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Biblical Feminisms: Knowledge, Theory and Politics in the Study of Women in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

The proliferation of biblical feminist interpretations and readings in the last two decades suggests that we may witness the emergence of an autonomous field of studies. In this essay I suggest that in order for such a field to emerge as an autonomous and thriving area of academic inquiry we must begin to think theoretically and critically about the work that has been done, the objectives of this work and the relationships between and among various approaches to the field. In this essay I call for a rigorous and critical biblical feminist epistemology that seeks to address on every turn the question of knowledge production as power; on the other hand I call for a radical democratization of the field and the questioning of any and all orthodoxies and hierarchies that may have already emerged in the field. The first "centripetal" approach insists on clarifying the foundations of the field, establishing genealogies of knowledge and an evolutionary trajectory, crediting and acknowledging theoretical points of origination. Respect for precedence and antecedence is required so as to avoid repetition, imitation and dilution. The second "centrifugal" approach emphasizes the need for interrogating, displacing and destabilizing foundational paradigms in Biblical Studies at large and for the continued questioning of stable identities of "women" as subjects and objects of inquiry. A vigorous field of Feminist Biblical Studies ought to deploy both approaches opening the way to both debate and contestation between various feminist approaches to the Bible on the one hand and to dialogue and alliance between methodologically, theoretically, politically and culturally different approaches on the other.

Keywords

theory, gender, epistemology, methodological approaches, difference, power

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Introduction

What is a feminist approach to the Bible? What is the difference that a feminist approach makes? What are the major theoretical debates in the field? Is there more than one approach, and if so what is the relationship between the various approaches? These are the basic questions that must preoccupy feminist scholars who either seek to elaborate previous theories or to suggest new conceptualizations of knowledge.[1] Yet, the contexts and instances in which they have been raised are astonishingly few and far between.[2] In contrast to the broader field of Women's Studies where theoretical distinctions, genealogical trajectories and a careful pedagogy that describes the debates in the field is amply available, our field—if indeed this academic definition is appropriate—lacks such resources.[3] My goal in this article is to argue that the constitution of Biblical Feminist Studies as an academic field depends on careful attention to the above theoretical questions and on the relationship between the production of feminist biblical knowledge, and the politics of its guiding theories. Most importantly, this preliminary discussion seeks to open up a dialogue with feminist theories of schol-

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1) This is an expanded version of a paper I presented at a panel I organized on "Biblical Feminisms: Debate, Dialogue, Diversity," Society of Biblical Literature, Washington D.C., November 20, 2006.

2) Some of the exceptions include "Feminist and Womanist Criticism," in The Bible and Culture Collective (eds.), *The Postmodern Bible* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp, 225-271. See also, Pamela J. Milne, "Toward Feminist Companionship: The Future of Feminist Biblical Studies and Feminism," in Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (eds.), *Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (She Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 39-60; Alice Bach, "Introduction: Man's World, Women's Place," in Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. xiii-xxvi.

3) See, for example, Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Agatha Beins (eds.), *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Ellen Messer Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Marilyn Boxer, *When Women Ask the Questions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Robyn Wiegman (ed.), *Women's Studies on Its Own* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); E. Ann Kaplan and Devoney Looser (eds.), *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Diane Elam and Robin Wiegman (eds.), *Feminism Beside Itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

arship and knowledge in their broader interdisciplinary scope in an effort to find allies and forge liaisons with Feminist Studies and related areas of study outside of the somewhat limited and limiting boundaries of Biblical Studies.

In what follows I will offer two apparently opposite approaches to the question of feminist approaches. The first approach sees biblical feminism as a coherent academic field; the second seeks to avoid such definitions and claims that the goals and agendas, methods and theories are too heterogeneous for any single classification or definition. The first approach preserves disciplinary distinctions; the second is interdisciplinary—refusing the distinctions of traditional methodologies and creating a feminist discourse that transcends these boundaries. The interdisciplinary approach seeks to identify the ways in which feminism as a theory and method transformed traditional disciplines. It seeks a common ground among a variety of disciplinary approaches that have emerged in the last two decades. The interdisciplinary approach emphasizes the plurality and heterogeneity of the field as an irreducible principle and refuses the attempt to "discipline" the field. The first approach is more "centripetal" because it attempts to focus on a clarification of the basic principles of biblical feminist knowledge as distinct from other sub-fields within Biblical Studies. The "centrifugal" approach investigates the limits of feminist knowledge, critiques and questions current blind spots and deficiencies, and moves the discussion forward toward a greater integration with other biblical academic discourses, such as Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and so on. The centripetal approach is more pragmatic in nature, seeking to synthesize, organize and classify varieties of feminist knowledge, and to represent them accurately as the cutting edge, while the centrifugal approach, that is the more theoretical, questions this very representation based on both academic rigor and a commitment to social change. The first approach seeks to clarify the foundations of the field, often establishing a genealogy of knowledge, and an evolutionary trajectory or a history of feminist ideas, while the second approach deals mostly with interrogations, destabilizing and disrupting foundational paradigms, and seeking to supplement or displace them. The production, dissemination and contestation of feminist knowledge, or what I will call "epistemology," is then a process that deploys both approaches at once, and

