A Third Kind of Feminist Reading: Toward a Feminist Sociology of Biblical Hermeneutics

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A Third Kind of Feminist Reading: Toward a Feminist Sociology of Biblical Hermeneutics

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Abstract
This article proposes that the next step in feminist biblical studies requires, even demands, the development of sociologically framed paradigms. It illustrates this proposal for such a third kind of reading with an examination of the interpretation history of Genesis 2–3 during the past forty years. Five hermeneutical stages emerge. They move from a first stage on feminist interpretations, to a second stage on deconstructive responses, to a third stage of interpretations that reassert androcentric meaning, to a fourth stage on the Christian Right's insistence on patriarchal gender roles, and finally to a fifth stage on commercialized biblical meanings in the Western media. This analysis shows that a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics explains, even to beginning students, the connections between biblical hermeneutics and society, because it conceptualizes biblical texts and interpretation histories as hermeneutically dynamic, politically and religiously charged conversations concerning socio-political practices.

Keywords
androcentrism, biblical sociology, Christian Right, commercialized biblical meanings, Eve and Adam story, feminist Hebrew Bible studies, feminist interpretation, gender patterns, Genesis 2–3, hermeneutics, patriarchal gender roles.

On a Future of Feminist Biblical Studies

We find ourselves at a crucial moment in the field of feminist Hebrew Bible studies. After every biblical woman character has been identified, every scholarly method has been applied, and practically every biblical text has been analyzed for its gender ideology, what remains to be done? 'Where do you go next', Smith asks, when many feminist interpreters agree that this literature is 'inherently misogynistic and biased against the interests of women' (Smith 1999: 104-105). The problem is not only with biblical literature itself.

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Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that the problem of androcentrism goes beyond the text itself and permeates the long history of interpretation (e.g. Exum 1996; Bach 1997). It is a vast enterprise to investigate androcentric approaches to biblical prose and poetry, and some suggest that we have to catalog 'every single biblical text relating to women and every single cultural artifact making reference to those texts' and identify them all as 'irredeemably patriarchal' (Smith 1999: 104). Others have already had enough of sifting through the morass of interpretations and want to return to the basics. They assert that '[t]o be a biblical scholar she must start with the text' (Smith 1999: 115). Still others yearn for a non-confessional approach, and for a clearer alignment with feminist studies in general (Fuchs 2008b). Much is in flux in feminist Hebrew Bible studies these days, and no clear directions exist.

It should thus come as no surprise that some of the research projects currently underway aim to map the field, to gather the accomplishments of the past four decades. Accordingly, Fuchs organized several panels on 'Biblical Feminisms' at the annual scholarly meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature from 2005 to 2007. Panelists were asked to describe the results that the various exegetical methods produced in feminist biblical studies, and to discuss how social categories, such as sexuality, race, class, disability, Marxism, or psychoanalysis, have shaped gendered Bible readings (Fuchs 2008a; 2006; 2005; 2003; see also J. Anderson 1991). Others, such as Mbuwayesango and Scholz, brought together feminist biblical scholars from various religious, geo-political, and ideological convictions to explore the field's state of affairs (Mbuwayesango and Scholz 2009). Still others plan multi-volume publications on the Bible, women and feminism to detail the wide spectrum of feminist research in First and Second Testament studies (Fischer *et al.* [forthcoming]; Reid [forthcoming]).

Prominent feminist biblical scholars comment on the current lack of direction. Brenner, for instance, observes that feminist Hebrew biblical scholars are in the process of surveying and assessing the field, and developing appropriate concepts and structures. She finds the following questions crucial for the advancement of the field:

> *Quo vadis*, feminist biblical scholarship?… What is beckoning? Where do you want to go? Is the Master's House still the house you long to possess, only that you would like to become its legitimate(d) masters and mistresses instead of marginal(ized) lodgers? Would you like to move it (houses can be moved now from one location to another)?… Will an act of exchanging places within the accepted power paradigms be the object of desire? Are new structures of dominance, a shift in majority/minority balances, being implemented? Are you, we, aspiring to conquistador positions in the names of the proverbial 'oppressed?' Should we not simply demolish the house instead of merely deconstructing it and its inhabitants, in order to build a completely new one instead? And if so, who will get right of occupation in the new house, and on what terms?… The contenders are many and the audiences are dwindling, as we are becoming more and more radicalized. Whose scholarship will matter, say, twenty-five years hence? (2005: 338).

Brenner wonders about the existing power dynamics when feminist biblical scholars try to adapt to, or even replace, the status quo. She is also concerned about the readership of feminist biblical scholarship and the field's overall purpose.

Other scholars also address the direction of feminist biblical studies, and propose to make geo-political and socio-cultural investigations an essential part of the exegetical analysis. One of them is Milne, who suggests that feminist biblical studies need to move from historical and literary analysis to a cultural analytical framework. She explains:

> A necessary…step…is to *consider the political and social implications* of biblical gender ideology, not only as it affects women characters in the text but as it has affected women in society *through the millennia and in our own time*… In this kind of work I see a shift away from a focus on the reader and his or her individual interaction with the biblical text toward a consideration of the *broader social implications* for women of reading or otherwise encountering a text like the Bible (1997: 48, 56; emphasis added).

Milne envisions that feminist biblical research should investigate the larger geo-political and socio-cultural dynamics that have shaped biblical gender ideologies throughout the ages, turning towards interpretation history and examining biblical literature as part of societal ideas about gender politics. Feminist critic Susan Lanser proposes a hermeneutical approach that correlates 'code' and 'context'. As early as the late 1980s, Lanser criticized previous feminist biblical publications for limiting the task to 'a function of semantic, grammatical, and phonological or orthographical properties' (Lanser 1988: 70), paying attention to 'form' only, without obvious attention to 'context'. In a nutshell, then, ours is a time when feminist Hebrew biblical scholars reflect on past accomplishments in order to define the future.

Building on these considerations, this article proposes that the next step in feminist biblical studies requires, indeed demands, the development of a sociologically framed paradigm. We need to explore the sociological context in which feminist interpretations stand today. I call this approach a third kind of feminist reading, one that 'negotiates garden and wilderness' (Lanser 1988: 79) and occupies 'the third space', to use Homi J. Bhabha's famous expression that describes the postcolonial and postmodern epistemological moment of our time (Bhabha 1994). This third kind of feminist reading promotes an examination of gender in culture, politics and religion through the particularities of biblical literature. The result is a feminist sociology of biblical literature, an investigative approach that is not isolated from the outer world, but firmly located within it, shedding light on the manifold socio-cultural and geo-religious dynamics in the past and present.

