Beyond suspicion?
Rethinking feminist hermeneutics after post-critique

Hannah Margaret Craven

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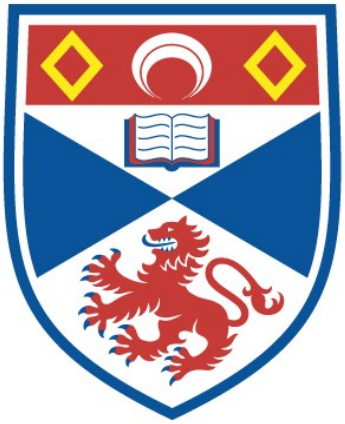

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Abstract

This thesis defends a faithful form of feminist Biblical interpretation in light of "post-critique." This is needed as feminist interpretation of the Bible today is dominated by a radical hermeneutics of suspicion which leaves little room for feminist readers who wish to oppose the oppression of women but who also believe that the Bible transmits the Word of God and makes possible an encounter with the divine. Seeking a less one-sided model of critique the thesis turns to a recent development in literary studies known as "post-critique" and explores its viability in relation to feminist Biblical interpretation.

The thesis has two parts. Part One first of all offers a survey of the field, locating my approach within it. Chapter 2 highlights the dominance of one-sided suspicious approaches, and then unfolds a counter-model, explaining what is meant by "post-critique" and outlining its foundations in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics. This chapter also provides a defence of a doctrine of Scripture that includes an account of the Bible's role as mediator of the divine. Building on this general framework, Chapter 3 sets out what "reparative" reading and "second naiveté" might involve in feminist Biblical interpretation.

In order to show the utility of this approach, Part Two (chapters 4–6) offers a series of interpretive case-studies on three New Testament texts (Luke 18:1-8; John 20:1-18; John 4:4-42). Each of these chapters engages with a suspicious feminist reading of the pericope, followed by a narrative-theological reading. The thesis concludes by challenging the widespread side-lining of faithful feminist readings of the Bible, both because this is founded on an un-argued-for refusal of theological possibilities, and because in rejecting such readings we forgo a range of significant resources for women's liberation and flourishing.

Contents

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Though this project was begun in St. Andrews, Scotland, its final stages were completed in Naarm, Australia. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations as the traditional custodians of the lands on which I live and work.

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I am privileged to have enjoyed the prayers, patience and generosity of all my colleagues at Ridley College, and I look forward to being a less distracted member of Ridley's team in the future. I have been sustained in prayer by many friends, family, peers, colleagues, my "resilience" group, and members of the community at St. A's Merribek. For this I am more grateful than I can say. My supervisors, T.J. Lang in the early stages, and later Gavin Hopps, have been unrelentingly encouraging, saving me several times from very nearly giving up.

Though I interact with many scholars in this project, the work of three in particular has been especially useful in helping me to articulate some of my own positions, and in resourcing key components of my thinking. Natalie Carnes' presentation to a group of PhD students in St. Andrews in June 2020 (which later became part of her recently published work *Attunement*) pointed me to theoretical resources with which to underpin some of my early intuitions. Scott Harrower's critical engagement with trauma hermeneutics emboldened my own tentative explorations. And Jill Firth's evocative use of the water imagery in Jeremiah became a springboard for my own. Chris Porter, too, deserves thanks for being a patient sounding board on, well, pretty much everything.

My two children have been absolute troopers. Through two international moves, multiple schools, houses, communities, and all kinds of change, they have shown grace, courage, and resilience. Latterly they have supported me especially with hugs, food and coffee, and endless patience and understanding (though my son now calls a PhD a "Personal Hell Degree.")

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been unerringly faithful, patient, hardworking, generous, sacrificial, and encouraging. He has literally and figuratively given me “a room of my own.” It is impossible to recount everything that this involves or means, but perhaps this is representative: every morning Tom brings me a cup of coffee, and every evening a cup of tea. Each day is bookended by tangible acts of love – no less all the moments in between.

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Part One

Chapter 1

Introduction:

Seeking Springs of Living Water

"Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again."[1]

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."
John 7:37b–38

Introduction

Feminist commentators have long argued that certain texts in the church's Bible do not deserve the status of sacred Scripture.[2] But what happens if we excise from Scripture all the stories of women's suffering? Given the stark reality of women's suffering in our world, perhaps the only thing worse than the Bible's recounting the suffering and oppression of women would be if it did not do so at all. That the brutal realities of women's existence are so clearly exposed in the pages of Scripture means that as readers we are entitled to interrogate them. For those who read within the traditions of the church and with an understanding of the Bible as the Word of God, it means that we are entitled to interrogate them to discern God's "point of view." And because the church's holy texts confront us with the horror of women's experience in these ancient stories, this means that the church must engage with the horror of women's experience in the present too. That we have not always done this, or have not done this well, or indeed that we have done this very badly and in ways that compound harm, is plain. Against such a history it makes sense that some might prefer these stories to be simply denounced or redacted. But is that all we can hope for?

Phyllis Trible writes of an encounter which insists on the potential of Scripture's stories for catharsis:

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 349.
[2] For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 23.

> Some years ago I lectured to a church group on the terrifying story of the gang rape, murder and dismemberment of the unnamed woman in Judges 19 (a story in which God never appears as a character). At the close of the lecture a woman approached me with tears in her eyes. 'Thank you for retelling this story,' she said. 'I never knew the Bible had a story like that. It is similar to my story. I have been gang raped and psychologically murdered and dismembered. To learn this night that the Bible tells my story begins my healing.'[3]

Women's stories in Scripture tell of the limitations, suffering and oppression of women's lives, but as such can they redeem them? Women readers need more than catharsis – they need to know that God not only sees but *says something* about their suffering. What does God say?

It is often assumed that faith and feminism are contradictory, or if not contradictory, at least in considerable tension. The assumption is that feminism arises from somewhere other than Christian faith and confronts the patriarchy and sexism of the Christian tradition. Some women can reconcile the two apparently competing commitments, others cannot. But this presentation offers a false binary. The real nub of the challenge of feminism and faith, I suggest, is that for many women both arise from the same place.[4] Lucy Peppiatt writes:

> It is interesting that despite the androcentrism and patricentrism of the Christian faith (and most religions for that matter), it is generally true that women are more religious than men, and worldwide there are more Christian women than Christian men. This appears to have been true of the early church, where it was known that Christianity appealed more to women, slaves, and children. There must be multiple reasons for this, but, in my view and my experience, one of the reasons for the deep attraction and appeal of Christianity to women is rooted in a profound instinct that we are not really excluded after all, despite what outward circumstances tell us.[5]

"Considerable evidence indicts the Bible as a document of male supremacy"[6] writes Phyllis Trible, and yet: "how come, if the story is so terribly patriarchal, I like it? How come I feel no anger in reading it, no embarrassment in claiming it? How come it gives me a sense of well-

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[3] Phyllis Trible, "Wrestling with Words, Limping to the Light," in *I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship*, ed. John Byron and Joel N. Lohr (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 235.

[4] Many early (proto-) feminists and suffragettes saw their advocacy as arising from Biblical and theological principles. Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759-1797) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argues from the Bible for women's equality (Brenda Ayres, *Wollstonecraft and Religion* (London: Anthem Press, 2024), 4). The prominent Quaker, abolitionist, and suffragette Sarah Moore Grimké (1792-1873) published a series of letters beginning by addressing "the perverted interpretation of Holy Writ" which underlay the view of women as inferior and their sphere restricted (Sarah Moore Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838)).

[5] Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 11.

[6] Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (March 1973), 30.

being in spite of its tragic ending? In pondering these questions, I sensed that another meaning must be available. To articulate it became the challenge."[7] Different feminist scholars have articulated this possibility of a "different meaning" in different ways. But many note the way that the Bible itself offers the resources for women's liberation even as it too often reflects and upholds sexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic cultures, structures, and behaviours. Trible notes the "depatriarchalising hermeneutic" operative within Scripture itself.[8] Others note the "counter traditions,"[9] the critical messianic-prophetic principle,[10] gynocentric interruptions,[11] or an inner-Biblical "critical traditioning."[12] But such scholars find themselves in an awkward middle ground: too "conservative" for many feminists, but too feminist for conservatives. Conservative critics of feminist interpretation charge it with changing the Bible's meaning. From the other side, feminist interpretation is seen as simply propping up the patriarchal tradition and its ongoing legitimation: can the master's tools ever dismantle the master's house?[13] And yet, women have always proclaimed their place in the faith tradition, even if their voices have not been amplified. In the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel Mary's Magnificat rings out:

> My soul glorifies the Lord
> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
> for he has been mindful
> of the humble state of his servant.
> From now on all generations will call me blessed,
> for the Mighty One has done great things for me –
> holy is his name. (Luke 1:46–49)[14]

This project is about the possibility and potential of faith in feminist Biblical interpretation. Herein I make an argument for and demonstration of what it might look like to move beyond

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[7] Phyllis Trible, "If The Bible's So Patriarchal, How Come I Love It?," *Bible Review* 8, no. 5 (1992): 44.
[8] Trible, "Depatriarchalizing."
[9] Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
[10] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* ed. Letty Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 117.
[11] Richard Bauckham, "The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic," *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 1 (1997): 29-45.
[12] Ellen F. Davis, "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner-Biblical Hermeneutic," *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 4 (2000): 733-751.
[13] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin Books, 2017). It is important to note that Lorde indicts not only patriarchy but also racism and homophobia in this essay, as well as speaking about poverty and class.
[14] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV), 2011.

suspicion and towards trust in feminist hermeneutics. Drawing together threads from literary studies, hermeneutics, feminist analysis, systematic theology and New Testament studies, I make the case for narrative-theological reading in feminist hermeneutics as a form of what Rita Felski calls "post-critique;" in Ricoeurian terms, a feminist "second naiveté," or what some scholars have called "reparative" reading. With Phyllis Trible I reject the imposed dichotomy between faith and feminism as a capitulation to androcentric interpretation.[15] With Rosemary Radford Ruether I insist that to assert the full humanity of women is to reflect "the true nature of things" – a basic affirmation of classical Christian theology.[16] And with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza I resist the possibility that God is a God of oppression and dehumanisation.[17] Unlike some of my feminist forebears however – though I acknowledge the great debt that I owe them – I am less optimistic about the potential for humanity to discern and achieve its own liberation, and more optimistic about the Bible's potential to reveal and mediate God's own power for the same. I want to reclaim Biblical religion as power not only of heritage, or power of inspiration (Schüssler Fiorenza),[18] but also as present power for the actualisation of liberation. Underpinning this argument is the claim that the Bible's vision of freedom and wholeness is not accidental correlation with an exterior feminist critical principle (so Ruether), but can be discerned as an inner logic that explains and critiques itself. That is, that the Bible tells an overarching story which explains how and why it simultaneously reflects the androcentrism and patriarchy of its originating cultures and also transcends them. To do so, we must own the Bible's vision not just of liberation, but also of "sin" and fallenness of which, as Genesis 3 tells it, patriarchy is the paradigm case. All this will of course require much unpacking, but first, given the broad and contested nature of the area, it is important to define and locate my approach within the field of feminist Biblical interpretation.

1 Locating my Approach

It is increasingly difficult to offer a definition of either feminism or feminist interpretation, for two related reasons. First, "there is no one feminism and no single feminist theology."[19] It

[15] Trible, "Depatriarchalizing," 31.
[16] Reuther, *Sexism and God-talk,* 19.
[17] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 140.
[18] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone,* xiii.
[19] Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 3.

is almost impossible to capture succinctly the depth and breadth of an ever growing and changing field. And second, because – as is to be expected in an area so large and diverse – that field contains its own inner disagreements. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld wrote that feminist interpretation is not defined so much by method or approach as by its commitments and aims, but even these have diversified significantly in the last decades.[20] Given this diversity, in order to proceed it is necessary to locate this work within the field of feminist scholarship on the Bible. Here we do this in two steps – locating first unity and then diversity within feminist approaches. First, we can identify some common commitments: positions that many feminists agree on and that form the basic assumptions and presuppositions of this work. Second, noting the diversity of approaches within these basic commitments, we locate this project within Carolyn Osiek's five-fold taxonomy.

