

Feminist Biblical Interpretation

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Capstone Project

Spring 2012

Feminist biblical interpretation is on part in the larger struggle for women's liberation. It helps women combine this struggle with belief in scripture. Feminist hermeneutics also challenges patriarchal interpretations of the Bible and finds ways for the Bible to be empowering to women. It does this by looking at the Bible in two ways: how the Bible worked in Israelite culture and how it is applied to contemporary culture. Feminist biblical exegesis works to create an egalitarian reading of the Bible, where men and women have different roles, but those roles are of equal importance. Lastly, feminist biblical interpretation reclaims the Bible by reinterpretation and reminding readers of women-positive passages – passages that, in their very essence, have a positive view of women.

The history of biblical interpretation reveals why feminist biblical interpretation is so important. For example, twenty-first century Bible readers interpret the text differently than readers from the Middle Ages. The same goes for geographical locations; the Bible is interpreted differently in the United States than in Japan. The concept that the Bible's readers understand the text differently due to their own particular circumstances is called positionality. Factors that can affect positionality are geographic location, time period, family, schoolings, nationality, race, religion, and the list goes on - included in this list is gender. Gender, as well as how gender is viewed by the surrounding society, can also impact how a person interprets the Bible.

For many years, they only voices that were heard when describing the experiences of biblical personalities were the voices of men. The experiences and perspectives of men were used to extract messages from biblical passages. Even passages about women were interpreted from the perspectives of men. This approach has been problematic for women because, as seen above, gender is a factor that affects a person's positionality. Therefore, when a biblical woman's experience is deciphered by a male, there is a chance that the experiences can be interpreted in a

way that the original writer did not intend. Moreover, the woman's experience can be depicted in such a way as to justify her subordination. Clearly, a man's positionality affects his understanding of biblical passages and can help him bring to light important insights. It is important that the woman's perspective is not ignored.

Rosemary Radford Reuther begins to answer the question of why feminist biblical interpretation is needed in her article "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation." Reuther begins this process by first stating the problem: the problem is that women's voices, both biblical and modern, have not been heard. For hundreds of years, the only experiences that have been used to interpret on the Bible have been men's. Reuther goes on to explain five consequences that come from a lack of female commentary on the Bible.

The first result is that, because only male experiences are heard or read, these experiences become the norm for humanity as a whole. This leads to the idea that man's experience is the human experience. This is a problem that one can see when one tries to make this an equation. Man's experience is the human experience and the human experience is man's experience. In the first part, the word man is neutral, meaning man's experience is the same the human experience. The second part "the human experience is man's experience" is a sentence where man is gender specific. The human experience applies only to men. What then happens to the woman's experience in this situation?

The phenomenon of the word "man" or "he" referring to humanity as a whole is discussed in the article "The Myth of the Neutral 'Man'" by Janice Moulton. Moulton explains that even if the term "man" is meant to be used as a neutral pronoun, it is almost always understood by the listener or reader as referring specifically to a man. A common example of this curiosity is the reasoning "Man is mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal." What

happens here, as Mouton explains, is that, like above, in the first sentence, man is used neutrally, but, “the occurrence of ‘man’ in this [second] sentence is *not* a neutral use” (Moulton 5). What if the name Sophia was used instead of the name Socrates? Then, the logic would be invalid.

The same issue arises in biblical interpretation. The word man may have been used originally as a gender neutral term, but over years, it has lost the gender-neutrality and come to mean men only. The placement of the word “man” does not change, but the meaning of the word is different. In conclusion, the new gender-specific meaning is used to exclude women, even if this was not the original intent of the authors.

The second result of excluding women’s experiences from biblical interpretation is that over time, women’s experiences are eventually forgotten completely when the word “man” changes to mean only men, and not humanity. This new meaning becomes canonized and it becomes an idea that is widely accepted by the religious community. Thus, the elimination of women from biblical studies becomes custom.

Consequently, there is no way for women to express the fact that there is more than one human experience. Any other way of looking at life, other than the man’s, becomes different. It then becomes easy to label these differing viewpoints as dangerous. When women and their experiences are labeled as dangerous, it leads to women being “excluded from shaping and interpreting tradition from their own experience [and on top of that...] the tradition [that is formed out of male experience] has been shaped to justify [women’s] exclusion [from religion, tradition, society, etc]” (Reuther 113). Man’s viewpoint then becomes the leading voice in religion, namely the Bible. As a result, “The Bible, in turn, becomes an authoritative source for the justification of patriarchy in [religious...] culture” (Reuther 116) In other words, women are excluded from sharing their experiences. After many years, only man’s experiences are heard,

and the reason for this is forgotten. The justification for the continuation of excluding women's experiences from biblical interpretation comes from the fact that they are not there in the first place.

The next consequence of women's experiences not being used in biblical interpretation is implied in the last consequence. This is that "The traces of [women's] presence have been lost from the public memory of the community" (Reuther 113). Women's experiences become so far removed from biblical interpretation that it becomes taboo to even notice or question the absence of women's experiences. This keeps women's experiences from even having a chance of being heard in the religious sphere.

The last impact of the lack of female biblical interpretation that Reuther explains is the effect that this has on contemporary women and society. It becomes common practice to tell women that they are different, and therefore dangerous because they are not men and do not have male experiences (i.e. human experiences). Some women begin to doubt themselves. Not only are their experiences trivialized, but their physical bodies as a whole. Women are viewed as unworthy of having meaningful or purposeful experiences for the simple fact that they are not men.