it is the dialogical and agonistic relationship between them that accounts for its unflagging momentum in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Knowledge

In 1990 I published an article entitled, "Contemporary Biblical Literary Criticism: The Objective Phallacy," where I challenged the ideology of objectivity in New Critical, Rhetorical, Semiotic and Structural discourses that dominated the field of Biblical Literary Studies for over a decade. I suggested that the trope of academic objectivity or "aperspectivity" made it impossible for feminist discourse to insert itself into the self-authorizing discourse of Biblical Literary Criticism.[4] I argued that paradoxically the truth claims of contemporary Biblical Literary Criticism duplicated and reproduced the omniscient and omnipotent perspective of the biblical narrator, and the universalizing discourse of the biblical text: "There is a stunning resemblance between the objective posturing of contemporary Bible critics and the aperspectivity which is one of the master tropes of biblical discourse… Though most literary critics agree that the biblical narrative is androcentric, they rarely allow this fact to interfere with their analytical procedures. Coupled with a scriptural vision which ignores the ideological nature of biblical literature in general, contemporary biblical criticism re-endorses biblical sexual politics."[5] At the time, my critique of biblical scholarly epistemology was one of the early attempts to resist mainstream (and "male-

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4) "Aperspectivity" is a term coined by Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). On objectivity and neutrality as fallacious positions in Western epistemology, see Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstruction of Being and Knowing* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989). See also Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

5) See "Contemporary Biblical Literary Criticism," in Vincent L. Tollers and John Maier (eds.), *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), p. 134. For a slightly modified version see my book, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 34-43.

stream") discourses of authoritative knowledge. It was not merely an attempt to interrogate the totalizing claims to absolute truth, but to interrogate as well a specifically male bias passing itself off as objectivity, or what I defined in the essay as "androcentrism." The twin goals of exposing androcentrism and critiquing objectivity characterize feminist epistemology in general.[6] By writing gender into academic studies, feminist epistemology questions the traditional separations between the critic and the world, and the knower and the known, thus opening up a space for intervention from the point of the present, and the personal.

Feminist epistemology is not only a critique of ideology, that is, a questioning of the cultural inscriptions of gender hierarchies—it is as well a critique of conventional norms and procedures in any given discipline and field of study.[7] In this sense it is a critique of phallogocentrism, the interlocking regimes of truth that have imposed themselves on various fields of study. By defining the authoritative posture of the literary approach to the Bible as "the objective phallacy," I sought to establish one of the basic insights of feminist epistemology, namely that all knowledge is political, including and especially male-centered knowledge about canonic texts like the Bible. Feminist epistemology is both critical and political, and as we shall see later, it is as much self-critical as well. It is engaged and situated knowledge, which at the same time remains suspicious of any coherent representation of knowledge as such. Feminist epistemology understands all forms of

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6) The following quotation from Lorraine Code is relevant here: "According to its self-presentation, the central assumptions of epistemology are neutral and universally applicable. The criteria of objectivity and neutrality that govern its search for truth—together with 'truth' itself—are criteria and goals that 'most people' would unthinkingly endorse…Yet I contend that mainstream epistemology, in its very neutrality, masks the facts of its derivation from and embeddedness in a specific set of interests: the interests of a privileged group of white men." See *What Can She Know?*, p. x.

7) Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 1-19; Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 19-38. .

knowledge as discursive formations of power relations.[8] To quote all too briefly from Jane Flax: "Feminist theorists take as their primary object of investigation and intervention the gender systems which continue to generate and reproduce relations of domination. No other movement or mode of thinking has taken as its central commitments the analysis and elimination of their oppressive effects."[9] Inspired by feminist critical and political transformations of Literary Studies, I questioned the ways in which contemporary academic literary reading of biblical texts reproduced biblical constructions of hierarchy, authority and gender.