1.1 Definitions

Some modern feminisms are defined so broadly as to capture advocacy for all marginalised peoples. However, feminism is more properly defined with a focus on the status of women. Feminism starts with a belief in the equality of the sexes, but it involves more than that. Feminism involves a recognition that our world has not and does not accord women their equal rights or honour their full humanity. Thus feminism interrogates and exposes the obstacles to the actualisation of that belief in society and works to transform them.[21] Feminism identifies those obstacles most broadly as male domination, or patriarchy.

Patriarchy describes a system of inequality between men and women which infiltrates all areas of life – social, economic, political, and inter-personal. Under patriarchy positions of power and privilege are held by men, and systems are structured in ways which benefit men. Patriarchal structures might be obvious and explicit (the mass abortion of female babies, femicide, child brides, limiting women's access to education and work) or more subtle (low grade sexual harassment, the "second shift" or the "mental load"), but all contribute to the marginalisation and oppression of women and to the retaining of male power. The Bible recognises the fundamental claim of feminism (the full humanity of women) as God's created intention (Gen 1:26–28), and patriarchy (the domination of women by men) as a distortion of this ideal – what Christian theology has traditionally described as sin or fallenness (Gen 3:16).

[20] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology: An Introduction to Selected Issues and Literature," *Interpretation* 42, no. 1 (1988): 11.

[21] This is why, unfortunately, Marie Shear's wonderful phrase "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people" is insufficient. Feminism is not just a belief or an idea, but must involve action to enact that belief.

Sandra Schneiders provides a neat description: "Feminism is a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women's experience of sexual oppression, which engages in a critique of patriarchy, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realisation."[22] Theologically, we might define feminism as the movement for the liberation of women from the judgement and sin of patriarchy.

Feminist Biblical interpretation takes up these commitments and aims in the sphere of religion and its sacred texts. It examines the role of texts, symbols, and practices in either the hindrance or promotion of women's full equality. Methods and conclusions vary widely, but Mary Ann Tolbert has defined feminist hermeneutics minimally as "a reading of a text (or the writing of an analysis, or the reconstructing of history) in light of the oppressive structures of patriarchal society."[23] It must be noted that – despite my claims from Genesis above – Christianity has historically been overwhelmingly patriarchal both in its teaching and its practice, and deliberately so. For this reason:

> Feminist scholarship within the Christian context, for all its variety, is unified in its critical perception of sexism as a massive distortion in the historical and theological tradition that systematically denigrates women, overtly or covertly affirms women's inferiority and subordination to men, and excludes women from full actualization and participation in the church and society.[24]

Minimally, feminist interpreters acknowledge "that the Bible came into existence in a strongly patriarchal environment and is a product of its time; hence, a misogynistic bias in the text itself is to be expected."[25] But here is perhaps where consensus starts and ends. The animating question behind this project, and the reason for the field's diversity is summarised by Mary-Ann Tolbert: "How strong that bias is and how it should be dealt with are points on which feminists differ."[26]

Intersectionality is an increasingly important and central component of modern feminist critical scholarship – and critical self-reflection – acknowledging the "multiple structural inequalities that lie beneath the social order (the intersectionality of gender, race, class, caste,

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[22] Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* Revised Edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 15.
[23] Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 119.
[24] Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 95.
[25] Tolbert, "Defining the Problem," 122.
[26] Ibid.

nation, colonized/colonizer, earth)."[27] Early feminisms were critiqued for the limitations of their white, western, middle-class perspectives and ambitions, and modern feminism is challenged to pay particular attention to the voices of women of colour, and to the works of womanist and mujerista scholars.

When speaking of the Bible I here refer to the Protestant canon of 66 books which make up the this church's Holy Scriptures. I will go on to argue for a feminist reading of the Bible-as-Scripture and to expound some assumptions and implications of such an approach. This is not to reject the usefulness or value of other ways of approaching the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, or other types of feminist work on the Bible. My argument, though, will be that in order to judge the Christian church and Christian theology's liberative potential for women through examination of its texts, feminist readers must receive these texts as the church does, and must engage in and with the type of reading which gives rise to the Church's theological claims and norms.

1.2 Unity and Diversity in Feminist Theology and Interpretation

While it is not possible to provide any list of things all feminists agree on, it is possible to articulate some core driving commitments that ground the field. Susan Frank Parsons describes these as the "dogmas" of feminist theology: "the central convictions out of which it springs."[28] None of these is without its own complications and debates. We might call them poles, or navigating compass points of feminist interpretation. Among feminist theology's basic commitments we might expect to meet some version of the following: 1) the claim that sexism is a structural injustice that must be resisted, and that the Bible's androcentrism and its patriarchal cultures reflect this structural sexism; 2) attention to women's experience as source and authority for feminist theology; and 3) that feminist theology involves liberating praxis and is active against powers that work for destruction and oppression.

From these basic considerations we can then identify several different approaches to feminist theology and Biblical interpretation. In the main, the difference lies in views about the source of, extent of, and solutions to the above claims. That is, does the Bible merely reflect the problem, or does it actively promote it, and therefore, can the Bible be part of the solution?

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[27] Carol Dempsey, Wilda Gafney, Christl Maier, Tyler D. Mayfield, Monica Melanchton, and Susanne Scholz, *Review of Susanne Scholz (Ed.), Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect; Panel from the 2017 SBL Annual Meeting in Boston (MA)* (Theology Faculty Publications and Presentations 29, 2017), 26.

[28] Susan Frank Parsons, "Feminist Theology as Dogmatic Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology,* ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 114.

Or, is Christianity capable of reform within its own logics?

In 1997 Carolyn Osiek offered a five-fold taxonomy which attempted to describe feminist approaches to Scripture in the broadest sense.[29] Osiek sought to capture feminist work not in terms of its method or its aims with any particular text, but instead in terms of its fundamental attitude towards the Bible as a whole. In this typology, multiple foci or methods might be operative within any grouping. The typology represents a spectrum rather than a tool-kit, such that the categories at either end clearly have no overlap with each other, while those adjacent to each other might have some. She notes that while each of these options will be objectionable to some feminists, each does indeed represent significant numbers of women in the Western Christian tradition and must, at the least, be respected as a valid alternative. To introduce the typology, Osiek asks: "When women today in Christian communities become aware of their situation within a patriarchal religious institution, and, moreover, when they recognize that the Bible is a major implement for maintaining the oppression by the patriarchal structure, what are the ways in which they respond and adjust to that situation?"[30] Osiek offers five possible responses.

Rejectionist	Rejects the Bible as neither authoritative nor useful. Sometimes rejects the whole of the religious tradition. Sees patriarchy as an essential and corrupt component of religious tradition.	Elizabeth Cady Stanton Mary Daly
Sublimationist	"The search for and glorification of the eternal feminine in Biblical symbolism." Aims to transcend the conflict with patriarchy and androcentrism by ascribing greater importance to the world of symbols (e.g. Mary, Sophia, Bride, Mother, Spirit)	Joan C. Engelsman Leonard Swidler
Liberationist	Holds that "the central message of the Bible is human liberation, that this is in fact the meaning of salvation." Receives only those texts that critically transcend their patriarchal frameworks.	Rosemary Radford Ruether Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Letty Russell
Revisionist	Holds that "the patriarchal mold in which the Judeo-Christian tradition has been cast is historically but not theologically determined." Male domination is "separable from and not intrinsic to" the tradition. Sees the tradition as capable of being reformed.	Phyllis Trible
Loyalist	Receives the Bible is the Word of God and divine	This category includes most

[29] Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," *HTS* 53, no. 4 (1997): 956-968.
[30] Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible," 960.

	revelation which is authoritative and must be submitted to. It is not subject to human experience or reason. Holds that the Bible is good, and not oppressive. If we believe it to be so, we must reform either our interpretation, or ourselves. (Note that while this category does seek good for women, it certainly does not hold to the key claims of feminism as described above).	"evangelicals" or "conservatives." It will include non-feminist Christian women who continue to interpret the Bible "traditionally" (patriarchally) and accept it as God's will. Osiek also includes egalitarians and "evangelical feminists" who argue that it is not the Bible but only interpretation that is oppressive.

Table 3: Carolyn Osiek - Typology of Feminist Approaches to Scripture (1997)

1.3 My Approach

I locate my work in this project within Osiek's category of a "revisionist" approach. Unlike the loyalist position I will accept that patriarchy is reflected not only in the history of interpretation but in the Bible itself.[31] But I maintain that although patriarchy forms the Bible's backdrop, it does not characterise its intention. One of the central problematics of this project is to parse out exactly how patriarchy can be inseparable from the text of the Bible itself, while not being determinative of its meaning and message. Indeed, I hope to show how this position is not just possible within a traditional understanding of the Bible as the Word of God, but also resourced by it. That is, I hope to outline and then put into practice a Doctrine of Scripture which authorises and enables a revisionist feminist interpretation. I suspect that the title "revisionist" will put some otherwise sympathetic readers off. I use it here only to locate my approach within Osiek's taxonomy. We might prefer Carol Christ's "reformist."[32] However, as we proceed, it will become clear that I prefer different terminology. In fact, one of the

[31] While I do think that feminist reinterpretation has shown that the Bible is far less sexist than the history of interpretation has made it seem, I do not believe that feminist interpretation can remove all that is challenging. The Bible remains predominantly androcentric, and the fundamental symbols and structures of Jewish and Christian religious life are foundationally so.

[32] Carol Christ earlier described only two categories: reformist and revolutionary. Though I prefer the term reformist, Osiek's larger taxonomy improves specificity. Schüssler Fiorenza describes at least ten different approaches, but ours would still fit her "hermeneutics of revision." Jacqueline Lapsley offers a simplification of Osiek's taxonomy into three categories only: loyalist, revisionist, and rejectionist. Carol Christ, "The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature," *Religious Studies Review* 3, no. 4 (October 1977): 203-212; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013); Jacqueline Lapsley, *Whispering the Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3.

outcomes of the articulation of my position may be to problematise or nuance the above schema. Further elaboration of these issues will come in chapters 2 and 3.

It is important to delimit one's work in feminist interpretation for two reasons. First, one of the most important contributions of feminist theology generally has been to expose the myth of the "view from nowhere" or the "objective" standpoint. It recognises that all interpretation brings a set of assumptions and reflects a certain standpoint. We must both acknowledge and accept this because it is not possible for interpretation to proceed in any other way. Osiek argues that each of these approaches must be considered valid because they *do* reflect ways that women make sense of the Bible in their own lives. But they are also alternatives, meaning choices. If all interpretation is from "somewhere" then we must not only recognise and acknowledge our location but interrogate and make choices about our approach. It is clear that we can choose to "do" different things with the Bible, and that we do so based on a set of beliefs and commitments. My own approach reflects my own considered beliefs and commitments. Working self-consciously within the reformed Protestant tradition and from within Christian communities who place a high value on Christian Scripture as normative for Christian faith and practice, I seek an approach to Scripture that allows us to maintain its authority, and that does not require rejecting or denouncing any part of it. This tradition also accepts that Scripture must be allowed to judge and inform us, and to offer its vision of human liberation over against our own designs. This is a key emphasis of the Gospels, for instance, as Jesus' Messiahship overturns expectations and undermines all attempts to appropriate it for status or power.