This last consequence is explained further in an article entitled "Every Two Minutes, Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation" by Susan Thistlewaite. Thistlewaite, a woman who works at battered women shelters, notes that "Denial is the way to the continuation of the abuse of women. Consciousness of the violence against women with which we all live with every day is the beginning of the end" (Thistlewaite 96). Like Reuther, Thistlewaite first describes the problem, which is the denial of any problem at all. Therefore, Thistlewaite makes it

a requirement that all biblical interpreters remember that the Bible is just one source that men have used throughout history to keep “women as scapegoats” (96).

After stating the problem, Thistlewaite goes on to explain why feminist biblical interpretation is needed to combat this problem. The solution to eliminating the use of the Bible to justify abuse of women is feminist biblical interpretation. Early in her article, Thistlewaite shares a story:

Following a presentation I gave on the Bible and battered women in New York in October 1982, one member of the audience raised the question, ‘why deal with the Bible at all?’ But as anyone who works with abused women knows, this is not an option [...] Phone calls to shelters often begin with the phrase, ‘I’m a bible-believing Christian, but....’ We begin to develop a feminist interpretation because the bible is part of the fabric of the oppression of battered women. (97)

What Thistlewaite strives to prove with her experience is that the patriarchal view that man’s experience is the only experience leads to much more than the denial of meaningful religious experiences for women. It can lead to the far more serious problem of physical and emotional abuse. Not only do some men use the Bible to justify the abuse of women, but women themselves see the abuse as justifiable given traditional scriptural interpretations. By understanding the Bible exclusively through the male experience, women become accustomed to the idea that they are, indeed, inferior to men, and, as Reuther eloquently writes, “[Women] experience their bodies as constantly vulnerable to assault and are told, at the same time, that they deserve such assault because they ‘cause’ it by their sexual presence” (Reuther 114).

While biblical interpretation is the cause of these problems, feminist biblical interpretation is part of the solution to end biblically justified abuse of women. As Thistlewaite states above, “We begin to develop a feminist interpretation because the Bible is a part of the fabric of the oppression of women” (Thistlewaite 97). Some of the battered women that

Thistlewaite deals with have spent their entire lives believing that they deserve to be abused because they have been taught that the Bible permits this. Feminist biblical interpretation, conversely, helps battered women reclaim the Bible and see that it is not acceptable to be abused based on their gender.

The ultimate goal of feminist biblical interpretation is healing. For women: whose religious beliefs include extremely literal interpretations of the Bible as the norm, no authority except that of the Bible itself can challenge the image contained in these texts of woman as silent, subordinate, bearing her children in pain, and subject to the absolute authority of her husband. (100)

Feminist biblical interpretation thus becomes necessary in order for these women to see that the Bible has messages that do not devalue women, but instead empower women. During the process of healing from the emotional trauma of an abusive relationship with a man, religious women also need to reconcile their relationship with the Bible. At the battered women's shelter, looking at the Bible in new ways is important because it tells that women that "You have a right both to your religious beliefs and to your self-esteem" (100).

After defining ways that the Bible is used to oppress women, and then learning ways that women are hurt through this oppression, the next step is to begin the reclaiming of the Bible. Feminist biblical interpreters put begin this action by reinterpreting the Bible in a way that is not harmful to the women. One author, Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, explores some ways to practice feminist biblical interpretation and explains why these particular processes are important to women. In her article entitled "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," Sakenfeld lists three different approaches to feminist biblical interpretation. The first is to find passages that can be used in opposition to texts that have traditionally been used to oppress women. The second approach is to look at the Bible as a whole "for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy" (Sakenfeld 56). Her last approach to feminist biblical interpretation is to look at how

women in ancient Israel reacted to the patriarchal society that they lived in, and use them as an example to show modern women how they can work to their fullest potential within patriarchal society.

Sakenfeld's first interpretive tactic is generally used in order to remind people of forgotten texts. The approach is necessary in order to bring passages that speak for the empowerment of women into the eyes of Bible readers. When a text is read from the traditional patriarchal view, passages that empower women are deemphasized, while the passages that show that women must be subordinate to men are emphasized. It is also a reminder "that the Bible is not necessarily to be rejected out of hand as an instrument of patriarchy" (58). Just because the Bible has sometimes been used to reinforce patriarchy does not necessarily mean that that was the original intention of the Bible's authors. This approach to biblical interpretation shows that some of the ways in which women in society are currently viewed are false, and there are other ways to look at the roles and power of women from a biblical perspective.

The second method of biblical interpretation that Sakenfeld suggests is beneficial not only to women, but to all oppressed groups. This avenue of interpretation starts from a broad exegesis of the text, and then narrows to the more specific explanation of the roles of the oppressed. When looking at specific passages, it is easy to take it out of context. The particular passage is looked at how it is used in society, but not how it is used in the Bible, which could actually have a different meaning. An example of this is Genesis 3:12. When God asks Adam why he had eaten the fruit off of the tree, Adam tells God that "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (Mechon Gen 3:12). Many patriarchal scholars look at this passage and note that Eve convinced Adam to eat, and that is why humans suffer. However, when putting the passage back into context, the reader sees that the serpent is

the one who receives the first punishment; the serpent was the first sinner. But, all three of them received punishment because they all disobeyed God's laws. Psalms 104.35 also says "Let sin[...]s cease out of the earth and let the wicked be no more" (Mechon Psalm 104.35). This psalm is saying that sin should be punished. All three beings – the serpent, Eve, and Adam – were all punished because they all sinned. When looking at the Bible as a whole instead of only Genesis 3:12, it becomes evident that God is not against women, but instead against people who disobey God's laws. This is an important tactic because feminism is often criticized as being reactive. When this approach is used, feminism uses its "more positive and constructive side" (60).

