group of scholars concerned to recover the female aspects of deity hidden in scriptural texts. This involves concentrating on neglected passages,



32

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reinterpreting those more familiar, and always having an eye to new understandings from historical and linguistic analysis. In the Hebrew Bible we have many references to God as female: the psalmist declares that God is a midwife (Psalms 22:9-10); at times God is mother (Deuteronomy 32:18) – this text is often translated as ‘fathered you’ but this is an inaccurate rendering of the Hebrew verb. God the merciful and compassionate mother is also witnessed in Jeremiah 31:15-22. In addition of course we have a huge body of work on the nature and role of Lady Wisdom in creation and the ongoing nurture she provides in the growth of Jewish spirituality.

In large part other feminist biblical scholars have built on the methods of Schüssler-Fiorenza and Tribble by applying those methods to a wide range of texts. We see a growing body of work involved in the recovery of women from patriarchal interpretations of text, which results in rereading the origins of both Judaism and Christianity. However, the jury is out as to whether this is a worthwhile exercise, since some believe the tradition is so patriarchal that even providing alternative ways of reading will not fundamentally alter the tradition itself. The position of Schüssler-Fiorenza and others remains the same: it is their tradition too and they will not hand it over to those who would use narrow and excluding methods of interpretation – interpretation after all is always political!

... This article continues in the book

**Suggested Reading**

SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, Elizabeth, *In Memory of Her*, SCM Press, 1983

TRIBBLE, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror*, Fortress Press, 1984

LONG, Asphodel, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions*, The Women's Press, 1991

PIRANI, Alix, *The Absent Mother*, Shambala, 1992

SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, Elizabeth, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, Continuum, 2001

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This recent SCM UK publication *Reading the Bible* a new 56-page glossy A4 book, aims to equip the reader with a wide range of approaches to scripture, from both academic study and church tradition. The book aims to celebrate the diversity and richness of the Bible itself, and of the ways in which Christians use it. *Reading the Bible* will be an invaluable resource to anyone who's leading Bible studies, training for ministry, or just interested in new ways of using the Bible.

The articles in the book have all been written by recognised authorities in the relevant fields. Contributors include John Saxbee, John Rogerson, Paul Foster, Henry Wansbrough, John Barton, John Sawyer, John Vincent, Christopher Rowland, Patricia McDonald, Robert Beckford and Lisa Isherwood. Some of the questions the book explores in different ways include:

- Who wrote the Bible?
- Who decided which books would be included?
- Does it matter which translation you use? Why are they different?
- Should we allow our own experience to influence our reading of the Bible?
- Can we learn anything about God or faith by looking at how artists respond to scripture?
- Is there one true interpretation of any Bible passage? Who decides what it is?
- Do Christians have to believe the Bible is literally true?
- What does the Bible have to say about politics and social issues?
- How do you deal with passages in the Bible that promote genocide, slavery or sexism?

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