Second, given the breadth of feminist approaches, it is essential not to claim too much. Here it is important to acknowledge my own social location beyond that already described. I am a white, Western, married, heterosexual, middle-class, ordained Christian woman working in a confessional institution and studying through a historic British university. I recognise that this position is both highly privileged and also limiting. The relationship of these backgrounds to feminism is mixed – offering both hostility and encouragement. Though I have often felt "on the edge" of my institutions, I also recognise that those spaces are places of power and privilege. I make no claim that the views expressed here will find universal (even broad) acceptance. What I hope to do is not to speak for all, but to carve out space for some. I hope to defend revisionist feminist narrative-theological reading as a reasonable and responsible reading of the Bible that makes sense of Christian women's experience of both the Bible's challenge and its power.

2 Methodology

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the question of methodology in more detail; however, a few preliminary remarks may be helpful here. First, too much discussion of Biblical hermeneutics proceeds without application to Biblical texts and so remains only at the level of theory.[33] My aim in this project is to demonstrate the fruitfulness of my approach, which can only truly be done in practice. Consequently, the bulk of the project (chapters 4–6) will be given to work on particular texts from the New Testament, one from the Gospel of Luke (18:1–8) and two from the Gospel of John (John 20:1–18; and John 4:4–42). These are chosen because they are narratives with female characters that are readily engaged by feminist interpreters. They provide opportunity to explore feminist modes of reading, both suspicious and reparative, as well as to engage theological issues from a feminist perspective.

Second, in one sense what I offer here might be classified as "practical critique" (as distinct from "practical criticism"). As described by Gila Ashtor a practical critique "focuses on the relationship between a particular interpretive agenda and the theoretical paradigm that informs it," and in particular, is levelled against "theoretical apparatus that seems… to compromise the 'quality' of *reading.*"[34] Practical critique rests on an idea of interpretive "goods." We have noted already that feminist interpretation is necessarily bound up with activism – it has a clear vision of the goods towards which it aims. But reading must be responsible not only to those who practise it and their own aims, but also to the texts under study and to its reading communities.[35] For feminist readings of the Bible to be transformative for regular readers of the Bible, it behoves them to be discernibly the type of readings that Christian reading communities regard as appropriate. I will argue therefore for the utility of feminist readings of the Bible that can account for and are consistent with the place of the Bible in the Christian tradition. Feminist reading must serve women's interests. But readings of the Bible will also (at least for certain aims), benefit by being discernibly Christian.

Third, though I proceed with explicit "interpretive interests,"[36] I also seek to avoid

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[33] Walter Moberly is famously insistent on this point. Walter Moberly, "Review of *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning*, by Christopher D. Spinks," *JTS* 59, no. 2 (October 2008): 711.

[34] Gila Ashtor, "The Misdiagnosis of Critique," *Criticism* 61, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 194.

[35] Ellen Davis describes Biblical interpretation as the practice of doing justice: doing justice to texts as the complex creations that they are, and doing justice to the reading communities of which we are a part. Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

[36] Mark Brett distinguishes between interpretive interests (aims that guide particular interpretive methods) and ideological interests (aims that reflect a readers broader ethical and political commitments). Mark Brett, "The Future of Reader Criticisms," cited in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 398.

interpretive reductionism: that is, to reduce the fulness of textual meaning to one aspect or element only, be that dogmatic interpretation, historical-critical, socio-scientific, narrative, ideological, or otherwise.[37] With Sandra Schneiders I allow my "approach" (the questions that I want to answer, or Brett's "interpretive interests") to determine method and not the other way around. Schneiders writes: "To start with the method(s) is to determine *a priori* what questions may be asked and what will count as data and evidence. By contrast, to start with the question is to root one's research in the open search for truth. Method remains necessary, but it will be developed in function of the question, not the other way around."[38] In this case, my interpretive interests are two-fold: 1) to examine the Biblical text in light of feminist questions and concerns, and 2) to hear what the Bible-as-Scripture has to say in response to those questions and concerns. It is this dual concern which leads us to explore hermeneutical models which can accommodate both interrogation and listening.

Fourth, broadly speaking I adopt a "communication" model of Scripture, such as that described by Jeannine Brown.[39] Texts viewed "as communication" involve all of author, text, and reader, viewing meaning-making as a process involving all three. This model makes room for multiple methods of enquiry (as above). But it also places responsibilities on readers to read in ways which honour the other "parties" involved. A communication model also offers theoretical resources (for example speech-act theory) for understanding how the Bible functions as Scripture, a topic we will return to in chapter 2. The communication model of Scripture ultimately takes us beyond Ricoeur but is not, I think, in conflict with the theoretical resources drawn from him here.

Fifth, as has already been mentioned, I pursue a model of feminist Biblical interpretation which stands within the Christian tradition and reads the Bible as Christian Scripture. This will put limits, for example, on the authority of women's experience over against the Bible by recognising the fallibility as well as the dignity of women. But most importantly, to approach the Bible in this way is to claim that the most important and defining feature of the Bible is not patriarchy, but that it is the self-presentation of the Triune God. Subsequently the ultimate goal of interpretation (though not its only task) is knowledge of God.

Sixth, and finally, the basic theoretical model underlying the main argument of this project

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[37] See Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in this Text?,* 398-401 for discussion on this point.

[38] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 154.

[39] Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

is drawn from Paul Ricoeur and his concern for the "restoration of meaning." We explore Ricoeur's concept of the hermeneutical arc through explanation to understanding, and his dialectical double movement between suspicion and trust. Against models of feminist interpretation which remain stuck in a hermeneutics of suspicion, I will argue for movement towards a feminist "second naiveté." An important task in this project will be defending my proposal as sufficiently feminist-critical. No doubt, many readers will feel that it is not. But against such objections I hope to show that there are limitations too of remaining only in the critical mode. As Ricoeur claims, to never return to a hermeneutics of trust is to remain closed to the possibility of truly hearing and seeing God – however insufficiently God may be described.[40]

3 Outline of the Project

After locating our questions, aims, and argument within the broader field here in chapter 1, this project proceeds in two parts. Part 1 (chapters 1–3) provides the theoretical foundations for my proposal for a feminist hermeneutics beyond suspicion. Part 2 (chapters 4–6) demonstrates the practice of it.

Chapters 2 and 3 give the theoretical foundations for the reading practices modelled in this book. **Chapter 2** describes the turn to post-critique in literary studies, engaging the work of Rita Felski and Eve Sedgwick, and offering a case for post-critique in feminist Biblical interpretation. I outline Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical model (upon which Felski's model of post-critique is based), tracing the double movement through the distanciation of critical methods and back to a posture of trust, or "second naiveté." The chapter concludes with a discussion of the doctrine of Scripture. Feminist critiques of Scripture have problematised traditional notions of Scripture's authority and its status as the Word of God. I argue that a sufficiently nuanced articulation of the Bible as the Word of God offers resources for feminist interpretation, making room for both suspicion and trust.

Having made the case for moving beyond suspicion, **Chapter 3** develops the concept of a feminist "second naiveté." Methodological questions are revisited as we consider the implications of the doctrine of Scripture developed in chapter 2, specifically narrative criticism and theological interpretation. An important element of this chapter is to distinguish the second naiveté from the first naiveté. Ever before us is the worry: what makes this mode of reading

[40] Paul Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," trans. Peter McCormick, in *The Conflict of Interpretations,* ed. Don Ihde (London: Continuum, 2004), 393.

post-critique and not post-feminism? We do not seek to replace feminist critical methods, but to complement them. In order to establish this, in the second half of this chapter we explore feminist reading from a different angle – through the use of competing metaphors for reading. Here we ask: what is a feminist reparative reader "doing" with the Bible? Over against traditional images of submission or servanthood, I examine four more dynamic metaphors: hospitality, love of neighbour, attunement, and informed trust. These dynamic and interpersonal metaphors can accommodate the critical alongside the receptive.

Part 2 (chapters 4–6) provides a series of case studies on texts from the Gospels. In each chapter I engage an example of the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and analyse its strengths and limitations. I take seriously the feminist questions and concerns which motivate these modes of reading, in each case taking these up to adjudicate the success of my own reparative readings.

Chapter 4 treats Luke's Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8). It engages with redaction-critical approaches, examines the feminist challenge to eschatology, and takes up the feminist critique of the failures of justice for women in the world and the church. In response I present a narrative-critical reading which accepts Luke's theological cues, arguing that such a reading does not neglect women's pursuit of justice in the here and now, but empowers it. In the final section of this chapter I develop a paradigm for feminist reparative reading based on the character of the persistent widow herself: a hermeneutics of faith and persistence.

In **chapter 5** we examine trauma hermeneutics. Here again the challenge to Christian eschatology is raised, specifically moves to resurrection, redemption, and repair which foreclose expressions of suffering and the lived experience of trauma as the "open wound." In conversation with trauma theologian Shelly Rambo we examine Mary Magdalene's garden encounter with Jesus after his resurrection (John 20:1–18). I argue that Rambo's trauma reading is theologically unstable, reifies the post-traumatic experience, and is insufficiently hopeful about the possibility of repair. Instead I offer a narrative-critical reading, informed by social identity theory and the role of trauma texts, which narrates Mary's encounter as a story of post-traumatic remaking.

Chapter 6 examines a classic text for feminist interpretation – Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–42). Elizabeth Warren has recently argued that much feminist work on this passage which seeks to retrieve the Samaritan woman's reputation from its sexist interpretative history participates in the same "slut-shaming" practiced by Jesus, the narrator, and the interpretative tradition. Here arise questions about sexual liberation for women, anachronism and cultural locatedness, and the need to recognise thought-worlds other

than our own. After examining the limitations of Warren's approach, I present a narrative-critical reading which emphasises the symbolic and theological dimensions of the text, consistent with the implied author's overall purpose in the Gospel. I argue that such a reading offers a positive vision for women, not focused on sexuality but on discipleship.

All three women in these Gospel narratives are examples of Christian discipleship. All three exhibit agency, courage, initiative, insight, faithfulness and perseverance. In each case I argue that there is much to be gained by accepting the text's own narrative and theological cues, offering the potential to recount positive encounters with the divine in which the challenges of women's situations and suffering are not erased but are met with empathy and with the power for transformation. Ironically, in the suspicious readings examined in these chapters all three women are reduced rather than expanded: angry and vindictive, stuck in trauma, and defined by sexuality. All three become defined by their negative treatment or experience. Removed from a larger story they become trapped here, with no future to live in to or possibility of restoration.

Finally, having seen the approach in practice and examined its liberative potential, **chapter 7** provides the conclusion of the project. Here we return again to broader theological considerations about the possibility of language for God, and for symbols to transcend their own limitations. We conclude that there is always a tension at the heart of feminist interpretation of the Bible, but not an insurmountable one. For, as Ricoeur notes, it is this "conflict" which gives rise to the possibility of real understanding. As we are confronted by the limits of ourselves and others in our ability to understand and to describe not just God, but even our own lives, we are able to see with greater clarity and depth what can be said, and said truly. Recognition of the problem of patriarchy in the Bible offers insight into the problem and challenge of interpretation more broadly. The negative moment clears the ground for the positive moment. But the negative moment is incomplete without this return. Suspicion, Scott-Baumann writes, must be seen as "a necessary yet not sufficient opportunity to challenge our thinking and investigate inconsistencies, acting as a critical friend to reason and hope."[41]

Conclusion: Seeking Springs of Living Water

Do we have reason to hope?