Such a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics awaits application to many biblical texts, characters and topics. This article illustrates it with Genesis 2–3, a narrative that has lastingly and profoundly contributed to gender dynamics in the western world. It exemplifies how the next phase of feminist biblical scholarship might look when feminist interpretations are placed within the sociological gender patterns from which and within which they have emerged. In my view, a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics provides a much-needed theoretical-conceptual framework that locates feminist interpretations within their geo-political and socio-cultural dynamics. It offers renewed conceptual and contextualized direction to feminist biblical studies in particular, and perhaps even to the field of biblical studies in general.

The Eve and Adam Story: Toward a Feminist Sociology of Biblical Hermeneutics

The need for developing a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics occurred to me when my various students kept wondering why feminist interpretations were necessary to begin with. Whether coming from biblically grounded or more secular backgrounds, a majority of students lack the historical-cultural information to comprehend the socio-political and religious challenges that have shaped readings of the Bible, feminist or not. They usually take for granted 'traditional' Bible interpretations that advance androcentric, hierarchical, privatized, personalized or moralistic meanings. They find them 'true' or 'accurate', whereas feminist readings seem 'way out there'. A conceptual framework that contextualizes biblical interpretation, a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics, helps them to appreciate the geo-political and socio-cultural dynamics within which feminist interpretations have made significant contributions to contemporary biblical hermeneutics. The systematic development of such a sociology must, therefore, be regarded as a crucial step towards investigating and communicating the epistemological, methodological, historical, political, cultural and religious contexts in which biblical meanings are located.

When this is done for recent scholarship on the Eve and Adam story, a distinct sociological paradigm emerges that contains five stages. A first stage presents the contributions of feminist biblical scholarship that focuses on sexism and has emerged since the 1970s. A second stage responds to the first and includes interpretations that deconstruct sympathetically feminist interpretations. A third stage features readings that reassert androcentric meaning. A fourth stage, representing the most recent sociological development, is characterized by conservative evangelical Christian interpreters, who insist on patriarchal gender roles as the defining concern of Genesis 2–3. Apart from these four stages, but probably most visible and influential in western culture, a fifth stage has emerged. It is outside the confines of the mostly Christian and academic institutional settings, as seen in stages one through four. The fifth stage consists of western media and advertisement culture that advance commercialized interpretations of Genesis 2–3.

When feminist approaches are placed in this sociological paradigm, their innovative and creative challenges to the androcentric status quo are obvious even to uninitiated students of feminist biblical discourse. The paradigm illuminates the 'broader social implications' that Milne wanted to see in feminist biblical studies. It also helps educate what Brenner calls the 'dwindling audiences', and demonstrates that indeed much is at stake in feminist biblical studies. If we failed to communicate the results of the field, we would lose not only meaningful appropriations of the biblical text, but also cultural-religious memory that validates alternative and marginalized perspectives. It would entail a loss of understanding of the various gender ideologies that continue to shape the lives of women, men, and everybody in between 'throughout the millennia and in our time' (Milne 1997: 48). Literalist fundamentalist and secular-capitalist appropriations might come to dominate biblical meanings for good, and succeed in erasing public awareness about alternatives. A sociological paradigm puts the choice in front of the readers, and involves them in ethical-political deliberation. They become agents in the generational task to decide what is going to be communicated to the next generation. This is certainly a worthwhile and important undertaking, and the following analysis

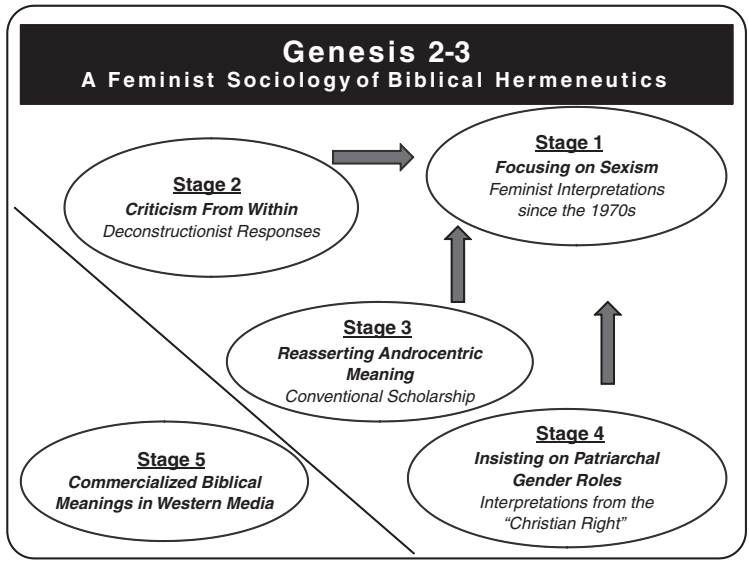

Figure 1. The Five Stages of the Feminist Sociological Paradigm on Gen. 2–3

aims to contribute to it. It describes the various sociological stages, as they are reflected in scholarly discourse on Genesis 2–3, and then, in a conclusion, it considers the larger implications of this sociological paradigm for feminist biblical studies.

Stage 1: Focusing on Sexism—Feminist Interpretations Since the 1970s

The first hermeneutical stage emerged in the 1970s after several feminist biblical scholars had earned the highest academic degrees in biblical studies. They began researching about women and gender in biblical texts and interpretation history, aiming to challenge and subvert androcentric conventions. Some of them tried to recover and reclaim biblical meanings from androcentric domination. Others pointed to misogynistic conventions and habits in the ancient texts. All of them read biblical literature with feminist convictions in mind, as defined by the second women's movement, and they made the social category of gender central in their work. Many investigated Genesis 2–3 (Brueggeman 1970; Bledstein 1977; Crüsemann and Thyen 1978; Bellis 1994; Schüngel-Straumann 1989; 1993; Gardner 1990; Korsak 1992; 1994–95; Reisenberger 1993; Rashkow 1993; Fewell and Gunn 1993; Wacker 1997; 2006; Claassens 2006; Rooke 2007), but three interpretations have received more attention than others, perhaps because they were the first to articulate such meanings in biblical studies. They come from Trible, Bird and Meyers.