I used the term "sexual politics" to suggest that power rather than sex was the issue in discourses about sexual difference. My argument was that literary "phallic" epistemology duplicated the traditional authorizing of an objective point of view that rendered biblical ideology about gender natural, legitimate and invisible. Neither literary scholarship nor the text itself, I argued, were innocent. As ideological text the biblical narrative was implicated in the cultural construction of gendered relations, and ought therefore to be read not as a god-like objective reflection of truth or reality as such, but as tendentious political representations of reality, and interpretations of truth.[10] It would be foolhardy to search in the biblical text for clues about historical facts, because those facts were modern constructs rather than an accurate description of what "really" happened. I deconstructed the biblical representation of "woman" by examining the hierarchical relations that

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8) Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence," in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 445-463.

9) Flax, "The End of Innocence," p. 463.

10) See also J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1993) and *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Danna N. Fewell and David Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Claudia Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*: *The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (She Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Gale Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

informed her as a mother, wife, sister and daughter, demonstrating that each one of these offered discursive formations of marginality. My point was that biblical discourse could not be distinguished from the real women who actually lived and acted during or before the time of biblical composition, because the text was not transparent, but already informed by ideological investments. An awareness of biblical sexual politics required then attention to its textual politics as well.[11] I proposed a series of reading strategies that will enable a critical, resisting, oppositional reading of the text, thus opening out a space for questioning and interrogation. Neither an attack, nor an "androcentric" reading of the Bible, I suggested instead a reading against the grain that released new ways of knowing the text, by deploying the margins as it were as the location of the woman reader enabling her to re-situate the fictional woman in the text at the very center of inquiry. The subtitle of my book, "Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman" used the word "woman" to signify a position, or location, from which to read the text, not an essentialist pre-given or pre-determined identity.[12]

Though the approach I developed in the 1980s could be seen as yet another hermeneutic method, one that I defined as a "hermeneutics of resistance," it was not conceived as a method whose goal was to recover or discover the true meaning of the text, as the hermeneutic project purports to do. The prefix "a" qualifying "woman" in my subtitle signified the opposite of any totalizing claim to the "correct" feminist approach to the text. In some ways, my reading offered an alternative to the dominant feminist discourse of theological recuperation that had dominated the scene in the early 1980s.[13] This approach sought to "depatriarchalize" the Hebrew Bible and was focused on stories about women.[14] The theoretical debate between the recuperative and critical

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11) See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen,1985).

12) On "woman" as position or strategic location, see Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 330-355.

13) The dominant approach was theological, best exemplified by Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rehetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

14) See also Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Tikva F. Kensky, *Reading the Women of the*

approaches was captured by Katheryn Pfisterer-Darr in her book, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*.[15] Though the debate seems to have shifted in the 1990s from "woman" to "women," the question of recuperation versus critique continues to animate multicultural and postcolonial readings of the biblical text as well.[16]

In an essay on "Feminism and Womanism" the editors of the *Postmodern Bible* question the theological hermeneutics of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as a totalizing and authoritarian paradigm that occludes other readings and thus reproduces the hierarchical posture of traditional scholarship on the Bible.[17] The essay contrasts Schüssler Fiorenza's theological approach with Mieke Bal's academic, non-prescriptive, hybrid approach that refuses any single coherent reading as a form of epistemological domination.[18] In a recent essay entitled "Points of Resonance," I offer an alternative approach to the debate between theological and academic feminism.[19] I suggest that both theological and academic feminism can open out a dialogue around the commonly shared concerns about the making of feminist biblical historiography, the contingent reconstruction of women's history, the cultivation of a hermeneutics of suspicion, the problem of "malestream" scholarship, and the issue of anti-Judaism in Christian feminism and Biblical Studies in general. Needless to say these are only a few themes that feminist

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Bible (New York: Schocken, 2002). For a depatriarchalizing historical reconstruction of the Hebrew Bible, see Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

15) Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

16) See, for example, *Reading the Bible as Women: Perspectives from Africa, Asia, and Latin America* Semeia 78 (1997); Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard (eds.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003); Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (eds.), *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

17) "Feminist and Womanist Criticism," pp. 260-267.

18) "Feminist and Womanist Criticism," pp. 255-258. See also Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

19) Esther Fuchs, "Points of Resonance," Jane Schaberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs (eds.), *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 1-20.

scholars on both sides of the debate can explore in the process of creating dialogue and communication.