In the book of Jeremiah YHWH is described as "the spring of living water" (Jer 2:13) in an

[41] Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 171.

image which recurs throughout the Bible: God's law is a life-giving stream (Psalm 1); Jesus stands by a well and offers "living water," a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:10, 14); later Jesus identifies this living water with the coming gift of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). But YHWH describes Judah's turning away from him to sin as forsaking the spring of living water. Instead the people have "dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jer 2:13). Judah, in their turn, accuse YHWH of giving them poison water to drink (Jer 8:14): "We hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror" (Jer 8:15).[42]

This series of images raises the question: When feminist interpretation of Scripture tastes more like poison water than living water, what has gone wrong? Has God given us bitter waters, or are we drinking from stagnant cisterns of our own making? This is a challenging question because it forces us to turn our interrogative gaze back on ourselves. We can question the possibility of God's living water, but can we entertain it?

[42] My own use of this image as a guide for our investigation in this way was prompted by Jill Firth's comments on Jeremiah. See Jill Firth, "Desert Spring, Dead Dog Waterhole, Disappointment Creek: Is the God of the Book of Jeremiah Bad for Women?," in *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture: Papers by Australian Women Scholars in the Evangelical Tradition,* ed. Jill Firth and Denise Cooper-Clarke (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 122.

Chapter 2

Beyond Suspicion?

Post-critique and Feminist Interpretation

"The Zeus of Critique rules absolutely, to be sure, but over a desert."[1]

Introduction

This chapter sets out the theoretical foundations for this project, exploring the prospects of post-critique in feminist Biblical interpretation. It does so in four stages. It begins by describing the emergence of post-critique in literary studies, with particular attention to feminist and queer criticism. Broadly speaking, post-critique designates a call for literary criticism to eschew the dominance of the suspicious mode and embrace a range of more constructive, or "reparative" reading strategies. Second, we examine a particular model for a form of post-critique in the area of religion in the hermeneutical model of Paul Ricoeur, who proposed a double movement through suspicion to retrieval. Ricoeur argued for the necessity of both the critical and the receptive; for, he contended, it is within the conflict of the two that true understanding arises. Thirdly, we bring these first two elements together with feminist Biblical interpretation. We ask whether post-critique is possible – even ethical – in feminist Biblical interpretation and we examine its risks.[2] Fourth, having identified the Bible's status as authoritative Word of God as the primary obstacle to reparative reading in feminist hermeneutics, I outline a doctrine of Scripture and understanding of "the Word of God" which attempts to make room for both the critical and the reparative.

I will argue that while the hermeneutics of suspicion has assumed almost exclusive dominance in feminist Biblical interpretation, Ricoeur's concept of the double movement through suspicion to trust affords the feminist interpreter greater liberative possibilities than

[1] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out Of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Enquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 240.

[2] For an examination of the limits of critique in feminist historical and systematic theology, and an exploration and commendation of alternatives, see Natalie Carnes, *Attunement: The Art and Politics of Feminist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), especially chapter 1. Carnes' discussion engages many of the scholars discussed here and narrates the turn to post-critique in the humanities. Though the book was released only a week before submission, an unpublished early version of a portion of Carnes' work was helpful to me in formulating the argument of this chapter and its extension to feminist biblical studies.

the suspicious mode alone. The double movement claims and retains the insights of the critical mode – it is alert to the presence and power of patriarchy in the text and tradition – but it does not rely on exposure alone for transformation. Further, the double movement is able to honour the givenness of the Biblical text on its own terms. Moving through suspicion to trust, the double movement is able to respond to the theological claims of the text, even as they are bound up with its human elements. Thus it can read the Bible as Scripture, therefore accessing a larger suite of hermeneutic resources and liberative possibilities.

1 Post-critique in Literary Theory

In this first section, we trace the emergence of post-critique in literary studies. Post-critique refers to a movement in literary theory over the last decade away from "critique" or various forms of critical theory (queer, feminist, post-colonial, Marxist etc) as the dominant mode, and towards a broader range of reading and interpretative strategies. Alternatives to the "demystifying," "paranoid," "symptomatic," "deconstructive," and "suspicious" readings of critique come in many kinds: surface-reading, materiality, New Formalism, Affect theory, reparative reading, and more.[3] These involve not only theoretical shifts but also what Felski and Anker refer to as "an alternative ethos, mood, or disposition."[4] The affective element is thus an important part of post-critique. This is not simply to reduce critique to "negativity," or equate post-critique with "positivity." Nor is it to suggest that post-critical readers by definition "approve" of everything they find in a text (whatever that might mean). Rather, post-critique is characterised by a certain attitude, posture, or disposition towards the object of its study: receiving rather than resisting, humility in place of hubris, hearing rather than exposing, trust rather than suspicion.

1.1 Critique's Decline

What prompted this shift in the literary world? We might say that critical reading became a victim of its own success. Its high point in the 1980's and 90's – all pervasive in humanities departments throughout Western universities – was simultaneously the beginning of its demise as the irony of the critical mode becoming the dominant mode began to become apparent.[5]

[3] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no.1 (2009): 1-21.
[4] Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.
[5] Timothy Bewes: "the phrase 'against the grain,' and the method supposedly denoted by it, slowly, and in

Early pioneers of critical theory, perhaps most famously queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, began to feel uneasy in the world they had helped to create, and began to question the demands it made of them. It was not so much a rejection of critique as a method in and of itself, as it was a disappointment about the place and power that critique had come to hold; that is, not so much that critical readings were likely to be "wrong," but that they had become so dominant that they discouraged other ways of reading. Critique had, in a sense, become uncritical. Sedgwick wrote that "to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities."[6] Rita Felski, in her pioneering monograph *The Limits of Critique*, makes a similar observation: "it seems increasingly evident that literary scholars are confusing a part of thought with the whole of thought, and that in doing so we are scanting a range of intellectual and expressive possibilities."[7] What once was innovative was now predictable and staid. Sedgwick recognised that the strength of the paranoid reading (as she termed it) was such that it obscured other ways of seeing: paranoia always finds what it is looking for.[8]

The dominance of the practice of critique though, does not just obscure alternative ways of thinking, it also threatens to become self-defeating. What once was (ostensibly) iconoclasm, avant-garde, marginal resistance, became the status quo.[9] With its ubiquity came a loss of its power and ability to cut through. The analyses were simply no longer either as insightful or useful as they once were.[10] Further, having characterised itself as "from below," as "struggling against subjugation" and railing against dominant modes of power and authority, critique had now become the authoritative mode.[11] Instead of functioning to challenge received truths and to open up new ways of seeing, critique had begun to exclude and to close down alternative possibilities.

A third reason for the growing uneasiness with critique provides the major theme of Bruno

violation of its most essential principle, took on the force of a critical axiom. In this narrative, 'counterintuitive' methods of reading take the place of 'intuitive' methods, with the result that the relation between intuition and counterintuition is inverted." Timothy Bewes, "Reading With the Grain: A New World In Literary Criticism," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2010): 1-33.

[6] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 125.

[7] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

[8] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 130.

[9] Felski, drawing from Robyn Wiegman, usefully problematises any characterisation of critique as either iconoclasm or status quo: "the scholar's performance of a stance of "critical non-complicity" both cements and conceals her actual complicity – not just with the conventions of an academic discipline but also with the larger structures of economic and political injustice that sustain them." Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 146.

[10] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 129.

[11] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 140-147. "From Below" is one of Felski's five dominant characteristics of critique.

Latour's oft-cited and still relevant "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" Latour's incisive, almost prophetic *mea culpa* challenged many readers as he drew connections between critical theory and conspiracy theory.[12] In a world hyper-saturated with critique, hyper-alert to the discourses of power, primed to suspect and to second-guess, Latour wondered if now different tools might be needed to aim at truth. Latour's point – and Sedgwick and others have made the same – was that "exposure" and "unmasking" lose their power when so much of the modern world's violence and aggression is no longer hidden but entirely on the surface. Critique is the wrong weapon in the fray of today's discourse.[13] Many of Sedgwick's examples are drawn from modern America: incarceration rates for young black men, chain gangs, the broadcast of capital punishment, the decline of the welfare state, and gun lobby rhetoric. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus begin their introduction to their edited volume of *Representations* ("Surface Reading: An Introduction") with a similar tale:

> Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet; the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication the state's abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as 'mission accomplished.'[14]

The tools forged to unveil the hidden, to expose the power, or to reveal the "lack of scientific certainty" for any number of so-called facts are, argued Latour, exactly those now being used to undermine the scientific consensus on climate change, to sow doubt about vaccination, to question the events of September 11, the moon-landing, and so on.[15] He writes, "dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? Is it enough to say that we did not really mean what we said?"[16] Felski concludes, "There is, in short, nothing automatically progressive about a stance of suspicion – nor is such a stance inherently marginal, oppositional, or even unusual;"[17] "suspicion is thoroughly enmeshed in the world rather than opposed to the world and offers no

[12] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 227.
[13] See also Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 138-140.
[14] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 2.
[15] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 227.
[16] Ibid, 227.
[17] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 45.

special guarantee of intellectual insight, political virtue, or ideological purity."[18]

1.2 Beyond Critique

So: totalising, unimaginative, predictable, and impotent. Is this the state of things in the humanities? And how can a critique of critique escape this totalising force? That is, how can critique itself be critiqued without reinforcing the mode at the same time? All the authors mentioned above – Felski, Latour, and Sedgwick – recognise this danger even as they articulate their worries about critique. Yes, we can expose critical theory as just another form of the will to power, and see the discovery of repressed homosexuality in every text as merely a projection of our own desires. We can turn suspicion on to the wielders of suspicion, analyse their own readings as symptomatic of their own hidden values, and so on. We could, and we can, and there is at times some value in doing so. But where do we end up? We wait for someone to do the same for us. Cathy Caruth analyses Freud analysing poetry analysing humanity, or interprets Lacan interpreting Freud. She re-reads Paul de Man's readings of Kant and von Kleist, and each time she finds something that those studied never knew they were doing.[19] Presumably, we might do the same for Caruth. But, as the layers of abstraction get deeper and deeper, do we not lose the power of the story itself? Do we not lose connection with what the texts themselves bring into view and what they aim at?

In response, Felski suggests that post-critique is characterised just as much by a disposition as it is by method. Therefore what she offers is less an argument against critique than a pivot to a different direction. As we have seen, there is no one method, theory, school, approach, or style of post-critical reading, but perhaps there is a common disposition: "modes of thought are also orientations toward the world that are infused with a certain attitude or disposition; arguments are a matter not only of content but also of style and tone."[20] Post-critique steps out of the infinite spiral of critique by returning to questions of value, matters of concern (Latour), and to what knowledge *does* (Sedgwick) – focusing not so much on theory (truth) but on results (performative effect). This is the point about exposure again, or the *so what*? Theory and results are connected of course – perhaps never more rigidly so than in the critical mode, as Sedgwick points out. But the shift reminds us that we can think about what sort of results we want, and

[18] Ibid, 50-51.
[19] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
[20] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 4.

the value of what we get. Interpreters make choices, and those choices determine and limit results. Texts do things. They carry ideologies. Yes – they are even discourses of power. But interpreters make choices that influence what kinds of power these texts have in our lives and our communities. This is, in many ways, a pragmatic argument – though one that operates simultaneously on multiple levels (the personal is political, after all). At the personal level, and in the classroom, the dominance of critique cuts us off from other "uses of literature," thereby impoverishing our experience and our imagination.[21] At the political level, the consensus is that something else is needed to achieve the aims of (certain kinds of) critical theory. Best and Marcus conclude: "where it had become common for literary scholars to equate their work with political activism, the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change."[22]

Perhaps it seems strange that we ever imagined it was. Alan Jacobs has argued that at least part of the problem stems from the attempt to operate within and advocate for certain moral positions in writing – in many cases over against the texts we write on – without any reflection on the ethics of reading or the reader.[23] Jacobs describes this kind of contemporary political criticism as "Pardigglean," resonant with the character of Mrs. Pardiggle from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*.