In 1973, Trible published an article, entitled 'Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread' (Trible 1973b), that employed a feminist-literary hermeneutic with the goal 'to recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith' (Trible 1978a: xvi). Her interpretation responded to the theo-epistemological challenges of radical feminist theologian

and philosopher Mary Daly (1973), who rejected the Bible as utterly androcentric literature and a detriment to women's rights. Trible did not accept this judgment, and set out 'to examine interactions between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Women's Liberation Movement' (Trible 1973a: 30). She asserted that careful exegesis leads to a more nuanced appreciation of the Bible than is suggested by Daly.

Trible's interpretation made five important observations, all of them based on literary-rhetorical methodology. First, she showed that the noun *ha-adam* contains several possibilities of meaning. The noun may refer generically to humanity, specify the male gender, and serve as a proper name for the first man. She cautioned that interpreters need to distinguish carefully the various meanings depending on the various contexts in which the noun appears. In Gen. 2.7-21, the context refers to humanity in general. Therefore, to Trible, initially '*'adham* is a generic term for humankind' (1973b: 251), a sexually undifferentiated earth creature, not yet female or male.

Second, Trible emphasized that the sexual differentiation of the earth creature occurs in 2.22-23 after God 'builds' the woman from the earth creature's side. Both female and male 'emerge simultaneously, not sequentially' (1999: 441), and when the woman (*'iššâ*) appears the man (*'îš*) appears as well. Hence, in Trible's view, the divine 'surgery is radical, for it results in two creatures where before there was only one' (1978c: 98). The couple's relationship consists of mutuality and equality, and 'for both of them life originates with God' (1978c: 102).

Third, Trible reconsidered the meaning of the noun 'helper' in 2.18. In contrast to standard androcentric convention, she asserted that the noun does not describe woman as inferior, as a mere 'helpmate' of the male, similar to other biblical passages (e.g. Ps. 121.2) in which the term 'helper' characterizes the deity and depicts a mutually beneficial, not a hierarchical, relationship between the parties. The same pertains to Genesis 2. Trible contended: 'God is the helper superior to man [presumably as earth creature]; the animals are helpers inferior to man [presumably as earth creature]; woman is the helper equal to man' (1973b: 252; 1978c: 88-94).

Fourth, Trible explained that the woman is 'theologian, ethicist, hermeneut, rabbi' (1978c: 110) in the negotiations with the serpent in Gen. 3.1-7. To Trible, the woman 'contemplates the tree', 'understands the hermeneutical task', quotes God, 'interprets the prohibition', and 'is fully aware' of what she is doing when she eats the fruit (1978c: 110). The text depicts female intelligence, authority and initiative, though certainly not 'female chauvinism' (1973b: 256; 1978c: 105-15).

Fifth, Trible clarified the meaning of the divine punishment in Gen. 3.11-24, in which God curses only the serpent and the ground, not the human couple. Eve and Adam are judged for their 'shared disobedience', but not cursed (1973b: 257; 1978c: 117-22). Furthermore, the divine judgments are not prescriptive, how things should be, but are descriptive, how things are. Accordingly, in Trible's exegesis, Gen. 3.16 'is not license for male supremacy, but rather condemnation of that very pattern' (1973b: 257; 1978c: 126-28). In other words, Trible viewed the ending of the Eve and Adam story as a critique of androcentric society, a provocative twist on the centuries-long convention to read the narrative as a justification for women's secondary status in society.

It is not difficult to see that this interpretation was innovative then and is even today, but it was not the only one presented. In 1974, Bird offered a reading of Genesis 1–3 that

assessed the biblical texts from a feminist perspective, using historical criticism (1974; 1981; 1987; 1989; 1993; 1997: 13-51, 123-54, 174-93). Bird's reading highlighted the distinct features of the Priestly account in Gen. 1.1–2.4a, and the Yahwist account in Gen. 2.4b–3.24. When Bird focused on Gen. 1.26-28, she compared the vocabulary with Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources to show that the biblical account is 'a polemical reading', because it characterizes ordinary humans with imagery usually reserved for ancient Near Eastern royalty and gods. Gen. 1.1–2.4a portrays humanity—female and male—as divinely created in the image of God, a radical idea in the ancient Near Eastern setting, Bird maintained (1997: 138, 144).

Yet, Bird also explained that Gen. 1.26-28 does not describe God as 'male and female'. Instead, the verse, 'God created humans, as male and female God created them', needs to be understood as stating that humanity 'is created like (i.e. resembling) God, but as creature, and hence male and female' (1981: 144). The text does not qualify God, but humanity, and so Bird contends that v. 26 'contain(s) two essential and distinct statements about the nature of humanity'. The statements depict humans as created in the image of God, and they portray them as male and female. They ensure that the biblical description of humanity is 'progressive, not synonymous. The second statement adds to the first; it does not explicate it' (1981: 144). In other words, Bird argued that the Priestly account does not refer to God as male and female, but depicts only humans as gendered creatures. In Gen. 1.1–2.4a, sexuality refers merely to the *biological* functions of the human couple, and defines neither God nor the social and religious roles of women and men. Accordingly, to Bird, 'the theme of sexuality (reproduction) has a limited function in this account' (1981: 146) that should not be overemphasized in androcentric or feminist interpretations.

The silence in the Priestly account on the social 'roles and norms of his day' changes in the Yahwist account, according to Bird. In Gen. 2.4b–3.24, 'the primary meaning of sexuality is seen in *psychosocial*, rather than biological, terms' (1981: 152; emphasis added). Thus, the second account adds important considerations about the social relationship between female and male that the first creation story left unanswered. In the second story, Bird explained, 'Genesis 2–3 supplements the anthropology of Genesis 1, but also "corrects" or challenges it by maintaining that the meaning of human sexual distinction cannot be limited to a biological definition of origin or function' (1981: 153). The Yahwist account depicts the social relationship between female and male as an *intended* partnership of equals, 'characterized by mutuality of attraction, support, and commitment' (1981: 153).