Biblical feminism in the singular depends on the accent or priority of either one of these terms for the researcher in question. For some of us the Bible is the starting point, and the research then is focused on what the Bible teaches about women. For some of us, feminism, or "women," is the starting point for the investigation, as we strive to understand how the very concept of woman is indebted to biblical discourse and how the Bible continues to construct "women" today. Those who emphasize the "biblical" term see a complementary relationship with feminism, while those who emphasize "feminism" often see an oppositional relationship between these terms. Some of us see these as complementary terms; others see them as oppositional terms. What I will proceed to define as "theological feminism" is a generalized category of researchers whose institutional location and politics often conscribe the extent to which they can critique the biblical text. Theological feminism tends to see the Bible as a textual expression of an essential truth, either conceptual or historical. Such scholars see feminism as yet another textual or theoretical approach that has the potential to better illuminate a particular verse, or narrative, in other words increase our appreciation and comprehension, and deepen and pluralize the knowledge that helps read the Bible better as it were. In this context feminism is a "hermeneutics" or an interpretation, one among several leading to the true meaning of the text. Academic feminism by contrast focuses on the evasiveness, multiplicity and complexity of the truth or meaning that various readings may yield, suspicious of the notion of a single blueprint for reading the Bible "correctly." Academic feminism seeks to question not only the text but the research procedures in historical, social or literary criticism that often inform biblical scholarship.[20]

In the United States, and perhaps internationally, the dominant discourse in Biblical Feminist Studies has been theological, mostly Chris-

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20) See, for example, Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Regina M. Schwartz, "Adultery in the House of David: The Metanarrative of Biblical Scholarship and the Narratives of the Bible," in Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 335-350.

tian, or "christocentric"—defined in relation to Christianity. In the last two decades, however, a more "secular" perspective that considers the Bible as a cultural, literary and ideological object of inquiry has emerged. This perspective is interested in the aesthetic, philosophical and political implications of reading the Bible in the modern and contemporary world. Feminist epistemology positions itself at the very heart of both of these projects, as well as at the crossroads of these perspectives. And despite the serious divisions between these projects they share some basic principles between them. Rather than an antagonistic relationship between these feminisms, I would suggest that we consider theological feminism as a sort of "foundation" and academic feminism as a type of "interrogation" and critical investigation of this foundation, with the expectation that this interrogation will turn in due course into yet another object for discussion and examination.[21]

Another method of opening out lines of communication, debate and dialogue is by discussing our respective disciplinary presuppositions. If those of us who use historical criticism, comparative religions, or literary theory as basic paradigms can find a way to transcend the distinctions that separate us in our respective disciplines, we may then create a context for developing a discourse that will focus on those issues that concern us all. Articulating our theoretical positions and methodological paradigms will clarify the philosophical differences between us. Some of us work with the paradigm of equality and liberation, which is the legacy of humanistic or liberal feminism. Some of us work with the interrelationships between gender, race and class, which is the legacy of socialist feminism, while some of us are focused on cultural politics which is the legacy of postmodern feminism.[22] What matters from

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21) As Judith Butler observed, feminist epistemology is a process of continual contestations of foundations. "That such foundations exist only to be put into question is, as it were, the permanent risk of the process of democratization. To refuse that contest is to sacrifice the radical democratic impetus of feminist politics." Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser (eds.), *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-57. The quote is from p. 51.

22) For a discussion of the various philosophical traditions in contemporary feminist theory, see Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983); for a critique of historical criticism as a search for certainty or reality see Joan

the point of view of the "centripetal" perspective is that scholars reflect on their own approaches and represent their own theories. The provision of a forum for a collective expression of difference is itself a feminist gesture, as it questions any discursive appropriation and representation of others' work (unless one intends to discuss the work, or critique it). From its very inception, feminist theory was dialogical and dialectical rather than an authoritative discourse dominated by a few hegemonic voices.[23] My hope is then to introduce the politics of debate and dialogue to biblical feminism and thereby to shift the emphasis from textual interpretation to theoretical reflection. Much as I question the uses of structural organization, and much as I am aware of the politics of representation, I believe that collections of essays on various texts, or anthologies of various approaches will simply not do. These present biblical feminisms as a chaotic, inchoate concatenation of writings, a cornucopia of methodologies without analysis or reflection. Having said this, I would nevertheless like to examine in the next section the uses of the concept of "feminisms" as a radical diversity that defies both disciplinary and philosophical classifications, keeping in mind that this kind of organization may be best suited for a graduate course on feminist theories and the Bible.