The last feminist biblical interpretation technique that Sakenfeld promotes to modern day women is learning from the lives of biblical women. When this happens, there are two results. The first is that women see that even though they live in a patriarchal society, they can still live life to its full potential. The other result is that women are encouraged to exercise freedom just as biblical women exercise their freedom. Women learn that they can look at the Bible and "fac[e] the pervasive androcentrism of the biblical material head on, without excuse or evasion" (63). This tactic does not seek to eradicate patriarchy, but instead helps women live to their fullest within the patriarchal system.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has suggestions for feminist biblical interpreters who look to reclaim the Bible. In her article entitled "The Will to Choose or Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work" Fiorenza states that the first step to reclaiming the Bible is to "denounce all texts and traditions that perpetrate and legitimate patriarchal structures and ideologies" (Fiorenza "The Will..." 132). In other words, Fiorenza is arguing that any text or tradition that explicitly oppresses women or any text or tradition that is interpreted in a way that is oppressive to women

should not be considered a legitimate use of the Bible. She goes further to say that if Bible readers to continue to view these texts and traditions as “the Word of God,” then God becomes “a God of oppression” (132). Viewing God as an oppressive being can be dangerous because these texts and traditions can then be used not only to oppress women and other minorities, but to abuse them as well.

Fiorenza takes her suggestion one step further. Not only should feminist biblical interpreters denounce patriarchal texts, but they should find and emphasize “the anti-patriarchal elements and functions of biblical texts, which are obscured and made invisible by androcentric language and concepts” (130). Feminist biblical interpreters need to show Bible readers frequently neglected texts which portray the female role as equal to or even superior to that of the male roles.

Finally, Fiorenza gives her reader one more step for reinterpreting the Bible. Not only should feminist biblical interpreters denounce patriarchal texts and emphasize texts that promote women, but “Patriarchal texts should not be allowed to remain in the lectionary but should be replaced by texts affirming the discipleship of equals” (132). Her reasoning is that if patriarchal texts are kept in the lectionary, then those particular patriarchal interpretations will once again become the norm and the fact that these interpretations are patriarchal in character will be ignored. Instead, Fiorenza argues, the Bible will return to the way that it has always been interpreted. Biblical readers will see only patriarchal passages while ignoring passages that celebrate the female and women will continue to be subject to oppression.

Fiorenza’s last recommendation, which calls for excising patriarchal texts from the lectionary, needs to be avoided. By ignoring passages that do not fit the feminist view of the Bible, important messages from those passages that do not necessarily relate to gender can also

be obscured. While Fiorenza's final proposal might not be recommended, her first two suggestions for feminist biblical interpretation have merit. Indeed, denouncing patriarchal texts is not sufficient to prove to readers that the Bible does not justify the oppression of women. The same is true when non-patriarchal texts are introduced to everyday readers. Both need to work together to show that many biblical texts espouse a much more egalitarian point of view.

The next step in feminist biblical interpretation is to reexamine the traditions and rituals that accompanied the earlier interpretations. This proposal has not been as widely accepted as merely interpreting the biblical passages in a different way. This is because verses from the Bible have been reinterpreted many times, but the traditions and rituals have, for the most part, remained the same throughout history. However, three authors, Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, Rosemary Radford Reuther, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, compare the quest of feminists to reinterpret religious traditions to the prophets, who changed contemporary rituals in a way that fit God's understanding of how the world should be. An example of this is in Jeremiah. In the second chapter of Jeremiah, God is telling the prophet about the ways in which the Israelites have sinned. In Jeremiah 2:27, God asks "'Who say to a stock: 'Thou art my father', and to a stone" 'Thou hast brought us forth', for they have turned their back unto Me, and not their face'" (Mechon Jer 2:27). The Israelites have changed their ritual to praying to stones and stocks instead of praying to the one who brought them out of Egypt. Later in the narrative, Jeremiah writes down the good things that will happen to the Israelites when the iniquities stop. These include taking the Israelites out of captivity and bring them to the land of Israel (Jer 30:3), all enemies will be stopped (Jer 30:16), all health will be restored (Jer 30:17), and God's anger will disappear (Jer 30:24). In this example, Jeremiah is telling the Israelites that how they are acting is making God angry. One of the ways that they are disobeying God is by holding prayer rituals

to stones and stocks instead of to the one God. When the Israelites stop these rituals and begin rituals that praise God, the Israelites will be rewarded.

In her article entitled “Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials,” Sakenfeld explains that “at times [prophets] even had to reject time-honored traditions as false in their understanding of God’s way” (Sakenfeld 55). Feminists, in comparison, need to also reject traditions that encourage the oppression of women. While rejecting these traditions, it is often helpful for feminists to offer an alternative tradition. It is difficult for people to change their customs, let alone eliminate them altogether. Therefore, it is important that the alternative rituals have the same goal (i.e. a closer connection to God), but at the same time, reaches these goals through egalitarian means. Examples of such ritual changes were the introduction of Bat Mitzvahs, naming ceremonies for baby girls, and “the addition of spiritual components to the circumcision ceremony for male infants” (Ramon).