Like Trible, then, Bird distills a gender affirmative meaning from the biblical text, although in her view both accounts offer unique perspectives to a contemporary understanding of female and male in society. The Priestly account limits gender roles to biology, whereas the Yahwist account locates gender in culture (Bird 1987). Yet, both also share a perspective that is 'androcentric in form and perspective' (Bird 1987: 38; 1997: 165). For instance, in Genesis 2, the man is always central, and it is he who needs a companion and a helper. At the same time, Bird insisted that 'no statement of dominance or subordination in the relationship of the sexes' exists in Genesis 2 (1987: 39; 1997: 166). An explicit gender hierarchy appears only in Genesis 3 where 'the companion of chapter 2 has become a master' (1987: 39; 1997: 166). Bird's analysis is in tune with the goals of

liberal feminism that aims for women's equality with men, and so Bird stressed gender equity in the biblical account.

A third early feminist interpretation focuses on Genesis 2–3 from yet another methodological angle. Grounded in a historical-archaeological methodology, Meyers explained that the origins of this biblical story reach back to Iron Age I, when the Israelites lived in rural, small and decentralized communities in the highlands of central Palestine. At the time, Israelites lived in family households in which women and men held equal status, responsibilities and economic rights (Meyers 1988; for a different view, see Schroer 1998; for a critical assessment of biblical historiography, see Davies 1995; Long 1999; Liverani 2006). Their living conditions were harsh, and everybody was equally necessary for survival. Accordingly, Genesis 2–3, reflecting these conditions, depicts the first couple as 'every woman and every man' (Meyers 1988: 80). The narrative also refers to the social problems that confronted the Israelites. Life, for instance, demanded 'an intensification of female labor and fecundity' (1988: 120), which required that 'women increased their procreative role and also made large contributions to the subsistence sphere' (1993: 140). The biblical story hints at these demands when it stresses the first woman's procreative duty.

Meyers also maintained that the original meaning of Genesis 2–3 changed when elite men with distinct religious, political and social interests revised the story during the emerging monarchy. They modified the egalitarian relationship between Eve and Adam into a hierarchical one, and turned the tale into an androcentric plot that endorsed the socio-political and economic hierarchies of the Israelite monarchy. Thus, the final version of Genesis 2–3 does not reliably depict ancient Israelite society, and only correlation with archaeological findings and anthropological theories would turn the biblical tale into an accurate historical source about early Israelite society. Meyers explained that the process of subordinating 'Eve' or 'Everywoman' to 'Adam' or 'Everyman' remained incomplete during the biblical era. Androcentrism became a dominant feature in biblical interpretations only when Greco-Roman culture introduced dualistic thinking to 'the Semitic world'. It was at this historical juncture that '[t]he misogynist expansions of the Eden story in early Christian and Jewish literature begin to emerge' and 'a new concept of Eve [was] associated with sin, death, and suffering… [and] superimposed…on the assertive and productive figure of the Eden narrative that we can hardly see the original woman of Genesis 2–3' (1988: 196; see also Anderson 2002). In Meyers's view, archaeological, anthropological and literary studies help to clarify these historical developments, and to 'rediscover and reclaim the pristine Eve' (1988: 196; 2006; see also the discussion of Meyers's work in Boer 2006). Only then can the egalitarian impetus of Genesis 2–3 become accessible to contemporary readers, Meyers asserted.

Clearly, the three interpretations of Trible, Bird and Meyers challenged well-established androcentric views of the Eve and Adam story. Predictably, they have not been widely accepted, and they are little known outside academic circles, despite the serious scholarly scrutiny they have received in the past few decades. In the next sociological stage, interpreters responded in a friendly-deconstructionist fashion to these early feminist interpretations, so much so that sometimes they themselves have even been characterized as feminist.

Stage 2: Criticism from Within—Deconstructionist Responses

The second sociological stage emerged during the 1980s, and includes mostly sympathetic responses to the feminist call for biblical reinterpretation. Interpreters of this stage often questioned the exegetical viability of feminist meanings based on historical, literary or epistemological observations, and they characterized feminist appropriations as 'revisionism'. Sometimes the deconstructionist responses have been classified as feminist, perhaps because of their sympathetic stance toward feminist goals. However, not usually identifying themselves as feminist, they instead stressed the ambiguity of biblical meanings, and often favored postmodern hermeneutics. They considered the early feminist readings as too narrowly conceived, and as advancing essentializing discourse. Importantly, then, deconstructionist responses did not unanimously endorse feminist-political positions, and usually tried to deconstruct early feminist approaches (D. Jobling 1980; 1986; Milne 1988; van Wolde 1989; Clines 1990; Bechtel 1993; Carr 1993; Schuller 1995; Goldingay 1998; Sawyer 2002).

One of them was literary-cultural critic Mieke Bal, who in the mid-1980s offered a forceful critique that characterized feminist and androcentric readings as 'equally false' (1987b: 110). Bal herself did not aim for a feminist interpretation, because she considered such a goal impossible; nevertheless, her work is often classified as feminist (e.g. Greenstein 1989; Abraham 2002). Bal explained, 'If my interpretation of Eve's position shows her in a more favorable light than do the common uses of the text, I do not want to suggest that this is a feminist, feminine, or female-oriented text' (1987b: 110). To Bal, the androcentric text uses both negative and positive gender markers that serve 'to limit repression to acceptable, viable proportions' and to make the domination bearable to both the dominators and the dominated (1987b: 110). Bal understood that 'dominators have, first, to establish their position, then to safeguard it. Subsequently, they must make both the dominated *and* themselves believe in it' (1987b: 110; emphasis original). Accordingly, Bal considered the Bible as neither 'a feminist resource [n]or a sexist manifesto' (Bal 1987a: 1), but as literature that includes 'traces of problematization of the represented ideology' (1987b: 110).

Accordingly, Bal viewed the Genesis narrative as 'a patriarchal myth that is related to an ideology that cannot be monolithic' (1987b: 110). Patriarchal ideology is complex because, like other oppressive ideologies, it is not blatantly hostile to the 'other'. Apparent tolerance of the 'other'—here 'woman'—does not make Genesis 2–3 woman-friendly or feminist either, Bal contended, but it is an essential strategy to androcentric ideology. Woman-friendly elements obfuscate gender bias, and invite both men and women to believe in the Bible. This complex and 'heterogeneous' strategy worked, and made the Bible 'one of the most influential mythical and literary documents of our culture' (1987a: 1), endorsed both by women and men. Bal analyzed the strategies that helped feminist and androcentric interpretations to suppress the heterogeneity of the text and to gain 'coherence and authority'. She wanted to expose the domination model itself, and to understand the biblical narrative's contributions to 'the possibility of dominance itself' (1987a: 3).