Theory

What is missing in contemporary Feminist Biblical Studies is an inquiry into the definition of "woman" and "feminism"—two of its most basic terms. For the most part these terms are taken for granted, and usually, their elaboration rests on the liberal conceptualization of human rights as articulated by proponents of the European Enlightenment.[24] Thus, for example, in a recent volume on contemporary European feminist approaches, Silvia Schroer quotes Elisabeth Schüssler

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Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

23) See Josephine Donovan (ed.), *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975).

24) See Christine Di Stefano, *Configurations of Masculinity: A Feminist Perspective on Modern Political Theory* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Fiorenza's definition as follows: "According to Schüssler Fiorenza, feminism is the radical notion that women are people, that is, full citizens. Feminism strives to expose veiled and open discrimination of women within the kyriarchal pyramid as well as in the intrinsic ideologies that sustain it, and fights for the recognition of the complete rights of half of humanity."[25] The political discourse referring to women as "full citizens" and human "rights" and objecting to "discrimination" derives from John Stuart Mill's liberal approach to women's rights.[26] The notion that woman, like man, is an autonomous individual agent, and as such has natural inalienable rights to liberty and autonomy is central to humanist liberal feminism. While this is an acceptable basic definition that may serve as a foundation for feminist theological study, it is by no means the only available one. The unitary concept of "woman" and the egalitarian liberal definition of feminism were challenged and interrogated by Black and postcolonial feminist theory in the 1980s, though the awareness of difference has emerged in biblical feminism only in the 1990s.[27] Academic feminism in the meantime is focused on precisely this effort to clarify and question the essentialist conceptualizations of women and feminism.[28]

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25) Silvia Schroer, "'We Will Know Each Other by Our Fruit': Feminist Exegesis and the Hermeneutics of Liberation," in Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard (eds.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), pp. 1-17. The quote is from p. 2. "Kyriarchy" is equivalent to "hierarchy" in an ecclesial context.

26) Di Stefano, *Configurations of Masculinity*, pp. 144-186. The liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill who advocated for the human rights of women, also believed that despotism is proper government of "savages." See C.M. Harstock, "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory," in Susan J. Heckman (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 39-58.

27) Linda Nicholson (ed.), *The Second Wave*: *A Reader in Feminist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997); Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.), *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1997; first edition 1989); Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Methuen, 1987).

28) See, for example, Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983); Linda Kaufman (ed.), *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and*

The critique of the female subject is not the repudiation or rejection of woman's agency, but rather a critique of the self-evident and pre-given, pre-determined female subject, who is neither discussed nor questioned.[29] Judith Butler argues that postmodern feminism seeks to expose the contingent and contestable foundations of the grand narrative of Western Enlightenment, including the philosophy of humanistic individualism.[30] The concept of the human subject as individual self was produced through a series of exclusions related to race, sex and class and as such it is implicated in a discourse of power. The "self" itself cannot claim existence or presence outside of language or social performance. Butler furthermore deconstructs the logic of feminine identity as a fixed essentialist real entity by exposing its discursive and cultural construction.[31] As a postmodern discourse feminism is a social and political critique based on gender as an analytic category. It is first and foremost a critique of the conceptual and discursive apparatuses that produce scholarship on gender and sexual difference. Postmodern feminism is both a critique of hegemony, power and privilege as enacted through discourse and knowledge systems, as well as a self-critical process of destabilizing identity categories. Postmodern critiques are focused on interrogating imperial, racial and gendered hegemonies while remaining suspicious of the notion of stable, predetermined, unquestioned collective and representative identities and the politics that are engendered by them. Postmodern feminism then differs significantly from liberal, radical, and notably cultural feminism—all orientations that are currently active in Biblical Feminist Studies.

"Feminisms" in the plural is the democratizing and pluralizing label that best describes the recent proliferation of approaches, methods and theories in the study of the Hebrew Bible.[32] As a definition of an ever

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Poststructuralist Theory (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Elisabeth Weed (ed.), *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

29) Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 19-38.

30) Butler, *Contingent Foundations*, pp. 35-57.

31) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

32) The use of "feminisms" is common in feminist scholarship. The first use of the term appeared in the title *French Feminisms* edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981).

growing field it is sure to be contested, but I would like to posit it provisionally as an approximate marker for what we are currently witnessing in the field. The most cursory glance at two influential anthologies, Alice Bach's *Women in the Bible: A Reader* and Athalya Brenner's *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, give us a sense of the diversity and complexity of this field.[33] Both anthologies include liberal, radical, cultural and postmodern feminisms, as well as several disparate disciplinary approaches while maintaining a de-centered presentation that foregrounds the diversity of these feminisms. The methods of inquiry, ranging from theology to history and from archeology to postmodernist criticism makes a consensual definition of the priorities and concerns of the field increasingly elusive.[34] Traditional well established disciplinary methodologies have themselves come under critical consideration. A recent publication entitled *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* critically examines the validity and viability of historical criticism as a feminist methodology.[35] Recent re-examinations of the inclusive historical reconstructions of ancient Israel and early Christianity find not simply the results of historical reconstruction, but the problematizing of totalizing truth claims about the past—despite their gendered inversions. The question that has been raised is: is it enough for feminist scholars to add women to existing histories, or should we question the construction of biblical history as such, both in the Jewish and the Christian context?[36] Is it possible for feminist scholars to use the terms concepts, methods and theories that they learnt from the "masters" of their re-

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33) See Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible*; Brenner and Fontaine (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*.

34) See Athalya Brenner, "Introduction," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, pp. 17-28.

35) Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). For responses to the postmodern critique of historical criticism see James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of the Millennium* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000); John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

36) Esther Fuchs, "The History of Women in Ancient Israel: Theory, Method, and the Book of Ruth," in Vander Stichele and Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools?*, pp. 211-232.

spective fields, and should they reproduce the master-narratives of their respective disciplines or question the effectiveness and adequacy of their investigative procedures for the examination of gender?

The self-critical stance of feminist scholarship in general is one of the primary characteristics of the broader enterprise of feminist scholarship, and indeed it is this ability to stay alert and suspicious of scholarly nomenclatures, labels, and norms, the ability to question the center from a skeptical margin, that continues to define the best work in this field. Feminist knowledge, its terms and conditions of production, interpretation, dissemination and contestation, what is often referred to as *epistemology*, encourages not only the questioning of traditional disciplines, but also feminist theories that have become all too dominant, or all too pervasive and taken for granted. Though the questioning of received knowledge has already begun in Feminist Biblical Studies in the 1980s, as I will argue later, it seems to have become more central a concern more recently. But the excitement afforded by new approaches should not occlude the significant contribution of traditional historical-critical reconstructions. Historical and literary reconstructions that strive to represent women as equal, even central to biblical texts and traditions ought to be recognized as the "foundations" without which the current critical interrogations would not be possible. It is possible then to historicize these two theoretical moves in feminist biblical scholarship, and create yet another historiography that will inevitably present the newer phase as more relevant, *au courant*, or accurate. I prefer to see the reconstructive versus critical approach as a synchronicity. What I recommend instead of the either/or approach couched in the juxtaposition of modernist versus postmodern critiques of traditional knowledge is a creation of a theoretical interdisciplinary space that will permit us to articulate our different yet intersecting positions. This space will open up when we begin to identify our disciplinary and theoretical distinctions and discuss our commonalities and shared concerns.

The acceptance of a plurality of feminist knowledges, or "feminisms," is true to the spirit of feminist inquiry as a consistent and continuing contestation of hegemony in all its forms. Rather than alarm and dismay, diversity can be a source of energetic learning. As the editors of *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* put it:

"We've used the plural form 'feminisms' rather than 'feminism' to acknowledge the diversity of motivation, method and experience among feminist academics. While the multiplicity of approaches and assumptions inside the movement can lead to conflict and competition, it can also be the source of vitality and genuine learning."[37] The diversity to which I am referring is not merely one of discipline or methodology. Serious divisions already exist both in terms of theory and the definition of the object of inquiry; between recuperative and critical approaches, theological and academic, liberal and postmodern, New Testament and Hebrew Bible. Yet, these divisions have not been sufficiently theorized so far; they remain suppressed, unarticulated, and therefore assumed rather than used as generators for the kind of energetic exchange that characterizes the broader field of Feminist Studies.

In a recent article I suggested that even the most polarized approaches, such as an academic non-confessional approach and a theological liberal approach, share what I defined as "points of resonance."[38] Without acknowledging difference, however, it is impossible to produce a theory that is a broader and more complex understanding of what "we" feminists working on the Bible are trying to accomplish. Instead of surfacing theoretical differences between hermeneutics and critique, there is a tendency to amalgamate or diffuse these important distinctions. Because Biblical Studies is a text based field, scholars do not always elaborate what theoretical approach they are using, and what disciplinary assumptions they are making, and often do not cite previous relevant work as they focus on particular biblical texts. The available anthologies and readers in the field usually encompass rather than organize feminist knowledge, focusing on multiplicity for its own sake, rather than analysis of difference. Feminist anthologies in Biblical Studies tend to respond to the latest epistemological trend in the humanities by incorporating these trends, rather than drawing distinctions and reflecting on the mutual benefits both to feminism and the

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37) Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms: An anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. x.