Reuther also explains importance of alternative traditions in relations to biblical prophets in her essay “Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation.” In this article, Reuther points out that the prophets do not change traditions based on their own authority, rather God works through the prophets to change injustices that God sees in a society. Reuther goes on to say that “God’s prophet points toward an alternative social order, an alternative era of human history when these wrongs will be righted a new time of God’s peace and justice will reign” (Ruther 118). The wrongs that the prophets are meant to right are injustices against God. The wrongs that feminists are meant to right are the injustices against women. By fighting against the oppression of women, they are also working to spread God’s word of equality. The ultimate goal for feminists is, as Reuther says, is not only an “alternative social order [but...] an alternative humanity” (118).

The last feminist writer to compare women's work to the work of prophets is Fiorenza. While she does not explicitly use the word prophet, the imagery that she uses is the same as the wording that Sakenfeld uses to describe the work for the prophets. Fiorenza believes that:

The critical rereading of the Bible is a feminist key and forms women's perspectives is in the process of uncovering lost traditions and correcting mistranslations, of peeling away layers of androcentric scholarship and rediscovering new dimensions of biblical symbols and theological meaning" (Fiorenza 1).

This language is similar to Sakenfeld's comparison to prophets:

The prophets of the Hebrew scriptures sometimes highlighted forgotten traditions of ancient Israel; on other occasions, they found it necessary to reinterpret traditions that had been skewed or misunderstood. (Sakenfeld 55)

One such example is in the Jonah narrative. In this narrative, Jonah is sent by God to the city of Nineveh. There, Jonah is to tell the people of this city that they need to turn away from their evil ways, or their city was going to be destroyed. The exact acts of the people of Nineveh are not specified; all that the reader is told is that the city acted in a way that made God angry. Jonah finally arrives in Nineveh "and he cried, and said, "Another forty days, and Nineve[h] shall be overthrown" (Jonah 2:4b). The people of Nineveh were scared. The king of Nineveh tells his people to turn "from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands" (2:8b) and to fast for an entire day. God sees their repentance and does not destroy the city.

This is similar to feminists fighting for the freedom of women. Men who violent against women can be compared to the people of Nineveh, who are also violent. Jonah is compared to feminists who tell the abusive men that they need to change their ways. If they do not change, society will ultimately be destroyed, not by God, but when violence becomes out of control, and policies and social norms are put into place that devalue one-half of that society. The

one difference is that the people of Nineveh immediately realize the consequences of their actions and repent. The feminist message has not been as kindly received. There is still a lot of work for feminists to do before violent men turn away from their evil actions.

The concept of rediscovering traditions that have been ignored or covered up is a key part of feminist biblical interpretation, as Fiorenza points out, and is parallel to Sakenfeld's description of the prophet's job. As seen from these two examples of feminist biblical interpreters compared to prophets, it is clear that feminist interpretation of traditions and rituals is not only important, but it is similar to another form of religious interpretation that was divinely inspired. Given the above, who is to say that feminist biblical interpretation and interpretation of traditions are not also divinely inspired?

The importance of feminist hermeneutics can be illustrated by comparing two different interpretations of the same set of biblical stories. This comparison will focus on the Rebecca narratives. These stories focus on Rebecca and her transformation from girlhood to marriage and then on to motherhood. The biblical reader first meets Rebecca when Abraham's servant travels to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. He meets her at a well where she gives water to the servant and all of his camels. When the servant finds out that Rebecca is Abraham's niece, he knows that Rebecca is the one who is to marry Isaac. The servant has dinner with Rebecca and her family, and the servant and Rebecca's brother Laban arrange a marriage for Rebecca and Isaac. Soon after, Rebecca and the servant leave for Canaan. Rebecca and Isaac marry and Rebecca becomes pregnant with twins. Throughout her pregnancy, the twins seem to fight within Rebecca. Rebecca is told directly by God that the older will serve the younger. At one point in their marriage, Isaac and Rebecca go to the nation of Gerar. There, Rebecca says that she is Isaac's sister instead of his wife. The king finds out the truth and is filled with guilt that he might have,

although did not, touch Rebecca inappropriately. The prophecy that was given to Rebecca by God comes true when Rebecca tricks her husband Isaac into giving the first born blessing to Jacob, the younger, instead of Esau, the older. Esau is angry and wants to kill Jacob, so Rebecca tells Jacob that he must flee to Haran, where she is from, until Esau's anger lessens.

In 1964, E.A. Speiser wrote a commentary on Genesis for The Anchor Bible series, entitled *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes (The Anchor Bible)*. This book contains an exegesis of the biblical stories of Rebecca. Speiser's comments on Rebecca begin with the story of her introduction to Abraham's servant. Speiser then offers a list of qualities that make Rebecca a good wife. The first qualities are taken directly from the specifications that Abraham relays to his servant before he sets off for Haran. These qualifications include that she must be from Haran and agree to go to Canaan to marry Isaac so that Isaac does not need to leave the land. Speiser then makes a list of Rebecca's characteristics: "The girl is friendly, helpful, generous, eager to share her excitement with members of her household" (Speiser 184).

The next time that Rebecca is mentioned in Speiser's commentary is when Rebecca meets Isaac and they marry. Speiser spends his time comparing their meeting to traditional Hurrian marriages. The Hurrians were a society of people that lived in the Mesopotamian area in the 3rd millennium B.C.E. who are known to historians through the Nuzi tablets, approximately 5,000 legal and business documents from their civilization.