Bal's analysis gained considerable renown, because it proposed that both feminist and androcentric interpretations share the same hermeneutical convictions. Both attempt to

streamline the Bible's heterogeneous ideology, and both reach for monolithic explanations. To do so, both also have to commit to what Bal called the 'retrospective fallacy'. This strategy requires that readers project a character's fully developed identity from the end to the beginning of the story. In the case of Genesis 2–3, readers have to assume that Eve, as depicted at the story's end, is already a fully developed character at the narrative's beginning. They must ignore the literary stages, the 'semiotic chronology', in which 'Eve' appears only in Genesis 3 (1987b: 107). They have to forget that '[w]hat existed before was an earth creature, then a woman, next an actant, then a mother, and finally, a being named "Eve"' (1987b: 107-108).

Committing the retrospective fallacy, readers—both feminist and androcentric—do not recognize that Genesis 2–3 contains two stories, an early story that presents a 'myth of creation' and a later story that presents a 'myth of Eve'. When readers collapse both narratives into one, they read the story from its end. According to Bal, this has led to a fundamental problem in the history of interpretation: 'What went wrong in the history of reception…is precisely the repression of the problem…(namely) the heterogeneous ideology of the text, which had to be turned into a monolithic one' (1987c: 131; see also J. Jobling 2005: 87). The consequences of the hermeneutical collapse are significant, as they contributed to 'dominance itself'. Feminist and androcentric interpretations could certainly have avoided this hermeneutical problem had they recognized Eve's and Adam's gradual literary development:

> First its [the character of *ha-adam*] existence was posited, but then it was not yet a sexual being. Then it was sexually differentiated, addressed, and successively endowed with different aspects of subjectivity. It became the subject of awareness, hence of focalization; of speech; of possible action; of choice; and of actual actions. It was characterized by description. Then, and only then, it was named: Adam the man, Eve the woman (Bal 1987b: 130).

Yet readers, feminist or androcentric, ignored this literary development, reduced the biblical text to a monolithic meaning, and denied the possibility of heterogeneous meaning. Thus, both approaches contributed to the domination model, Bal argued, and prevented readers from seeing the heterogeneous ideology of the biblical text.

Lanser articulated another far-reaching critique of feminist interpreters. She challenged them for relying on a formalistic 'theory of language' that defined communication as 'a process of encoding and decoding sentences' (1988: 70). Focusing her critique on the work of Trible and Bal and classifying Bal's work as feminist, Lanser charged that feminist interpretations reduced Genesis 2–3 to 'a function of semantic, grammatical, and phonological or orthographical properties' (1988: 70). The problem of these 'surface' readings is that they ignored the significance of 'context' in the meaning-making process, and underestimated that 'every act of understanding relies (unconsciously and sometimes also consciously) on complex rules and assumptions about social and cultural behavior and language use' (1988: 70-71). Basing her assessment on the philosophical and literary-theoretical convictions of Jacques Derrida (1998) and Stanley Fish (1980), Lanser criticized feminist approaches for failing to recognize that '*every* reading creates and is created by its context; no uncontextual reading is possible' (1988: 77; emphasis original). Accordingly, interpretative differences consist 'both in the degree to which

context is brought explicitly to bear and in the kind of context the reading creates' (1988: 77). Yet, feminist interpretations, grounded in formalist assumptions, separated literary observations from social and linguistic contexts, and so they explained insufficiently 'the social custom, grammatical principles, cultural attitudes and common experience' (1988: 77). They ignored the significance of 'inference', how readers infer meaning depending on the reading contexts.

Lanser encouraged readers to concentrate on 'the tension between inference and form' so that the 'deep ambivalence' of Genesis 2–3 would not be suppressed. Here, she resonated with Bal's concern for the heterogeneous character of biblical narrative in the hope that 'a third kind of feminist reading built upon the uneasy relation of context and code' would eventually emerge, one 'that negotiates garden and wilderness, for which the feminist critic would indeed be a theoretical pioneer' (1988: 79). Her critique has enjoyed widespread interest since it appeared in 1988 (e.g. Clines 1990; Kimelman 1998; Slivniak 2003), and her comments about the inherent contextuality of all interpretations are important.

However, in fairness to early feminist interpretations, concerns for reading contexts rarely informed biblical studies prior to the 1990s, though some of them did identify a context for their interpretation. For instance, Trible referred to 1963 as 'an important date for biblical theologians', and mentioned Betty Friedan's work (Trible 1978a: xv). She also alluded to several socio-political and theological developments that provided her with 'the clue between the text and the world'—black and liberation theologies, psychology, ecology, 'sexuality', and feminism. In addition, she disclosed that she was 'specifically interested in feminism as a critique of culture' (Trible 1978b: 5-7). When placed in the history of the field, Trible's comments are significant, although they are certainly modest compared to today's expectations, and apparently for the 1988 standards of Lanser's field, secular literary criticism. In other words, early feminist scholars adhered to 'uncontextual' approaches that dominated biblical studies at the time.

In conclusion, these and other studies criticized feminist 'revisionism', and diagnosed many historical, literary and epistemological disagreements, although criticism was offered mostly from a sympathetic stance toward feminism. The next sociological stage illustrates the slowly changing public discourse on feminism in general, and feminist biblical studies in particular. In the next phase, interpreters began reasserting the validity of androcentric meanings, and became less willing to support feminist hermeneutical aspirations. Two examples shall demonstrate that in this stage, increasingly and forcefully, feminist goals and perspectives were challenged and publicly rejected.

Stage 3: Reasserting Androcentric Meaning—Conventional Scholarship

The third hermeneutical stage demonstrates the ongoing persistence of the socio-cultural and theo-political gender conservatism in Western society and religion. This conservatism did not waver, despite some initial gains in feminist discourse and practice, and, as interpretations of Genesis 2–3 indicate, it began reasserting itself in recent years. These interpretations re-articulated a largely negative stance toward feminist meanings, and stressed the validity of androcentric meaning, sometimes from a sympathetic stance, but mostly

from a negative position toward feminist biblical studies. They proclaimed androcentric meaning as inherent to the biblical text, and accused feminist interpreters of projecting ideological positions into the text, as if they did not make the same hermeneutical move.