38) Fuchs, "Points of Resonance," pp. 1-20.

respective trends. In the 1990s multicultural and postcolonial discourses have displaced feminist criticism as leading critical discourses in biblical scholarship. Postcolonial theory, queer theory and cultural studies have been absorbed uncritically, for while sharing much in common with feminist theory they diverge from it in serious and profound ways. To examine our own differences—disciplinary, institutional, epistemological—when we are still marginal within the field at large seems in a sense counter-intuitive, and yet, it is only by rethinking and re-inventing existing frameworks for the production and dissemination of knowledge that we will come up with some framework that will allow us to talk with each other rather than past each other. "Feminisms" should provide not just a conceptual framework for the multiplication of differences, but one as well that will permit us to discern the emergence of a new hegemony from a false "multicultural" multiplicity.[39] This multiplicity often hides the fact that they are Christian or christo-centric.

Politics

How then can we talk to and with each other across the theoretical divides of our respective "feminisms?" Can we create a dialogue between modernism and postmodernism, theological and academic approaches, and find a shared discourse across the disciplinary, institutional and professional lines that divide us?[40] How do we speak across cultural, national, ethnic, racial, religious, and class particularities? How does gender intersect with class and race? How can we transcend the accumulation of foci of analysis, or concatenation of criteria in the

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39) By false multiplicity I refer to cultural pluralities that celebrate difference without foregrounding critiques based on hegemonic formations versus minority discourses, based on class, race, nation and religion. See Laura Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

40) For a theoretical treatment of this question in feminist scholarship, see Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Know-How," in Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (eds.), (*En)gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), pp. 281-301.

name of political correctness and create instead an analysis that is not itself already fragmented? Can "women" today produce readings that enrich our understanding of "woman?" rather than create discordant discourses each representing a "special interest" group that is only tangentially related to gender? Situated knowledge is not an occasion for denying the significance of gender as a criterion of analysis, but, on the contrary, a context that further clarifies its as yet unknown dimensions.[41] Reading "as" an Afro-American, lesbian, or disabled woman will ideally not reproduce essentialist, fixed, self-same, naturalized cultural identities, but will seek rather to expose the complexities, divisions and diversities in each of these imagined communities. More importantly, the reader will use the cultural identity in question as a location, a position from which to read the text, and in the course of reading translate the cultural difference into a methodological paradigm that will assist in deconstructing the particular oppressive hegemony with which she is concerned.

For one thing, it is important to ask to what extent our particular "feminism" is focused on power, privilege and processes of oppression. Diversity for its own sake is little more than yet another version of a free market liberal relativism of late capitalism. As feminists, the question of power and the question of *cui bono* should never be brushed aside even when we examine the various perspectives through which to look at biblical worlds. When I speak of power and oppression I do not only refer to the very real concerns of working class exploited women in the global village, but as well about the academic institutionalization of knowledge as politics. Who controls the academic discourse on the Hebrew Bible, and who speaks for the subaltern are questions that postcolonial theorists, for example, discuss as well.[42] Surely, no one in the privileged academic setting of the Society of Biblical Literature can speak for the voiceless, indigenous, or immigrant working poor in the U.S. or the Third World, who lacks the means of communication, because she cannot afford to learn the academic language that may give

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41) Sandra Harding, "Who Knows? Identities and Feminist Epistemology," in *(En)Gendering Knowledge*, pp. 100-120.

42) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 197-221.

her access to voice her position.[43] No one can speak for the subaltern because by definition those of us who have access to public speech in this context have transcended her class constraints. Nevertheless, what a nonwestern academic discourse is likely to introduce to this conversation is what Uma Narayan called "a double vision"—the ability to see what advantaged women may not be able to see because they lack the "epistemic advantage" of the oppressed.[44] Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins offers a method of reading as the "outsider within."[45] These postcolonial strategies of reading transcend essentialist representations and cultural labels that have become all too pervasive in Biblical Studies, drawing automatic lines of sameness between the writer and the collective cultural identity she speaks for. As reading strategies rather than fixed cultural identities the otherness of "women" becomes a fluid, accessible and usable paradigm of resistance to privilege and discursive hegemony, as well as a strategy for alliance-building between and among variously disenfranchised groups.