The traditional marriage document that Speiser uses to evaluate with Rebecca's marriage to Isaac contains five sections:

- (a) The principals in the case.
- (b) Nature of the transaction.
- (c) Details of the payment.
- (d) The girl's declaration of concurrence.
- (e) Penalty clause (185).

In Hurrian society this document would have been signed by a brother on behalf of his sister.

Speiser's argument is that Rebecca's father has passed away and consequently her brother Laban is the one who arranges her marriage to Isaac. Speiser continues on to label the different parts of the story that match up with the terms of a similar Nuzi marriage document.

(a) The principals in the case are Abraham's servant and Laban (Rebecca's brother). (b) The nature of the transaction is a sistership marriage since the main actor is Laban. (c) The servant gives jewelry to Rebecca and her family as payment. (d) Rebecca says that she will go with the servant.

Speiser spends a great deal of the next portion of his exegesis talking about the sister wife motif, or the thrice repeated storyline of ancestors who pass off their wives as their sisters. He compares and seeks to explain the experiences of the two couples who are mentioned in connection with this motif – that is, Abraham and Sara, and Rebecca and Isaac. Speiser gives two explanations for why these events may have occurred. The first is that the Israelites adopted this custom from the Hurrians, and the second is that these marriages really were between “sisters” and “brothers” and this type of marriage was considered preferable to other types of marriages. The first explanation comes from the idea of the Hurrian custom of sister-wives. Indeed, it is important to note here that “not only was Rebekah a native of Hurrian-dominated Har(r)an,” but Abraham was also a previous resident of that area (93). The origins of the ancestors suggest that Hurrian customs might have influenced the early Israelite practices. In Hurrian society, relays Speiser, marriage consisted of two documents: a marriage document that made two people husband and wife, and a sister-wife document that made two people sister and brother. According to Speiser, because sisters had a higher social status than wives, it was natural that Hurrians would want to have that extra bit of protection for their wives and make them sisters as well. The sister-wife document is not alluded to in the Hebrew Bible and Speiser

explains why. He says that the laws that regulated the practices were forgotten by the Israelites, but the custom itself remained. “In such circumstances, an interpretation was bound to be improvised, one that would be in keeping with more familiar conditions and with common human inclinations” (93). The explanation given by the Hebrew Bible is that if Rebecca is recognized as Isaac’s wife, Isaac will be killed mercilessly, and Rebecca will be kidnapped. However, if Rebecca is identified as Isaac’s sister, then she will have more protection.

The other reason that Speiser gives as to why the sister-wife motif is in the Hebrew Bible is that saying one was a sister instead of a wife ensured not only protection, but purity as well. Since Rebecca and Isaac went to Gerar, there was a significant chance that Rebecca would have been taken away from Isaac and forced to become a wife of the king of Gerar. However, the Hebrew Bible specifically says that Rebecca was identified as Isaac’s sister so that this would not happen. If she had been taken as Gerar’s wife, the paternity of her children would have been in doubt. Because “in the formative early stages” of the Israelites, the purity of Rebecca was “of particular significance” the biblical text is emphatic in its point that Rebecca never joined the king’s harem(93). In doing so, the Bible underscores the legitimacy of the biblical Israelites and their Jewish descendents, saying that they are descendents of Rebecca and Isaac, and not of the king of Gerar.

Throughout the rest of the Rebecca stories, Rebecca herself is only mentioned a few more times by Speiser. The second to last time that Rebecca appears in Speiser’s commentary is when Rebecca feels her twins fighting in utero. She exclaims aloud “If it be so, wherefore do I live?” meaning, why go on with this war inside of me (Mechon Gen 25:22). However, Speiser makes special note of the fact that “Rebecca proceeds to consult YHWH through an oracle [...] which shows that, though desperate, she was not as yet resigned to her fate” (Speiser 194).

The last time that Rebecca is brought up by Speiser is when she tricks her husband Isaac into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. Speiser writes:

[...] Jacob himself did not think up the scheme [to trick his father]; he acted, though not without remonstrance and uneasiness, under pressure from his strong-willed mother; and he had to pay for his misdeed with twenty years of exile (211).

In 2004, a book that looks at Rebecca through a feminist lens appears. The book entitled *Reading the Women of the Bible* by Tikva Frymer-Kensky uses the Nuzi tablets to help in her exegesis of the Rebecca narratives. She opens her commentary on this set of stories by explaining the characteristics of a good wife. These characteristics are found in the expectations that both Abraham and his servant require in a girl from Mesopotamia. Abraham's expectations are that "And if the woman not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from my oath" (Mechon Gen 24:8a). This means that if the woman is not willing to go, then she should not be forced. The need for Rebecca to be willing to come is important to understanding Rebecca. Frymer-Kensky argues that women were usually not asked if they wanted to leave their families during an arranged marriage. The marriage was usually a deal between her parents. When a girl in ancient Israelite times married, she needed to cut all ties with her family and remain with her husband's family. Rebecca's case is different since she is not only leaving her family, but she will be leaving to go to "a pioneer country" (Frymer-Kensky 13). The fact that Rebecca has a choice in this process shows that she is seen as having some sort of power. Frymer-Kensky points out that Isaac was not even consulted during this process. The servant's expectations of a wife for Isaac spell out more about Rebecca's character. His requirements are that "she must be hospitable and strong [...], caring and industrious" (8). On top of this, the Bible explains "And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her" (Mechon Gen 24:16a).

According to Frymer-Kensky, a girl who is a virgin is pure, self-disciplined, and “is most likely to stay faithful as a wife” (9).