A recent example comes from Gellman, who expressed sympathy with feminist goals, but also wanted to play the devil's advocate. He argued for an interpretation that is 'an unalloyed patriarchal one', and claimed that his androcentric reading was 'at least as plausible' as a feminist one (2006: 329; see also Abraham 2002). In accordance with this conflicted position, he confessed 'to my sorrow, that a case for the new feminist reading of the Adam and Eve story is very difficult to defend' (Gellman 2006: 321). The analysis includes works of Trible, Bird, Meyers and Bal, and again Bal's work is classified as feminist, although she herself rejected this characterization.

Several important arguments define Gellman's position. First, he questioned the feminist notion that the term *ha-adam* is correctly translated as 'earthling', and claimed instead that 'more convincingly, perhaps…the earthling was originally sexually a male' (2006: 321). To Gellman, the man retains his 'self identity and consciousness of self when he declares that he has found what he had been looking for previous to the creation of the woman' (2006: 324). Adam's 'post-operative consciousness' does not change, and the man's recognition of the woman is 'no more than an etymological confirmation that the woman gets her life as an extension of the man' (2006: 324). Gellman maintained this classic androcentric position when he proclaimed that God does not rebuild the earthling 'in any way' (2006: 323). In his interpretation, the term *ha-adam* refers to the male regardless of the Hebrew wordplay between *ha-adam* and *ha-adamah* ('earth').

Second, Gellman challenged feminist interpretations that distinguish between the original equality of woman and man in Genesis 2 and the ensuing establishment of hierarchical gender relations in Gen. 3.16. To Gellman, the entire story of Genesis 2–3 assumes a hierarchy between woman and man in which the man is more important than the woman. For instance, the serpent only speaks to the woman in order to make Adam eat from the tree, because even there the man matters more than the woman; she is always his extension only. Furthermore, God approaches Adam first and only secondarily the woman because 'God is not concerned with the woman's whereabouts' (Gellman 2006: 324). To Gellman, the narrative is androcentric throughout, and not only in Gen. 3.16-20, as Trible had maintained.

Third, Gellman did not consider the naming of the woman in Gen. 2.23 as an illustration of the story's 'woman-friendly' possibilities, in contrast to feminist interpreters who carefully distinguished between the naming in 2.23 and 3.20. To Gellman, both cases reinforce male superiority and domination to show that 'Adam's names *stick*—whatever name Adam gave, *that would be its name*', and 'Adam's name for the woman sticks, too' (2006: 333; emphasis original).

Gellman reasserted the androcentric meaning of Genesis 2–3. However, as mentioned above, his hermeneutical success also worried him. Supporting a feminist agenda, he expressed repeated sympathy for feminist theologies grounded in the Bible, and advised Christian and Jewish feminists to let go of text-based Bible readings, because the text does not support feminist goals. He recommended that feminists develop *midrashim*, a form of Jewish storytelling that looks for textual gaps, omissions or deficiencies, and gives storytellers creative license. He also hoped that feminists would advance the notion

that revelation is ongoing, and not limited to the androcentric Bible. His ideas were, of course, not new; feminists had been suggesting them since the 1970s (e.g. Plaskow 2005). For instance, Milne observed: '[T]he past two decades of feminist biblical analysis has intensified, rather than lessened, the dilemma for those who would be "Christian feminists" or "Jewish feminists"', because of the 'patriarchal values' of biblical literature (Milne 1993: 172). In a way, then, Gellman agreed with this point. His interpretation reasserted biblical androcentrism in Genesis 2–3, and he recommended that feminist theologians turn to other sources than the Hebrew Bible.

Other interpreters, too, reasserted androcentric biblical meaning, although they did not share Gellman's positive stance toward feminism. Kawashima is one of them. His interpretation is entirely unsympathetic to feminist readings of Genesis 2–3, which he classified as 'a misreading' (Kawashima 2006: 48). Kawashima claimed that it is 'safe to say…that they [feminist scholars] represent a minority opinion' because 'notable literary critics' do not find feminist interpretations sustained by the text and 'recent philological commentaries tended to ignore them altogether' (2006: 47). The observation is not mistaken. Many mainstream commentaries, journals and monographs have ignored feminist work. The question is whether such omissions prove the falsity of feminist biblical readings, or whether they simply illustrate the ideological bias of what is considered mainstream biblical studies. To Kawashima, it proved the former, and so he tried to uncover tautological arguments, diagnose grammatical inaccuracies, and identify subjective epistemology, even solipsism, in feminist readings. Certainly, reasserted androcentric interpretations such as Kawashima's indicate that intellectually and socially conservative scholarship is not in decline. The fourth stage of the hermeneutical debate on gender confirms this observation, and gives evidence to the rise and success of the Christian Right's fundamentalist views on Genesis 2–3.

Stage 4: Insisting on Patriarchal Gender Roles—Interpretations from the Christian Right

The fourth stage is closely related to the third, but goes further. Located within conservative and evangelical Christian churches, proponents of the Christian Right insist on androcentric biblical meanings, and write from explicitly conservative evangelical Christian perspectives. These interpretations dismiss feminism altogether, and also ignore the large body of feminist biblical scholarship. Proclaiming biblical literature as patriarchal, Christian Right interpreters consider the Bible as a positive and authoritative guide for contemporary Christian women's and men's lives. The Bible should be read as establishing hierarchical gender relations today. Intellectually and socially conservative voices are on the rise in biblical studies, as well as in larger culture. A prominent group among them, the so-called 'complementarians', argue in this way, and their interpretations are criticized from another group of similar religious-theological affiliation, the 'Christians for Biblical Equality' (see *www.cbmw.org/Journal* and *www.cbeinternational.org*).