> It seems to me that one of the most important assumptions, and disabling illusions, of contemporary political criticism is the belief that one can seek political justice through one's literary criticism without seeking to be a just person. Critics simply *assume* that justice is conferred upon them by the justice of their cause, or that being just is something easily achieved – for instance, as Fred Inglis…. argues, simply by doing cultural studies: As he puts it, with tongue only partially in cheek, 'Cultural Studies will make you good.'[24]

To be clear, post-critique in general is not about an ethics of reading or reader. But although diagnoses of the underlying cause might differ, and prescriptions about what is needed next are varied, there is at least some agreement on the presenting symptoms. Critique alone may leave us personally and politically anaemic. Returning critique to the toolkit as one tool among many offers the reader a greater set of possible approaches and interpretative results.

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[21] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Balden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). Felski discusses four "uses" of literature apart from its function as the object of our critique: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock.
[22] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 2.
[23] Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 125-144.
[24] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 139-140.

2 Beyond Suspicion with Paul Ricoeur

Jacobs' own hermeneutic (a hermeneutic of love) arises from his conviction that all Christian activity is to be governed by the "law of love." Thus reading and interpretation – be it of the Bible or any other text – is a form of loving one's neighbour. We will return to Jacobs again in chapter 3 when we consider in more detail some models for post-critical reading. However, Jacob's emphasis on the ethics of reading and the cultivation of virtue reveals a lacuna in contemporary secular post-critique. The movement of Felski's book is to lead her reader beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion and into a hermeneutics of trust. These terms are borrowed from Paul Ricoeur, but much more in generalities than via the detail of his own hermeneutical theory. So while Felski draws from religious ways of reading (or perhaps, from ways of reading the religious) her own work has been noted to be surprisingly disinterested in – and perhaps even resistant to – religion.[25] Scholars working at the intersection of religion and literature have long been advocating recognition of the limits of contemporary critical modes of thought, but Lori Branch reveals how Felski's work, despite its call to attend to more facets of literature, finds its own limit at the horizon of belief.[26] It is useful, therefore, to step back from Felski to her foundation in the work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, and his work in hermeneutics and phenomenology of religion.

2.1 Suspicion, Trust, and The Conflict of Interpretations

Ricoeur describes the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of trust in his *Freud and Philosophy,* where he introduced the idea of the conflict of interpretations. The conflict Ricoeur describes here has parallels to the challenge of feminist Biblical hermeneutics: "According to one pole, hermeneutics is understood as the manifestation and restoration of meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation, or as is sometimes said, a kerygma; according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion."[27] The hermeneutics of suspicion is exemplified by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, who Ricoeur refers to together as the "masters of suspicion."[28] They represent a school of

[25] Lori Branch, "Post-critical and Post-secular: The Horizon of Belief," *Religion and Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 162

[26] Branch, "Post-critical and Post-secular," 163; Sandra M. Gustafson and Tyler Gardner, "Introduction: Possibilities Beyond Critique," *Religion and Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 156.

[27] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*: *An Essay on Interpretation,* trans. Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

[28] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy,* 32.

interpretation that aims at the "reduction of the illusions and lies of consciousness."[29] Though much divides Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, they are united, argued Ricoeur, in their "decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as "false consciousness."[30] Thus interpretation (understanding) involves looking past the shown to the hidden, beyond the patent to the latent.

A hermeneutics of suspicion tends to assume that truth and reality are often covered by lies of power, ideology and false consciousness. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud all aim at deciphering, and therefore at enlarging consciousness. But "our three masters of suspicion also present the most radically contrary state to the phenomenology of the sacred"[31] for the hermeneutics of suspicion views the manifest sacred as that false consciousness: as illusion, ideology, and will to power. To discover reality is to discover the freedom of man (sic) demystified.

In stark contrast to the hermeneutics of suspicion stands the hermeneutics of trust. Here, interpretation aims at the restoration of meaning, and is the stance of the phenomenology of religion and the sacred. A hermeneutics of trust begins with concern for the object of interpretation, displayed by a commitment to "describe and not to reduce."[32] In religion, the object of interpretation is the "sacred," respect toward which entails allowing oneself to be addressed. Indeed, for Ricoeur, to hear such an address is the very aim of reading and interpretation.[33] This desire to be spoken to by religious language and symbol arises from a belief that these symbols do not just mask, but also reveal truth.[34] The hermeneutics of trust accepts that something is intended and attempts to discern what is signified. It "requires that I participate in the belief in the reality of the religious object."[35] Its aim is to hear the meaning that is there and that is intended – to "draw out" rather than to "peel back."

Although Ricoeur initially describes these two models of interpretation as in radical conflict, he believes ultimately that it is only by bringing the two together that interpretation can proceed. It is the "conflict" of interpretations that generates reflection. It is the combination of the two, the dialectic between them, through which understanding is gained.

> Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished doing

[29] Ibid.
[30] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy,* 33.
[31] Ibid, 35.
[32] Ibid, 28.
[33] Ibid, 29.
[34] Ibid, 30.
[35] Ibid, 29.

> away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning.[36]

And thus interpretation proceeds as a dialectical process, with both suspicion and with trust, with unmasking and with believing. The unmasking of suspicion is not simply destruction but is a kind of necessary ground clearing. It creates a new foundation from which truth might be seen and heard more clearly.[37] Something is destroyed, but something new is found. Subsequently, Ricoeur is clear that the hermeneutics of trust that he advocates is not pre-critical. It is in conversation with and depends on the hermeneutic of suspicion.

> No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith… It is rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second naïveté.[38]

Ricoeur refers here to his now famous articulation of the hermeneutical circle – "Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe."[39] Elsewhere Ricoeur expands on this maxim making clear that it is intended to embrace not only faith but also the disciplines that regulate understanding. This is intended to be contained by the term understanding, but is perhaps often overlooked.

> This formulation is still too psychological. For behind believing there is the primacy of the object of faith over faith; and behind understanding there is the primacy of exegesis and its method over the naive reading of the text. This means that the genuine hermeneutic circle is not psychological but methodological. It is the circle constituted by the object that regulates faith and the method that regulates understanding. There is a circle because the exegete is not his own master. What he wants to understand is what the text says; the task of understanding is therefore governed by what is at issue in the text itself. Christian hermeneutics is moved by the announcement which is at issue in the text.[40]

So it is clear that for Ricoeur the methods that regulate understanding include the critical disciplines and tools of suspicion. These give rise to our understanding of the object of faith. We see the same impulse again in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, in the essay in which

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[36] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy,* 27.
[37] Ibid*,* 33.
[38] Ibid, 28.
[39] Ibid, 28.
[40] Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 385.

Ricoeur adjudicates the debate between Gadamer and Habermas, or between a hermeneutical consciousness and a critical consciousness.[41] Ricour argues that the two are not opposed but that each is, in fact, dependent on the other. Each proceeds towards different and valuable aims, but ultimately, their practice is intertwined. Particularly interesting for our purposes is Ricoeur's closing observation that critique itself comes from a tradition of emancipation which includes the Exodus and the resurrection. He writes: "Perhaps there would be no more interest in emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and the Resurrection were effaced from the memory of mankind."[42] So the force of critique and the force of tradition – though different – need not be always opposed.

In Ricoeur's account, the many disjunctions encountered in the history of thinking on hermeneutics (alienation and belonging, truth and method, objective and existential, explanation and understanding, suspicion and faith) are overcome by giving priority to the text itself, and to the world it creates, in a process that brings them together. The focus on interpretation must be on what he calls "the world of the text" – that is, the text's aim or reference (in Fregian terms), the world it projects, or "the being brought to language by the text."[43] To do this requires *explanation* (critical interaction, method, recognising and overcoming distance) which aims at *understanding.* Together these constitute interpretation. But ultimately, for Ricoeur, the goal of interpretation is appropriation. The world of the text is a world the reader is invited to inhabit and to make one's own: "The interpretation is complete when the reading releases something like an event, an event of discourse, an event in the present time."[44] And although appropriation is dependent on the reader, it avoids pure subjectivity because it only properly occurs when it follows apprehension of "the world conveyed by the work."[45] As such, "to understand is not to project oneself into the text; it is to receive an enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds which are the genuine object of interpretation."[46] Here, suspicion must now be turned upon oneself.[47] The illusions and false consciousness that limit understanding are not only the ideologies of the text (or its author) but

[41] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 23-60.
[42] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* 60.
[43] Paul Ricoeur, "A Response by Paul Ricoeur," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), xlv.
[44] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* 147.
[45] Ibid, 144.
[46] Ibid,144-145.
[47] Ibid, 152-154.

the "narcissism of the reader."[48] Thus appropriation is not the reign of, but the relinquishment of the ego. The reader submits to the "revelatory power of the text,"[49] and in so doing is changed by it: "By 'appropriation,' I understand this: that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself."[50]

2.2 The Second Naiveté

To conclude this section let us return briefly to the concept of the second naiveté, as it is essential for our purposes that this construct can sufficiently hold together both suspicion and trust. Although Ricoeur uses this particular expression infrequently, a number of scholars have argued that it is central to his hermeneutical project.[51] Buzási suggests that other terms later came to do the same work for Ricoeur: listening, restoration or recollection of meaning, appropriation as the end of the hermeneutical arc, perhaps even his use of Aristotle's *phronesis*, and his articulation of narrative identity.[52] The hermeneutical arc is the clearest analogue I think, containing within it the journey from initial naive belonging, through distanciation (with the use of objective critical methods) and returning to understanding and appropriation.[53]

Since the enlightenment, Ricoeur contends, naive interaction with religion and religious symbols is impossible. In a world that has forgotten or perhaps repudiated the sacred, in many cases because of the problematic nature of the symbols themselves and/or their use, another way of "hearing" is required: "we can, we modern men, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism… it is by interpreting that we can hear again."[54] Modern readers cannot engage the sacred uncritically, Ricoeur thinks, but engage it they must. And so both explanation and understanding are required. Ricoeur "recognizes that explanation alone can be reductive, but that understanding alone remains vulnerable to uncritical individual or corporate illusion or self-deception."[55] And thus, he is "in search of a theory of interpretation in which

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[48] Ibid, 153.

[49] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* 153.

[50] Ibid, 120.

[51] Áron Buzási, "Paul Ricoeur and the Idea of Second Naivety: Origins, Analogues, Applications," *Ricœur Studies* 13, no. 2 (2022), for an examination of the origins of the phrase and its use in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. See also Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*.

[52] Buzási, "Paul Ricoeur and the Idea of Second Naivety," 45.

[53] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* 123.

[54] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* 351.

[55] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 344.