Frymer-Kensky then takes a few pages to compare Rebecca to her future in-laws Abraham and Sarah. Rebecca is like in that Abraham as “they are both models of hospitality” (14). For example, when three angels come to Abraham’s house to tell of Sarah’s future pregnancy, Abraham does not just give them food, but meat, which he prepares on sight. When the servant meets Rebecca at the well, she does not just give him enough water, but gives his camels all of the water that they need as well. Both of these acts are impressive. Preparing meat is an extensive process, and Abraham did not need go through that process for strangers. Abraham does not even know that the three men that visit his house are actually angels. Nonetheless, he goes out of his way to feed them the best food. The same is for Rebecca. She does not need to water the servant’s camels, but she does and gives them all the water that they need. This is impressive because she only has one bucket, it was difficult to get water out of wells during this time, there were ten camels, and after a long journey like the one that the servant and his camels took, the camels would have needed a lot of water.

Also like Abraham, Rebecca “voluntarily chooses to leave Mesopotamia for Canaan” (13). This means not only leaving her family, which she would have been expected to do regardless of where she was going, but she was also going to a far off place where she would not be able to interact with her family on a regular basis. However, like Abraham, she does so without a second thought. The last similarity between Abraham and Rebecca according to Frymer-Kensky is that “like Abraham, Rebecca is the bearer of a promise” (14). This is the promise of the covenant: many descendants, winning at enemies’ gates, and ownership of land.

Rebecca is also like Isaac's mother Sarah in that they are both directly involved in the continuation of the Israelite people. These women are the ones who make sure that their correct children receive the blessing usually reserved for the first born even if the chosen child is not the one favored by their respective husbands. Rebecca and Sarah are more concerned with carrying out God's plans for the future of the Israelite people than with abiding the wishes of their husbands. Thus, Sarah kicks Hagar and her son out of her house so that Sarah's son, Isaac, will inherit the blessing instead of Ishmael, Abraham's first born son with Hagar. Similarly, Rebecca tricks her husband into blessing Jacob instead of their oldest son Esau so that Jacob would be the one to carry on the covenant. As Frymer-Kensky says:

they are acting as God's partner and agent, working to bring about God's will. God explicitly tells Abraham to do as Sarah wishes (Gen 21:12). In the case of Rivka, the storyteller relates the oracle to legitimate Rivka's actions, to make sure that the readers understand that tricky as they might be, they are in accord with the word of God (22).

The next part of Frymer-Kensky's commentary is about the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca. She notes that the moment Rebecca sees Isaac she begins to fulfill her duties as a wife by putting a veil over her face. This does not mean that Isaac and Rebecca are immediately married, but it is part of the process. Frymer-Kensky notes that in Assyrian law, the veil was required for married women. However:

The veiling is also symbolic: all of Rivka's attributes, not only her beauty will be less visible as a wife [...] but her qualities do not remain hidden from him [Isaac], for he loves her. (15)

This last point is one that is important to Frymer-Kensky. She acknowledges that the Bible sees the husband as the dominant voice of the family, "but it nevertheless envisions a love relationship" (15). Even though Rebecca is the more outspoken partner and Isaac is the more

passive partner, leading to a seemingly disproportionate match, the Bible wants the reader to know that the marriage is ideal because “he loved her” (Mechon Gen 24:67a).

Frymer-Kensky’s exegesis continues with the story of Rebecca receiving an oracle directly from God and then explaining how that oracle is fulfilled. After hearing the oracle, Rebecca now knows that Jacob is the one who needs to get the blessing of the first born, even though Isaac has already made up his mind to give the first born blessing to Esau. To make sure that this does not happen, Rebecca decides to trick Isaac into blessing the son that God has chosen as his instrument to carry on the covenant. The way that she tricks Isaac into blessing Jacob instead of Esau shows three aspects of Rebecca’s personality. The first is that Rebecca is proactive. She may be a little selfish, but she is a loving mother, and her actions are not unique the Ancient Near East. Frymer-Kensky recognizes that the role that Rebecca takes in order to ensure that the covenant continues with the correct son is the primary role. Rebecca works to ensure that God’s oracle is fulfilled.

Second, Rebecca may have wanted Jacob to receive the blessing not for God, but for herself. “She may believe that he [Jacob] is more likely to care for her in her old age. Motives are rarely unmixed” (Frymer-Kensky 18). Jacob is more domestic, meaning that he is more comfortable in the home where Rebecca will be staying when she gets old. Esau, on the other hand, is more comfortable in the wilderness and may not be as willing to stay with his elderly mother. However, as Frymer-Kensky points out, even if this selfishness was really her motivation for tricking her husband, it cannot be forgotten that it still makes sure that God’s prophecy is fulfilled.

Lastly, Rebecca is a loving mother. Before Jacob agrees to trick his father into giving him the blessing instead of his brother, he argues that Isaac may curse him.

Rivka knows that once uttered, a curse cannot be easily removed, but it can be deflected, and Rivka offers to take the consequences of the curse upon herself. She is the first woman to do so, but not the last [...] This is a very persuasive technique, and it works (19).

From this quote the readers see that Rebecca is doing two things. First, she is doing everything within her power to make sure that Jacob gets the blessing that God wants for him. Second, she is protecting her son. To be the recipient of a curse is dangerous, which Rebecca knows. Still, she is willing to take the chance of being cursed so that the covenant will continue.