To complementarians, the Eve and Adam story legitimates patriarchal gender roles in contemporary society, and endorses a Christian life built on biblical androcentrism. Complementarians stress that women and men are 'equal yet different' (Ortlund 1991: 103; see also Scholz 2005), and that Genesis 2–3 is central in 'the gender debate among

Bible-believing Christians' (Strauch 1999: 18). In fairness, complementarians recognize the paradox of asserting 'male-female equality and male headship', but they insist that God gives a husband authority over his wife (Ortlund 1991: 100). Complementarian Ortlund stated that 'we ought to be sufficiently agile intellectually and emotionally to accept this paradoxical truth' in which 'the man heads the home for God and the wife helps him to fulfill the divine calling' (1991: 105). He explained that the woman is the helper of her husband because 'under God, a wife may not compete for that primary responsibility' and ultimately 'godly male headship is female fulfillment, not a denial of female rights' (1991: 105).

These androcentric gender stereotypes characterize most, if not all, complementarian interpretations, and so, for instance, Strauch declared:

> God designed the man to be husband, father, provider, protector. He is the head of the family and to lead the church family. God designed the woman to be wife, mother, nurturer. She is to actively help and submit to the man's leadership (1999: 7).

Predictably, complementarians repeat classic Christian patterns of androcentric theology (e.g. Cottrell 1994). They explain that sin is brought into the world when Eve tries to take charge; she usurps Adam's headship. They state that both are doing wrong: Eve for being deceived, and Adam for forsaking his headship responsibility, and so '[t]ogether they pulled the human race down into sin and death' (Ortlund 1991: 107). Complementarians also emphasize that God made Adam the central character and created him first, repeating the ancient and well-known interpretation that woman was formed out of and for man. They believe that the woman is her husband's helper, and assume that Eve's initiative is unwarranted because 'she [is] the helper, he the leader' (Strauch 1999: 25). They also acknowledge that both are penalized for their 'sin' with 'a true curse' (Cottrell 1994: 133; see also Stitzinger 1981). Sometimes, they recognize that 'male headship may be personally repugnant to feminists' (Ortlund 1991: 98), but such an admission is rare. Importantly, complementarians insist that only those feminist writings that share belief in the Bible's inerrancy are worthy of being debated.

Complementarian interpretations are not uncontested within evangelical Christian communities. Among their competitors are the Christians for Biblical Equality, and the disagreements have led to heated exchanges, as publications on their organizational websites indicate (see also Groothuis 1996). Taking an egalitarian position, Hess asserted that Eve and Adam are described as equal partners, hence Christian churches should support equal participation by women and men (Hess 1993; 2004). Predictably, complementarians reject egalitarian readings, finding them 'reductionist' because they are 'simply asserted—not proven, or even adequately argued' (Duncan 2005: 13). However, both sides—complementarians and egalitarians—do not directly engage feminist biblical scholarship as it has developed since the 1970s. Their disputes operate almost entirely within the cocoon of evangelical conservative discourse, and so their focus on gender engages feminist biblical studies only indirectly; however, all of them engage the issue of gender. The arguments are well-known in contemporary Christian conservative circles, due to the considerable reach of conservative Christian publications and media outlets. From a feminist perspective, the insistence on androcentric biblical doctrine is

certainly a troubling development, but it is one that is effectively and widely communicated, and taken for granted.

Stage 5: Commercialized Biblical Meanings in Western Media

The fifth stage has developed outside academic and religious institutions, and has largely been articulated in commercialized appropriations of biblical content that commodify and trivialize any serious meaning-making effort. Sometimes, the Eve and Adam story features prominently in those appropriations; but, as can perhaps be expected, feminist hermeneutical positions are not featured. Commercialized biblical meanings are grounded in androcentric assumptions. They limit the narrative to a twisted gender discourse that aims at selling goods and services rather than tackling cultural or religious meanings. Eve and Adam appear in advertisements that promote perfumes, liquors, bathroom furniture, adult internet sites, or movies (e.g. *http://web.mac.com/adcrit/adcrit/DKNY.html*; *http://videos.matchdoctor.com/48155/DKNY_-_Be_Delicious.html*; *www.luxist.com/tag/adam%20and%20eve*; *http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/smirnoff_green_apple_twist_adam_eve*; *http://nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com/blog/_archives/2006/5/19/1969148.html*; see also Miller 2002). Even Irish comedian Dave Allen poked fun about this biblical narrative in 1986 (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGASvVqzOa0*; [accessed 26 February 2010]).

All of them appropriate the biblical tale with a desire for religious irreverence. Many challenge dogmatic Christian convictions that classify Eve as the originator of human sin, perhaps one of the few positive aspects of commercialized approaches to Genesis 2–3. In secular advertisements, Eve's 'sin' turns into a product to be had, wanted and promoted. Not defined as corrupting or 'bad', her 'sin' is a product to be consumed because it promises bliss, youth and joy, while punishment is nowhere in sight. Advertisers ask consumers to identify with Eve and to desire what she desires. Since Eve enjoys whatever she has, consumers are invited to want what she has. When they succumb and buy what she has, they become like Adam. In an interesting gender twist, then, consumers learn to identify both with Eve and Adam although, typical for androcentric storytelling, Eve always appears as the seductress. Some online companies exploit the androcentric notion that the first couple's sin consisted of sexual activity, and they sell what androcentric interpreters consider the kernel of the first couple's 'sin', namely, sex. Again and again, advertisers try to tempt customers to want what Eve and Adam have, and to pay for it. In these retellings, the biblical story is a commodity that promises pleasure, fun, and instant online gratification.

In short, contemporary Western advertisement implements an interpretative strategy that is absent in biblical studies. It assumes that whatever sells can, should and will be used for marketing purposes. If it is the story of Eve and Adam, commercialized appropriations build on well-known biblical meanings, but with a twist. They trivialize the biblical narrative, invite consumers to identify first with Eve and then with Adam, and ultimately turn the tale into a commodity. Perhaps, commodified appropriations of biblical literature are the last use global capitalism has for biblical images, stories and characters, but it is also obvious that commercialized interpretations create only superficial biblical meanings. Compared to them, academically and religiously serious interpretations

appear quaint, whether they are based on feminist alternatives, whether they are responses to the feminist call, whether they are androcentric reassertions, or whether they are grounded in the Christian Right's insistence on hierarchical gender meaning. In the secular world, money rules and complex argumentation is, at best, secondary. Perhaps the capitalist contempt for the serious meaning-making process is the 'real' worry to contemporary biblical scholars, feminist or not, because meaningful interpretations do not matter in such a socio-political and cultural context.