'understanding' seeks help in objective 'explanation' and returns deepened and enlarged."[56]

Ricoeur's hermeneutical model provides a foundation for a form of post-critique in feminist Biblical hermeneutics because it shows the importance of both the critical and the receptive modes for interpretation, and particularly for interpretation of religious texts. Where Felski cannot fully enter in to "enchantment" for fear of being beguiled, Ricoeur's model maintains the reality and importance of religious experience and the kinds of hope, belief, love, and commitment it entails. It offers a way to combine real faith in the God revealed in the Bible with the critical commitments of feminism, as together productive of a form of Christian faith which can be appropriated without harm. In the second half of this chapter my aim is to make space for a form of feminist interpretation of the Bible as a kind of Ricoeurian second naiveté. Recognising the limits of the critical and suspicious mode in feminist Biblical interpretation, I aim to demonstrate the potential of a complementary hermeneutics of trust, by which our vision of women's liberation can be deepened and enlarged by both critical explanation and by "hearing." The core tenets of feminism require a repudiation of the first naiveté, seen as an uncritical and pre-reflective reception of the Bible. Feminist critical methods have helped the church to recognise the idols of patriarchy and male supremacy, and to unmask illusions of objectivity. But we must ask whether they also risk becoming reductive, closed off to possibility and to self-examination. Having seen the benefits of feminist criticism, what might also be gained by a willingness to return to the sacred. In his "Preface to Bultmann" Ricoeur writes: "If there is no objective meaning, then the text no longer says anything at all; without existential appropriation, what the text does say is no longer living speech."[57] For those who do indeed want the Bible both to say something and to mean something for us, a feminist second naiveté presents an opportunity. To approach the Bible in this way might be seen, as Cassandra Falke writes, not as an attempt to escape this world, but as a way for the Scriptures to "give the world back to us."[58]

3 The Case for Post-critique in Feminist Interpretation

Building from these foundations in the world of literary criticism and hermeneutics, the

[56] Lewis S. Mudge, "Introduction," in Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980), 13.
[57] Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 393.
[58] Cassandra Falke, *The Phenomenology of Love and Reading,* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 89.

remainder of this chapter develops an argument for the potential of post-critique in feminist Biblical hermeneutics. We begin with some discussion of post-critique and feminism in general, before turning to the particular case of feminist interpretation of the Bible. As is well known, the hermeneutic of suspicion has become *de rigeur* in feminist Biblical interpretation, and its project to uncover the sexism, androcentric bias, and patriarchy of the Biblical texts and their interpretation has been invaluable. Feminist interpretation has revealed the unchecked assumptions and distortions of interpreters, interrogated the values at work in the texts, and has made possible genuinely new and liberating interpretation. Much of this work is now well accepted and has influenced mainstream Biblical studies. But are there limits to remaining in the critical mode for feminist Biblical interpretation?

Felski's argument – as we have noted – is not against suspicion *per se,* but that "literary scholars are confusing a part of thought with the whole of thought" and importantly "that in doing so we are scanting a range of intellectual and expressive possibilities."[59] For Ricoeur too, suspicion is necessary but not sufficient for understanding. In the remainder of this section I will argue that Ricoeur's framework of the double movement through suspicion to trust affords the feminist interpreter greater liberative possibilities than the suspicious mode alone. The double movement claims and retains the insights of the critical mode: it is alert to the presence and power of patriarchy in the text and tradition. But it does not rely on exposure alone for transformation. Further, the double movement is able to honour the givenness of the text on its own terms. Moving through suspicion to trust, the double movement is able to respond to the theological claims of the text, even as they are bound up with its human elements. As Ricoeur has pointed out, feminist criticism stands in the liberative tradition of the exodus and the resurrection. The critical mode interrogates the Biblical text but is also enabled by it. Feminist faith need not, therefore, be opposed to feminist critical consciousness, but can be mediated by it. And feminist critical consciousness need not be subsumed by faith, but enabled by it.

And yet still, it is not unreasonable to worry about the risks of such a venture. Can we really move on from our resistance to a patriarchal text? Schüssler Fiorenza asks: "what will the text do to us if we submit to its world of vision?" and further, how do we "refuse 'submission' if the sacred text's world of vision is not suffused by the desire for justice and well-being for all without exception?"[60] Can a feminist submit to a text if the world it projects remains shot-through with patriarchy? Does she not have an obligation to resist?

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[59] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 5.
[60] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons,* 18.

In this section I turn explicitly to the question of the prospects for post-critique in the practice of feminist Biblical interpretation. I have narrated the turn to post-critique in literary studies as arising from recognition of some of the deficiencies of the critical mode as it edged out other possibilities for reading. We noted the perceived failure of critique-as-activism (the non-power of exposure), the predictability of critique and its diminishing ability to offer new insight, and the recognition of the human need for the constructive as well as the critical. These three areas of observation all connect with important elements of feminist interpretation of the Bible. In this section I will: 1) show precedent for the utility of post-critique in feminist and queer studies; 2) demonstrate the way that the hermeneutics of suspicion has come to dominate feminist Biblical studies, excluding alternative ways of reading and interpreting Scripture; and 3) respond to the challenge that the Bible's status as authoritative Scripture presents a unique problem for reparative reading.

3.1 Precedent

Perhaps we can accept that critique is just one method among others for interacting with texts, but should feminists really want to pivot away from it? Felski's book describes the way in which critique's ascendancy came to imply the inferiority of all other methods. If critique is synonymous with seeing "truly," then whatever is not critique is at best naive; at worst, it is blind. If the alternatives to critique are indeed "gullibility, blind faith, and slavish compliance… quietism, complicity, conservatism, or worse,"[61] then truly we do well to avoid them. As feminists, we *must* avoid them, lest all our scholarly endeavours serve merely to prop up the patriarchal status quo and reinforce the marginalisation, subordination, and oppression of women. At the same time, there are representatives of the anti-critical school who deny there is any value at all to the feminist-critical project, that feminist (and other) criticism just gets in the way of reading texts appropriately.[62] If embracing post-critique means joining hands with such views, again, we do well to be cautious. But feminist interpreters rightly reject such an un-nuanced account of the possibilities of their own work – in either direction. The important point here is that this is not a call to see less, but to see more. Not to deny the truths that critical readings and feminist analyses offer us, but to go further and to ask what additional resources

[61] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 51.

[62] Felski provides a number of telling examples from John Ellis's *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (1999). Ellis writes: "Typically, work by feminist critics is shaped so completely by the notion of patriarchy that an intelligent contribution to the understanding of literature becomes impossible." Rita Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6-13.

the text has to offer as we dialogue (with the text, with each other, with ourselves) around the issues that are raised. To trust that the manifest *as well as* the latent might offer something of value, opening up possibilities that the critical mode alone cannot grasp.

We have seen already that, at least in literary studies, post-critique includes scholars of feminism and queer theory. Felski's earlier book *Literature After Feminism* hints already at the later direction of her work as she chafes against the ubiquitous either/or that ostensibly challenges feminist criticism:

> This is the belief that you cannot do two things at once. You can either look at literature as literature or you look at it as politics, the argument goes, but you cannot do both. Feminist scholars are, by definition, interested in the social aspects of the books they read; as a result, they cannot do justice to literature as literature. They are doomed to miss much, even most, of what is important in the books they read.[63]

But as Felski points out, to suppose that feminists cannot appreciate literature due to their situatedness is to buy into the myth of the "ideal critic as blank slate," and to assume that only the feminist (or Marxist, or Freudian) reading is the perspectival/political reading. These are claims that feminist theorists deny and have worked hard to help us overcome. This is well articulated in mainstream Biblical interpretation too, by Gadamer, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Bultmann, and perhaps even Saint Augustine, who all emphasise the locatedness of the reader as an instrumental part of interpretation. Not only that, but it is to assume that "political" questions are never part of the concern of the texts "as literature" themselves, either explicitly or implicitly – or indeed, concerns of "traditional" interpretation. It is to claim that the best reading of Jane Austen's novels, for example, will be one which ignores questions of gender and of class, or that attention to issues of poverty and wealth in Dickens is a distraction. With regard to the Bible, it would be to suggest that "political" readings of the Bible on the subject of women and men and relations between them did not exist until feminist criticism came along and inserted foreign questions. But of course, "traditional" interpretations of male and female roles were as political as any. Felski concludes: "trying to hold literature and the social world apart is a Sisyphean task: however valiantly critics try to keep art pure, external meanings keep seeping in. This is because literature is double-sided. It is not *either/or* but *both/and.*"[64]

In her chapter on readers Felski again turns to Ricoeur, this time to nuance the notion of feminist reader as *resister* of the text (which she describes as an analogue of a hermeneutics of

[63] Felski, *Literature After Feminism,* 6.
[64] Ibid*,* 12.

suspicion). Again, Felski wants to note not the failure but the limits of this mode. Many times, by imposing a "correct" feminist reading on to a text, one is liable to miss the text's own subtleties, sometimes its own self-critique.

> 'Can reading be truly subsumed by *self-defense?*' asks Shoshana Felman. 'Does not reading involve one risk that, precisely, cannot be resisted: that of finding in the text something one does not expect? The danger with becoming a 'resisting reader' is that we end up, in effect, *resisting reading.'* [65]

Ricoeur, I think, would agree. Suspicion and trust are not an either/or, but a both/and. Suspicion must be turned on ourselves as well as on the text. Felski frames it as "double vision" – the ability to overcome the either/or and to hold in balance both the "politics" and the "art."[66] To return to the example of Jane Austen and to Sedgwick's insights about the limits of the power of exposure, what do we learn by simply pointing out that Austen's world is profoundly sexist and that women are trapped in unfair and limiting lives? And – do we really suppose that Austen herself does not see this? What do we miss of her own subtle critique of her social world if our vision is stuck here?

The evolution of queer theory provides a second example of the potential of the reparative to complement rather than replace the critical. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was one of the first to reflect on the limitations of the dominance of the critical mode. Her argument, which only built over the succeeding years, suggests that even the most committed and radical ideological critics and activists can recognise the benefits of not remaining always in the critical mode. Sedgwick's alternative is what she calls "reparative" reading. This is nowhere clearly defined so much as generally contrasted with the paranoid. Where the paranoid strips back and "exposes," the reparative is "additive and accretive." Paranoia is predictive, the reparative is open. Drawing from psychoanalysis and particularly the work of Melanie Klein, Sedgwick describes it as:

> To use one's own resources to assemble or ''repair'' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole – though, I would emphasize, not necessarily like any preexisting whole. Once assembled to one's own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein's names for the reparative process is love.[67]

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[65] Felski, *Literature After Feminism,* 38.
[66] Ibid*,* 19.
[67] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 128.

The reparative is risky, but also rewarding. It is a deliberate choice to move toward pleasure and nourishment, even while recognising the partial or mixed nature of what one will find, and the possibility (or probability) of wounding.[68] "The first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises*"[69] and this axiom drives its practice: "because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known."[70] The paranoid mode, then, is an attempt to forestall pain. This is understandable and sometimes useful, but ultimately it is self-defeating; because to close off the possibility of bad surprises is also to eliminate the possibility of good ones. Reparative reading requires the relinquishment of this determination in order to find in the text something not already known: "to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones."[71]

Looking back on "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" some ten years later, Sedgwick writes of what she could not see then: "in those speculations I overlooked the crudest, most contingent, and probably also most important reason why paranoia seems so built into queer theory as such."[72] That is, that queer theory was built in the 1980's and 90's when AIDS was a new, relatively untreatable disease, public reaction was hostile, homophobia was high, and "it was not an uncommon experience to be in a room of vibrant young people, conscious that within a year or two, all but a few of them would have sickened and died."[73] Those years were dominated then by intense feelings of dread: "The punishing stress of such dread, and the powerful resources of resistance in the face of it, did imprint a paranoid structuration onto the theory and activism of that period, and no wonder."[74] But in the mid-1990's things changed somewhat. Treatment became available and the worst fears about AIDS did not come true. But at the same time Sedgwick received her own terminal diagnosis. Reflecting on why her breast cancer did not provoke the same feelings of anger, disbelief and dread, Sedgwick supposes that she recognised – somehow – that the paranoid position would take too much: "I knew for sure that the paranoid/schizoid was no place I could afford to dwell as I dealt with the exigencies of

[68] Ibid, 137.
[69] Ibid, 130.
[70] Ibid, 130.
[71] Ibid, 137.
[72] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 638.
[73] Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein," 638.
[74] Ibid, 639.

my disease."[75] Instead she found in Buddhism something that could sustain, and moving away from paranoia, she came instead to something more "productive," more "pleasurable," more "relational" – the quest to turn bad into good: to the reparative.