Again, Frymer-Kensky makes a parallel between the Nuzi tablets and the Hebrew Bible. She remembers one tablet where a man tells another man, who is not his son, that he will be blessed as his first born. “Nevertheless, one of the documents shows that the man’s family came to him on his deathbed to tell him to designate the first born” (18). This is an important parallel because it shows that it is not unheard of for a family to persuade, or in Rebecca’s case trick, the head of the family into picking a certain son to have the first born blessing. This justifies Rebecca’s actions. It shows that although the man is at the head of the household, the man is not always able to see what the wife can. In this case, Rebecca heard God’s word, and Isaac did not. This legitimizes the subordinate wife into making decisions that are usually in the hands of the dominant husband. Many contemporary authors also feel that Rebecca is an immoral person for tricking her blind and dying husband, “but the biblical world valued cunning in the underdog. Only the powerful value honesty at all cost. The powerless know that trickery may save their lives” (Frymer-Kensky 19). While Rebecca does not look to trickery to save her own life, she uses trickery in order to make the oracle come true, as well as carry on the covenant of Abraham.

After the blessing is successfully given to Jacob, Rebecca sees that Esau is furious that the first born blessing was taken away from him. Frymer-Kensky again paints Rebecca as a loving mother who is concerned about the protection of her sons. She is also concerned that the

covenant be continued through the correct line. Rebecca convinces Jacob to run away to the land where she came from, Haran in Mesopotamia. “She desires her designated heir to find a wife from Mesopotamia. Esau’s anger is her opportunity to send Jacob [there]” (20). Esau had already married a few Hittite women, and the Bible says that “And they were a bitterness of spirit unto Isaac and to Rebekah” (Mechon Gen 26:35b). However, this is not the only reason that Rebecca sends Jacob to Haran. The other reason that Jacob is sent to Haran is his brother’s anger. Rebecca knows that if Esau kills Jacob, then Esau would be executed for murder, and Rebecca would be left childless. Rebecca uses the classic persuasive technique of “do it for me if you are not going to do it for yourself.” She deliberately makes sure that both of her sons are alive and safe.

Frymer-Kensky ends her chapter on Rebecca with a final comparison between Sarah, Rebecca, and other Ancient Near Eastern families. Both Sarah and Rebecca “are notable for determining the success of their sons, often against their husbands’ inclinations (Frymer-Kensky 22). Sarah forces Hagar out of her house in order that Isaac would receive the blessing of the first born, and Abraham has no say in this decision. Likewise, Rebecca makes sure that Jacob receives the blessing of the first born by tricking her husband into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. When commenting on women in general in the Ancient Near East, Frymer-Kensky says that:

The assertiveness of these Genesis mothers should not surprise us. Recent anthropological fieldwork in contemporary rural Greek and Turkey, both unabashed self-proclaimed patriarchies, shows that wives and mothers can be to all appearances subordinate women and nevertheless exercise enormous real power within in their households and villages. In the case of Sarah and Rebecca, their own preferences are made more powerful with divine charge and divine knowledge (22).

When comparing the E.A. Speiser's interpretation of the Rebecca stories to that of Tikva Frymer-Kensky's interpretation, it is at first difficult to see the major differences the accounts. Both commentaries view Rebecca as strong-willed, cunning, pure, and a wife who fulfills her role in marriage. However, that is where the similarities end. Frymer-Kensky's chapter revolves around Rebecca, unlike Speiser, whose chapter focuses rarely on Rebecca herself, and more on the men who shape her life.

Frymer-Kensky describes Rebecca as an independent thinker who has control over her own destiny, the destiny of her family, as well as the Israelite people as a whole. She agrees to go with Abraham's servant, she hears the voice of God directly, she takes affirmative action to make sure that Jacob receives the blessing from Isaac, and she makes sure that her son continues on the covenant with a woman from her home area. Speiser, however, takes a different approach. He writes about Rebecca as if she is a secondary character. She is bought by Abraham's servant, and when she gives her consent, it is only part of a transaction between the two men above her. She changes her status from wife to sister in order to prove her purity, or because it is the custom of the time. Either way, it is not her decision to take on a different role. And the affirmative action that is described by Frymer-Kensky is transformed into manipulation, and in the end, she sacrifices the happiness of her son in order to get what she wants. The only time that Rebecca is seen in a positive light by Speiser is when he is listing the characteristics that make her a good wife, and when he applauds her determination to discover why her children are fighting within her.

While the previous pages discuss the importance of feminist hermeneutics, it is necessary to note that there are some limitations within this field. Two authors describe the limitations of feminist biblical interpretation. These authors are Katherine Doob Sakenfeld who writes the

article “Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials,” and Jack Cottrell, author of the book *A Critique of Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Gender Roles & the Bible: Creation, the Fall, & Redemption*.

As seen above, Sakenfeld discusses three main ways to interpret the Bible through a feminist lens. Her first approach is “Looking at texts about women to counteract texts used against women” (Sakenfeld 58). The main problem with this way of interpreting the Bible is that there is no one agreed on methodology for all interpreters. Sakenfeld defines this as a lack of “interpretive consensus” (58). This leads to the further issue of having conflicting answers to the question of what the Bible actually says about women. As Sakenfeld describes in her explanation of the usefulness of feminist biblical interpretation, texts need to be reinterpreted, just as the prophets have done in the past. However, the question arises of which texts need to be reinterpreted. Which texts cannot be reinterpreted? And, as a reiteration, how do biblical interpreters go about interpreting these texts, what methodology should they use?