The good news is that Eve and Adam are still widely recognized, even by people who are not religiously literate. A semi-naked couple, a tree, an apple in the hand of a woman or still hanging on the tree, and a snake are sufficient to make people almost anywhere recognize the biblical tale. But how do professional interpreters communicate that the story's manifold meanings still matter, when capitalist commercialization obliterates references to biblical literature when they do not make money? Commodified and trivialized interpretations hint at the difficulties biblical scholars face when they want to communicate the results of their exegetical work today.

Negotiating Garden and Wilderness? Concluding Remarks

This article proposes that feminist biblical studies need to attend to the sociological paradigms in which feminist interpretations are located today. Defined as a third kind of feminist reading, such an analysis conceptualizes and contextualizes feminist interpretations within the socio-political and cultural-religious dynamics within and from which they emerged. Understood as part and parcel of the sociological patterns, feminist contributions to exegetical innovation, intellectual strength, and socio-political and religious insight become clear. The sociological investigation also demonstrates that feminist readings have been severely contested, and that a focus on gender, women and sexuality in biblical hermeneutics contributes to the ongoing socio-political and cultural debates today. Feminist biblical interpretations evoke a wide array of responses, even though those responses do not always engage feminist scholarship directly. Thus, the sociological paradigm illustrates even to a beginning student the connection between biblical hermeneutics and society. The paradigm is able to reflect anew the relationship between 'garden and wilderness', between 'context and code' (Lanser 1988: 79), because it conceptualizes biblical texts and interpretation histories as hermeneutically dynamic, and as politically and religiously charged conversations over socio-political practices.

The sociological paradigm of Genesis 2–3 also teaches that interpretations do not advance a single meaning only. Combined with the fact that readers, shaped by the collective characteristics of their social locations, create biblical meanings, a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics promotes an epistemology that helps to counter fundamentalist literalism. It challenges notions about the singularity of meaning and historical accuracy as determinative factors of knowing and living in the world. It also contextualizes biblical interpretative processes within the larger geo-political, socio-cultural and religious dynamics of the past and present. As such, a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics contributes to an understanding of the world based on reason. In an era that tends to relegate religious discourse either into the privatized, personalized and sentimentalized realm of individualized piety, or into the religiously fundamentalist realm of terrorism and violence, reasoned argumentation about biblical meanings is needed perhaps more than ever.

The sociological stages established here are not unique to Genesis 2–3, but apply also to other biblical texts. They include the stories of Sarah-Hagar (Gen. 16.1-16; 21.8-21), Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19.1-26), Rebekah (Gen. 24), Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen. 29.31–30.24), Dinah (Gen. 34), Tamar (Gen. 38) or Ms. Potifar (Gen. 39.7-23). They could also be expanded to other parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Joshua 2, Hosea 2, or Ezekiel 16 and 23. A feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics explains why, as Kawashima observed, 'recent philological commentaries have tended to ignore [feminist readings] altogether' (2006: 47). Commentaries, too, have to be placed within the socio-political and cultural-religious dynamics in which they were written. For instance, when contemporary commentators omit references to feminist interpretations, they participate in theo-culturally, socially and politically conservative efforts that favor conservative epistemological and sociological assumptions (Fiorenza 2007: 239-66). Usually, they subscribe to what Kawashima calls 'the ideal of objective knowledge', also apparently assumed by Kawashima (2006: 56).

Finally, the hermeneutical patterns, as developed here for Genesis 2–3, indicate that we find ourselves at an epistemological impasse. Feminist interpreters have searched in biblical text and interpretation histories for meanings that focus attention on women and gender and subvert or expose androcentric conventions. Other interpreters have criticized these interpretations, deconstructed the exegetical viability of feminist work, and characterized it as too narrowly conceived. Still other readers have promoted interpretations based on socio-cultural and theo-political conservatism and rejected feminist biblical scholarship, and sometimes refused any direct engagement. It appears that an androcentric perspective has gained new ground in biblical readings during recent years, perhaps in accordance with a general cultural move toward the right. Interpretations of Genesis 2–3 clearly reflect this development. In addition, commercialized appropriations have trivialized serious meaning-making efforts at understanding the Eve and Adam story in a secularized culture that places making money above all other goals.

The question is whether theo-political conservatism, enhanced by commercialized appropriations, will eventually eliminate the debate altogether or will, perhaps unintentionally, limit biblical meanings to the androcentric perspective. Will hermeneutical advances made in feminist biblical studies soon be viewed as a brief historical moment, even as an aberration because few if any readers know of the field's accomplishments, and see no need for its active promotion? The future of feminist biblical research is far from certain. At stake is the transformative power of biblical meanings and the ethics of interpretation, what Fiorenza defines as the need for research 'on the rhetorical function of biblical and other ancient texts in their past and present historical and literary contexts' and the 'ideological justifications' of the meaning-making process (2003: 72).

So what would characterize a 'third kind of feminist reading' if we are indeed deeply entrenched in the wilderness without a garden in sight? Perhaps we need to engage in discipline-wide conversations about purposes, goals and methods of biblical studies, the field's material and institutional conditions, and its real-life implications and contributions to culture, politics, education, and life on planet earth. Perhaps we need to identify methods to counter the commodification and trivialization of biblical meanings in Western culture. Perhaps we need to make sure that the next generation of Bible readers knows the history of biblical studies, so that they are equipped to counter privatized, personalized and sentimentalized biblical interpretations in a culture that privileges

money and greed, not to mention the need to counter fundamentalist-literalist readings of the Bible. Fortunately, some of this work is already underway, but it is often located on the margins of academia, religious life, and society.

In light of these concerns, it seems crucial that feminist biblical scholars communicate the field's achievements to other scholars, all kinds of students, and a wide array of lay audiences who usually do not know the basic accomplishments of feminist biblical studies. In my opinion, analysis of the sociological stages of biblical hermeneutics, the 'third kind of feminist reading', is the next crucial step feminist biblical scholars need to take in this so-called 'post-feminist' and 'post-racial' era (e.g. Schorr 2008). This approach ensures that feminist biblical investigations continue exposing gender hierarchies and other forms of socio-political and cultural structures of oppression that mainstream culture takes for granted, reasserts, and even insists upon. In this sense, then, a feminist sociology of biblical hermeneutics contributes to the ongoing education process that provides readers with roadmaps for further exploration, and perhaps even future participation, in feminist biblical work.

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