Reparative reading depends on the realisation that "good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level."[76] It is not a denunciation of the critical or a denial of the potential harms caused by persons or of texts, but it breaks the link between this awareness and a certain kind of action – between axiom and imperative:

> For someone to have an unmystified view of systematic oppressions does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To be other than paranoid… to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does *not*, in itself, entail a denial of the reality of the gravity of enmity or oppression.[77]

In Ricoeur's terms, we remember that the second naiveté is not the same as the first naiveté. It is not pre-critical belief without reflection and it does not exclude critical explanation or interrogation. But neither does it allow suspicion to be totalising. The second naiveté will "complement critical methods with the restoration of meaning which would otherwise be excluded."[78]

3.2 Need

So we have seen that post-critique need not be incompatible with critical movements, but is it really needed in feminist Biblical interpretation? This section examines the status of suspicion in feminist hermeneutics arguing that its increasing dominance has indeed come to have limiting effects on the field.

Feminist Hermeneutics as Activism

The link between academic work and activism is explicit in feminist Biblical interpretation. Schüssler Fiorenza's *Wisdom Ways* describes the movement thus:

> Feminist Biblical scholars are part of a social movement and hence must articulate the values and perspectives of this movement as theoretical frameworks for critical investigation and study of the Bible… becoming a feminist interpreter means shifting your focus from Biblical

[75] Ibid, 640.
[76] Ibid, 637.
[77] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.
[78] Buzási, "Paul Ricoeur and the Idea of Second Naivety," 44.

> interpretation construed as an ever better explanation of the text to Biblical interpretation as a tool for becoming conscious of structures of domination and for articulating visions of radical democracy that are inscribed in our own experience as well as in that of texts.
> A textual reading or contextual analysis must be judged as to whether it is empowering to wo/men in their struggles for survival and transformation. This pragmatic criterion for ethical and theological evaluation is justified because feminist studies in general and feminist Biblical studies in particular owe their existence and inspiration not to the academy but to social movements for change.[79]

Schlusser Fiorenza's account here is representative – the link between feminist Biblical interpretation and feminist activism is routinely made. Other more recent examples include Barbara Reid's *Wisdom's Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures,* Nicola Slee's *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology,* and the 2017 edited volume *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality.* These three works represent scholars from different areas of Biblical and theological work, with differing approaches, methods, and perspectives. All agree that feminist theology and Biblical interpretation aim to *do* something – "to contribute to a world in which gender justice and equality are a reality and not merely an elusive dream."[80]

That feminist interpretation is activism arises from the recognition that all other interpretation is activism of a sort, too. The reason suffragettes like Cady Stanton and Sarah Grimké turned their attention to the Bible was because they recognised its power to determine political, social and personal relations. It is essential to recognise, too, that feminist interpretation has had significant influence over interpretation of the Bible in both the academy and the church such that powerful progress has been made. Arguments and interpretations readily accepted in Grimké's day no longer stand. Culture has changed, and so has Christian theology. Feminist interpretation has proved its worth.

That said, feminist work – on the Bible and in society at large – is very far from finished. There is much ongoing work in feminist interpretation and theology on a range of important issues like trauma, abuse, sexual violence, masculinity and femininity, and much more. Intersectionality has broadened feminist work in essential ways too. However, although many of the broad gains of feminist interpretation have filtered down to churches and to regular Christian women, the increasing gap between academic Biblical studies and every-day church

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[79] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbit Books, 2001), 3, 6.

[80] L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp, "Introduction," in *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, eds. L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 7.

goers means that its gains are diminishing. Academic work in general, and academic feminist Biblical interpretation in particular, is becoming increasingly specialised and atomistic. It is also becoming less and less anchored to traditional theological accounts of the Bible, especially to canonical or theological modes of reading. But for feminist critical interpretation to function as activism for Christian women (not only post-Christian women) it needs to remain connected to ways that Christians read the Bible *as* Christians. If feminist reading strategies only operate in post-Christian modes then they will not be perceived as liberative for Christian women who wish to remain within Christian traditions which continue to uphold the Bible as the authoritative Word of God.

The Dominance of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

The hermeneutics of suspicion is not only common practice in feminist Biblical interpretation, it is its explicitly stated foundation. Further, it is commonly stated that the Bible serves patriarchal interests not just accidentally but deliberately.[81] If the Bible is deliberately and inherently patriarchal, then there is no "neutral" reading or use. Feminists must treat the Bible as a human work – *man's* work – recognising that it reflects and reinforces male interests, and works against women's interests. A hermeneutics of suspicion is appropriate to the Bible because the Bible is not "trustworthy evidence of human history, culture, [or] religion."[82] Instead it actively eliminates, distorts, curtails, and proscribes the actions and lives of women – both those written about, and those who read it. Thus the feminist reader must "read against the grain." For Schüssler Fiorenza, the live question in feminist Biblical studies is not to what extent the Bible is patriarchal, but to what extent (if any) it can function as a spiritual resource in women's lives today.

So, notwithstanding the increasing depth and breadth of feminist scholarship today, and the recognition of the need for diverse and intersectional approaches, suspicion remains the foundational commitment. And although we have acknowledged a spectrum of feminist theoretical approaches to the Bible, the majority of academics who explicitly identify *as* feminist theoreticians represent the more radical end of that spectrum. The many scholars who represent more moderate approaches are less likely to identify as or be classified as "feminist

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[81] For example see Barbara E. Reid, *Wisdom's Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 9. She writes: "A third step is to question who wrote the text, for whom, in what circumstances, and with what purpose. Here it is important to acknowledge that the books of the Bible have been written, for the most part, by men, for men, about men, and to serve men's purposes."

[82] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,* 29.

interpreters" or "feminist theologians" due to assumptions about what that label describes. The hermeneutics of suspicion is so dominant that not being suspicious enough is tantamount to not being feminist enough. When Fiorenza describes the work of prominent and influential early feminist scholars such as Sarah Grimké, Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible, and even Rosemary Radford Ruether, she concludes that in the end these – and by extension, others – are (even if unwittingly) "neo-orthodox,"[83] "Christian apologists"[84] whose work "serves more to rescue Biblical religion from its feminist critics than to develop a feminist historical hermeneutics"[85] and "is in danger of using a feminist perspective to rehabilitate the authority of the Bible, rather than to rehabilitate women's Biblical history and theological heritage."[86] On this view, women readers who do not adopt a wholly suspicious stance are not only naïve but complicit: by accepting, studying, and representing the Bible on its own terms, they become active participants in women's oppression.

The double movement calls the reader through the critical distance of suspicion and back around to inhabit something constructive. But, we might ask, is not Christian feminist Biblical criticism and theology already constructive? And has not it alwayy's been so? Attached to its texts and invested in their interpretation and its results, feminist criticism is necessarily two pronged – de-constructive and re-constructive. Texts are reinterpreted, the Bible itself is re-framed, and its place in women's lives reconsidered as feminist scholars seek to articulate a life-giving vision. I argue, however, that while feminist work has always had constructive elements, these are not properly classified as a form of post-critique, certainly not a "second naiveté." The dominant feminist constructive mode is not a return to trust or to the revealed, because when it builds, what it builds is not the "world of the text." In fact, this is the element most assiduously avoided. As we shall see in chapter 4 in the work of Amy-Jill Levine and in the examples that follow, typically feminist interpreters are interested in the world behind or beneath the text, and in the lives of women and communities of faith today. But it is precisely the "world of the text" or the grain of the text that is considered so problematic. For this is precisely where the sexism, patriarchy and androcentric bias are found. Let us briefly consider two examples, in the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and the recent edited volume *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*.

[83] Ibid, 17.
[84] Ibid, 8.
[85] Ibid, 19.
[86] Ibid, 21.

Schüssler Fiorenza

In *Bread Not Stone* Schüssler Fiorenza develops a multidimensional model of feminist Biblical interpretation which includes four techniques: a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of proclamation, a hermeneutics of remembrance, and a hermeneutics of creative actualisation.[87] While all four allow the feminist critical community to engage the church's Scriptures for the purpose of women's liberation in positive, creative and constructive ways, none of them can be said to build out the "world of the text" itself. Schüssler Fiorenza's approach will see and name the text "on its own terms" so to speak, but it will not "receive it" as such, if by that we mean allow it to teach, challenge or change us on those terms (appropriation). Whatever revelation arises from these approaches, it is emphatically not coming directly from the world projected by the text, but from interpretation which unpicks, denounces, challenges, or subverts these.

The *hermeneutics of suspicion* "takes as its starting point the assumption that Biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions"[88] and then searches for what is lost behind and beneath these. A *hermeneutics of proclamation* demands that only those texts "that are identified as transcending their patriarchal contexts and as articulating a liberating vision of human freedom and wholeness should receive their proper place in the liturgy and teaching of the churches." Those identified as sexist and/or patriarchal, should not be proclaimed, read or used in Christian worship or catechesis, instead they "must be denounced."[89]

The *hermeneutics of remembrance* takes a slightly different approach to texts judged to be sexist or patriarchal. Here, those texts are retained, their problematic nature revealed and described as clearly as possible, and the oppression of women is told *in memoriam,* as an act of solidarity and truth-telling. Within the stories of women's abuse and mistreatment are also glimpses of women's struggle, resistance and agency. We also remember those women whose stories are not told, are curtailed or revised and those women whose practice is delegitimated by the Bible's teaching. Lastly, a *hermeneutics of creative actualisation* is a constructive project which "allows women to enter the Biblical story with the help of historical imagination, artistic recreation, and liturgical ritualization."[90] This necessitates a move away from the text and its world, to re-imagine, retell, reformulate, and to amplify the "feminist remnants that

[87] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15.
[88] Ibid, 15.
[89] Ibid, 18.
[90] Ibid, 20.

have survived in patriarchal texts."[91]

Schüssler Fiorenza is explicit that what is revealed by these processes and can "become" Holy Scripture does not arise from the text itself, but from the results of its transformation through the feminist critical interpretative process in the context of women-church. In her own work, it is not what the text reveals (builds) but what it hides that offers the liberative vision for women. This is a constructive impulse, but not a reparative one, at least, not toward the texts of the Bible itself.

Intersectional Approaches

Schüssler Fiorenza's work is foundational for the discipline, but it does not necessarily represent modern approaches in feminist hermeneutics. So for a second example we turn to a more recent edited volume. *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality* is a 2017 volume in the Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies series. It provides an important snapshot of the status of feminist work in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and includes an introductory retrospective chapter by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld and a future oriented postscript by Elna Mouton. Contributors were asked to reflect on the question: "What constitutes the feminist framework with which you read the Hebrew Bible?," and to choose one Hebrew Bible text to illustrate their approach.[92]

A number of authors in the volume explicitly cite Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion as the starting point for their work. They also describe the ways in which the intersectional framework builds on this. As the editors note in their introduction, feminist Biblical scholarship "increasingly occurs at the intersection of methods such as postcolonial and queer Biblical interpretation."[93] Approaches and results are increasingly diverse, embracing ambivalence and ambiguity, and in many cases challenging "traditional" feminist readings or analyses. "Intersectional thinking proposes that one cannot focus on gender in isolation but needs to understand it as part of a complex constellation of factors that include, among other things, race, class, sexual orientation, social location, geography, and disability."[94] This work remains strongly critical, reminding us that there are many layers of power and oppression yet to be uncovered. Intersectional analysis complicates binary thinking about power relations and complexifies the portraits of women in Biblical texts, revealing the ways

[91] Ibid, 21.
[92] Claassens and Sharp, "Introduction," 2.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid, 4.

that women too collaborate and participate in the oppression of the "othered" – other women, foreigners, and even the earth. Reader "locatedness" is also increasingly specific.