Cottrell agrees with this critique. In his book, Cottrell uses the term “hard passages” to describe “certain passages of Scripture which do not seem to agree with egalitarianism, but which seem rather to put certain restrictions on the role of women” (Cottrell 27). One of his major critiques of feminist hermeneutics (and Sakenfeld agrees with this) is methodology. His issue is not with differing methodologies, but with the use of the wrong one. Cottrell observes that feminist methodology is made to look exclusively for egalitarianism. He accuses feminists of:

creating the problem of ‘hard passages’ and making it necessary to resort to the most [unimaginative] sorts of interpretation in order to make these passages inform to egalitarian philosophy (31).

Cottrell is saying that when feminists look for egalitarian passages in the Bible, and they do not find support for equality, “hard passages” come into play. Then, feminists use their own

methodologies to make the passages fit with their own “egalitarian philosophy.” He concludes that “[...] the problem of ‘hard passages’ is exclusively a feminist problem” (31). This particular problem is not present in the interpretations of non-feminists.

Sakenfeld’s second way to interpret the Bible in a feminist light is “Looking to the Bible generally (not particularly to texts about women) for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy [...]” (Sakenfeld 56). Once again, Sakenfeld describes the limitations to this technique. The main problem with this is that the Bible is too large to make solid assumptions about the entire text. She explains that the entire text is “vague and diffuse,” making it more difficult to understand than if one looks at specific texts (61). A second limitation to this approach is the possibility of forgetting about patriarchy. This means that interpreters can look at the Bible and “fall into the false assumption that biblical authors speaking against oppression had in mind women as well as other oppressed groups” (61). Sakenfeld is saying that if an interpreter only looks at the big picture and sees that the Bible is against oppression, then the interpreter may understand that the Bible is against all oppression, instead of a specific kind, such as actions against the orphaned or the widowed. The bigger issue with this is that some biblical interpreters look to the Bible for complete truths that apply today, when in reality, some of those truths are conditional, applying only to the time that the Bible was written. Thus, interpreters are looking for an answer or truth that does not exist.

Cottrell also has a similar critique of feminist hermeneutics. He notes that when feminists look at a text generally and do not find that it fits within the feminist interpretations, the feminists in turn disregard the entire text completely, without trying to find other, equally important messages in the text. Cottrell explains why this method is an issue:

[...] it is a version of the fallacy that incomplete knowledge is false knowledge. If this principle were applied consistently, it would make

human knowledge as such impossible, because we are finite beings who can *never* have *complete* knowledge about anything (Cottrell 29).

Sakenfeld's last method for feminist exegesis is "Looking at texts about women to learn from the intersection of history and stories of ancient and modern women" (Sakenfeld 56).

Sakenfeld questions this approach by asking how one knows that the biblical passages that promote oppression against women are authoritative. Sakenfeld points out that even if a text does promote the violence and oppression of women it can still hold some sort of authority. However, it can be difficult to accept this authority. The question that proceeds is who says that it needs to be authoritative? Can a feminist follow the messages of the text even when the text explicitly says to oppress women?

The question goes back to the idea of positionality. Cottrell also discusses this in his book, although he does not explain whether or not it is a limitation. He explains that modern biblical interpreters, including feminist interpreters, "give priority to [...] what a text *means* today, as determined by the interpreter [as] more important than what it *meant* when written, as determined by the author" (Cottrell 32). Cottrell is saying that some interpreters focus too much on how the Bible is applied in today's world and not enough time putting the Bible in the context of the Ancient Near East. In his introduction, Cottrell says that "I am convinced that the feminist interpreters are simply not being fair and responsible for their handling of Scripture" (23). He then goes on to explain that when he reads feminist hermeneutical writing, he sees the Bible's messages being distorted. When a reader of Cottrell's book can notice is that the Bible should be interpreted in the context of the author of the Bible, instead of the lens of the interpreter. This way, the original message does not become distorted.

This focus on the ways in which women are viewed in biblical interpretation is essential when the interpretations are applied to the contemporary world outside of the scholarly

community. Many times, when the Bible is interpreted in an oppressive way, it is easier for some women to simply ignore religion as a whole. However, for many women, religion, as well as the Bible, has been an important part of their lives. This does not mean that the oppressive interpretations need to be ignored and that women should continue to live under strict patriarchal rule. As shown throughout this paper, faith in religion and women's liberation can be combined through feminist biblical interpretation. Without feminist hermeneutics, justification for abuse and oppression against women, both by men and the women themselves will continue. When the Bible is used to legitimize women's oppression, God, who many claim wrote the Bible, begins to endorse the oppression of women. From this, women can no longer fully trust in the God that allowed and advocated for their lower status. Feminist biblical scholars do not want women to turn away from God. Instead, they provide women with a way to look at the Bible and God in a positive light.

The reason that feminist biblical interpretation is important is because for some women, the Bible is a necessary constant in their lives. Even if the Bible is used against them, it is still a pillar that the woman leans on. Feminist hermeneutics allows women, especially women who have been abused based on the Bible's supposed teachings, to continue to have that constant. The difference is, however, that the Bible becomes a supporter and a friend instead of an enemy. At the same time, women learn through a feminist exegesis that the Bible does not necessarily view women as less than. The Bible can be seen as empowering women. Women, and again especially abused women, can begin learn that they matter, and that they are important - to other humans and to God. There is no longer a need to be ashamed or scared because one is a woman. In the end, women learn that the Bible can be beneficial to women, and women do have an important role within religion and society.

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