Another route toward establishing dialogue across our respective "feminisms" leads to greater refinement and more accurate analysis of the most urgent problems of disempowerment and disadvantage globally, beyond cultural, national and ethnic particularities. Chandra T. Mohanty, who authored pioneering postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric discourses on Third World women in the1980s, suggests that a far more urgent struggle today is "the politics and economics of capitalism as a far more urgent locus of struggle. It is just that global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial and gender inequalities, and thus they need to be demystified, reexamined, and theorized."[46] Mohanty does not renounce her

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43) Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, pp. 241-268.

44) Uma Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from A Nonwestern Feminist," in Jaggar and Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, pp. 256-272.

45) Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," in *(En)gendering Knowledge*, pp. 40-65.

46) Chandra T. Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anticapitalist Struggles," In Kennedy and Beins (eds.), *Women's Studies for the Future*, pp. 72-96. This quote is from p. 78.

earlier critique of Eurocentric colonizing discourses of Third World women, but rather than an agonistic relationship claiming exclusive victim status for an objectified Third World woman, she now argues for a relationship of solidarity between privileged and unprivileged, colored and white women, who share an equal interest in the politics of change. Mohanty shifts the emphasis from the analysis of difference as a fixed boundary to a materialist, fluid, class based analysis of the intersections of globalization, capitalism, patriarchy and the colonization of women's lives. From an earlier focus on localism, she insists on a broader concern with the exploitation of working women around the globe. Mohanty suggests a Comparative Feminist Studies or "feminist solidarity" that creates an understanding of shared and common differences as the basis for solidarity across differences and unequal power relations. The model of alliance-building between advantaged and disadvantaged groups united in a struggle for global change is effective not just politically but epistemologically. This feminist solidarity (or Comparative Feminist Studies) model redefines the academic and curricular context of women's studies in general, opening it out to an understanding of distance as proximity, localism as global, specificity as universality as it shifts the divisive discourse of cultural oppression to a dialogical model of co-responsibility, mutuality and political solidarity.

The politics of Biblical Feminist Studies, I would then argue, should combine a respect for difference as well as a desire for solidarity and alliance across difference. Only by following both a feminist politics of solidarity, or what I referred to earlier as a centripetal epistemology and a de-centering pluralist centrifugal postmodernism, can we aspire to create an autonomous field of studies. It is crucial that we not become absorbed by other theories of social change as mere chapters or sub-sections in broader courses on the Bible. We should rather strive to maintain the integrity of our courses as apparently marginal points of entry into the very heart of Biblical Studies and the theories that currently shape it. By using disciplinary, cultural and political models we are laying the foundations of a genuinely autonomous field of studies, and helping to reshape the future of Biblical Studies as a whole.

The deconstruction of biblical feminism is not meant to invite chaos or nihilism or to render it an ineffective perspective for analysis. It is meant rather to enable the releasing of new significations where currently they are repressed. I would not like to imply that "feminisms" should re-name an ever expanding category of differences. The de-centering of biblical feminist epistemology as a totalizing narrative of pre-given agendas and priorities should not be misunderstood as an opportunity for pluralizing essentialist differences based on naturalized, pre-given, cultural identities. As Christina Crosby points out, the self presentation of so many bodies of knowledge as inclusive of numerous differences is often a self-congratulatory gesture that blindly equates identity with epistemology.[47] She puts it as follows: "But consciously assuming a specific standpoint, reflecting on the facts of history which place one in a particular way, leaves the problem of identity intact and the concept of history uninterrogated. It is to assume that ontology is the ground of epistemology, that who I am determines what and how I know. But how do I know who I am? That's obvious: I am my differences, which have been given to me by history."[48] We should defend against essentialist tendencies to claim one's cultural identity as authorizing or automatically validating theory. The politics of such an approach is alarmingly close to the liberal feminist who seeks to climb up the academic ladder by manipulating competition and dissonance.

Nor should pluralism and difference in and of themselves turn into automatic validations of contemporary feminist theory. As Teresa L. Ebert reminds us, feminist theory is not an occasion for playful oblivion, but a political engagement for epistemological transformation.[49] Multiplicity is the hallmark of late capitalism, and in and of itself does not represent an attempt to deconstruct power, or to analyze asymmetrical social relations.[50] Feminist knowledge, theory and politics then

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47) Christina Crosby, "Dealing with Differences," in Butter and Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, pp. 130-143.

48) Crosby, "Dealing With Differences," in Butter and Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, p. 137.

49) Teresa L. Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996).

50) Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

gain their legitimacy through the productive interrelationships between them, not by setting each category up against the other. In this essay I tried to argue for the legitimacy of this vision within the narrower realm of the feminist study of the Hebrew Bible.