What does constructive feminist work look like here? Where is the vision of and power for liberation found? It is unclear. When ethical concerns are at the forefront the Biblical text's contribution is treated merely as a prompt. According to such approaches, the text's own perspective must be resisted, though exposure of its dynamics may aid discovery of the same in our own lives and contexts. Some chapters do not mention God/YHWH at all. Mostly God's role is as authoriser of man's own sexism, racism, and colonisation. If there is a common thread, it is a call to women to consider the complexities and ambiguities of their own moral positions and powers. Intersectionality is an important and productive development in feminist Biblical interpretation, but it is fundamentally and necessarily a critical mode. It is not a pivot away from but an expansion of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Yet such scholarship may prompt us to wonder, with Claudia Camp, if this is all it has to offer then "why do we *keep* a Bible, and should we stop reading it?"[95] Camp does not answer her own question, though states clearly that the Bible's stories must not be accorded any authority "beyond what any other story would hold."[96]

Thus far we have seen that feminist Biblical interpretation is synonymous with activism and increasingly governed by suspicion. As such, whether feminist Biblical interpretation has any room for a reparative return to the Bible is not clear. Certainly many think not. Several essays in the above volume are explicitly critical of earlier "glass half-full"[97] feminist work. Intersectional feminism must become more critical, they argue, not less. Jacqueline Lapsley offers a similar evaluation when reflecting on the volume *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, and Strategies.* She cites authors in that volume who celebrate feminist Biblical scholarship's move away from theological commitments, and their characterisation of those who bring them as biased. Though early feminist approaches in the 1970's and 80's included a number of scholars with theological commitments offering "reformist" or "revisionist" perspectives, such work has since become a minority. Lapsley concludes: "Milne views the future of feminist Biblical scholarship as a happily non confessional endeavour."[98]

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[95] Claudia V. Camp, "Daughters, Priests, and Patrilineage: A Feminist and Gender-Critical Interpretation of the end of the Book of Numbers," in *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible*, 177.
[96] Camp, "Daughters, Priests, and Patrilineage," 189.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word,* 5.

Debate around the extent to which the reparative impulse is appropriate in feminist Biblical interpretation has existed since the days of the first *Women's Bible*, in the tension between the reformist and the revolutionary models of Sarah Grimké and Elizabeth Cady Stanton respectively. But as Sedgwick has identified, a hermeneutic of suspicion has a tendency to push out other possibilities. Claudia Camp articulates the predicament of the feminist-critical scholar thus:

> Why could a feminist interpreter not escape the tyranny of the past, appropriating Woman Wisdom in a new and empowering way for women of today? But, again, a more subversive feminist voice returned with its challenge: didn't my use of the text for a liberating empowerment of women also, in the same move, reinscribe textual authority for oppressive purposes?[99]

What Camp articulates here is the insidious spread of the suspicious mode. No return is possible because any and all use of the text – even for ostensibly liberative purposes – continues to participate in the oppression of women by upholding the Bible's authority. Here perhaps we have arrived at the sticking point. Though the limits of the suspicious mode with regard to Biblical interpretation are becoming clearer, so are the risks of any attempt to move away from it. Feminist Biblical interpretation faces a special challenge not present in general hermeneutics or literary studies: The challenge of authority.

3.3 The Challenge

We have now arrived at the point some readers may feel we have been avoiding. When it comes to the Bible, in comparison to other types of literature, the stakes are higher. Texts collaborate to build culture, to normalise power, to narrate identity and so on. But for the most part they do so subtly. And readers are – at least theoretically – free to resist them. But the normative status given to the Bible's teaching, and its role as an authority for life and practice in the church give it a different kind of power. For most people it might be of some interest but of little real importance what Thomas Hardy's views on women's roles are. For many it is of great importance what God's are. The Bible's status as Scripture, the traditional claim that it is, somehow, the Word of God and authoritative for life and faith mean that it lays claim to a different status. To allow the text to confront us "on its own terms" – even after some time in critical interrogation – is to risk re-inscribing not just the Bible but also its patriarchy as

[99] Camp, "Daughters, Priests, and Patrilineage," 178.

authoritative. Fiorenza writes: "In short, if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and dehumanization."[100]

This is why it has been so important for feminist scholars to challenge the idea of the Bible as the Word of God. One strategy has been to suggest that the problem lies in the Bible's history of interpretation, not in the Bible itself. This was the argument of suffragettes Sarah Moore Grimké, Lucretia Mott, and Frances Willard, and the reason for their push for women to study Greek and Hebrew and to translate and interpret the Bible for themselves.[101] Since that time, however, despite significant strides in depatriarchalising in translation and interpretation, it has only become clearer that the text of the Bible itself reproduces and does not always explicitly challenge patriarchal elements of the cultures it reflects and describes.[102] If patriarchy is built into the structures of the text and of the religion, what then?

Letty Russell wrote that the Bible "is not considered to function as the Word of God, evoking consent or faith, if it contributes to the continuation of racism, sexism, and classism… the Biblical text can only be considered to function as God's word, compelling our faith, when it is nonsexist."[103] For some feminist interpreters this means that the Bible has no inherent connection to God, or to God's designs and desires for humankind at all. Critical work aims to delegitimise its power. On this view, feminist scholarship is a kind of harm minimisation. But Camp's questions loom especially large for this view: "why do we *keep* a Bible, and should we stop reading it?"[104]

For many, the answer is simply that there have been and continue to be many women for whom the Bible is not only challenging but also nourishing. Women do expect to hear and encounter God through the Bible's stories and teaching, and they experience it as life-giving. Letty Russell writes:

> The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of New Creation that impels my life… Perhaps it would seem more useful to give up on the Bible as a normative source of my theology, but

[100] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone,* xii

[101] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,* 11-12.

[102] Images such as Israel as the unfaithful wife, the seeming lack of concern for women's perspectives in most stories, that Jesus chose only male disciples, and so on.

[103] Letty M. Russell, "Introduction," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 16.

[104] Camp, "Daughters, Priests, and Patrilineage," 177.

> I don't seem to be able to do that.[105]

This ambivalence that persists in women's experience of the Bible suggests to me that there is a need for reparative reading in feminist scholarship. To exclude it would be – ironically – to dismiss women's experience. Those with theological commitments are said to be biased interpreters, but the presumption of God's absence is just as much a limiting presupposition as belief in his presence.[106] What is more, this stance will make it more likely that the results of feminist scholarship on the Bible will grow increasingly disconnected from the lives of women who continue to read and study the Bible in religious communities with explicit religious commitments. As Ricoeur so clearly saw, the hermeneutics of trust is the hermeneutic stance of the phenomenology of religion. Reparative reading offers resources that suspicion cannot. This recognition and a yearning for something beyond what is offered by the critical mode is apparent in Sharon Ringe's comments on the story of the Canaanite Woman (Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew15:20–28):

> The disciplines of Biblical criticism have taught me to approach those questions by working backward through the stories as they are presented in the Gospels, much like peeling away the layers of an onion. The problem I met, however, was that working through the disciplines of source, form, and redaction criticism led to treating the text like an onion, whose bite and flavor is in the layers but which has no core, as Katharine Sakenfeld points out in chapter 4. I learned from those layers, and from the process of examining them… But the formal disciplines of Biblical criticism left me on my own just when the only place to move was into the crucible of the story, where its power to confront and to transform could begin to work.[107]

Ringe appears to be searching for something reparative – something with the "power to confront and transform." Having travelled the hermeneutical arc through the critical mode, she is aware of its limits and ready for something more. But from where does the Bible's power to confront and transform come?

Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis has described changing trends in Biblical interpretation as representing "a generational difference in our perceptions of where the present struggle is for the church as it attempts to read the Bible as the word of God."[108] Davis and her colleagues

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[105] Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 138,140.
[106] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word,* 5.
[107] Sharon Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* ed. Letty Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 66.
[108] Ellen F. Davis, "Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church," in *The Art of Reading Scripture,* eds., Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 10.

at The Scripture Project (the group behind the book *The Art of Reading Scripture*) argue that the modern church's most fundamental need is to "learn again to read and teach the Bible confessionally within mainstream North American and European Christianity."[109] She goes on:

> An earlier generation of Biblical scholars rightly perceived that people who read the Bible were looking for theological meaning but did not take with sufficient seriousness the historical character of the Bible – or, more likely, knew nothing of it. The challenge facing that generation was to demonstrate convincingly how it is that 'the words of Torah [come to us] through human language,' as the ancient rabbis said: how deeply the Biblical texts are embedded in a particular culture; how they reflect current events; how they are shaped and in some ways limited by the Zeitgeist as well as by the Holy Spirit.
> I am myself profoundly indebted to this historical work and draw upon it daily in my teaching. Nonetheless, in the present intellectual climate, I believe the Bible is often read 'too historically' – that is, too narrowly so. Many students in mainstream Protestant seminaries study the Bible as if its aim were to give us insight into ancient ideologies and events. Yet a confessional reading sees in the Bible a different aim: first of all, to tell us about the nature and will of God, to instruct us in the manifold and often hidden ways in which God is present and active in our world; and second, to give us a new awareness of our selves and our actions, to show us that in everything, we have to do with God. In a word, the Bible's aim is to do theology.[110]

Is it possible that Davis's description narrates changing needs in feminist interpretation too? A reparative turn does not repudiate all the gains of critical textual work, but can acknowledge that the status of the Bible in the Christian church requires something more. If indeed our goal is truly to approach understanding – of the texts of the Bible, of ourselves, of others, and our world – then we must acknowledge, with Ricoeur, "the insufficiency of the critical methods in themselves."[111] To do more, Jacqueline Lapsley argues, we must recover an interest in the Bible as theology. Against the feminist assumption that patriarchy is the Bible's "*defining* characteristic" Lapsley argues that "(1) the defining feature of the Bible… is that, in a complex way, it is a word from God for the church; and (2) the task of interpretation is to better hear and understand that word."[112] From those assumptions, she suggests, "It is possible to reflect both on the patriarchal nature of the text and on what else might be going on in the text that people who understand themselves as Christian and as feminist would benefit from hearing."[113]

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[109] Davis, "Teaching the Bible Confessionally," 9.
[110] Davis, "Teaching the Bible Confessionally," 10-11.
[111] Buzási, "Paul Ricoeur and the Idea of Second Naivety," 55-56.
[112] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word,* 4.
[113] Ibid.

The success of post-critique in feminist Biblical interpretation and theology will depend, I suggest, on the overcoming of false antinomies. We must resist the either/or. Sedgwick argued that the reparative impulse depends on the realisation that "good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level." In the next chapter we turn to consider some ways of reading that allow us to engage with the Bible similarly.[114] But before that, we conclude this chapter with some more detailed consideration of the nature of the Bible. Of course, our assumptions about *what the Bible is* impact how we read it and why. I will argue – against the tide of feminist Biblical scholarship – that it is precisely the Bible's status as the Word of God that opens the possibility for it to become a powerful and positive force for women's liberation. Feminist readings which participate in the either/or preclude the possibility of hearing God in the text of Scripture, and therefore of claiming God's authorisation and power for the liberation of women. On the other hand, readings which can recognise the patriarchal biases of the Bible's cultures as part of the gradual unfolding of God's redemptive purposes in human history, can offer reinterpretation in light of the entire message of the Bible and God's overarching plan to restore all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10).

4 A Doctrine of Scripture for a Feminist Double Movement

Sedgwick wrote that "to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does *not*, in itself, entail a denial of the reality of the gravity of enmity or oppression."[115] It seems possible then for the feminist interpreter to choose the reparative mode even as she acknowledges and resists the sexism of the Biblical text. In the previous section I have shown something of the limiting effects of the dominance of the hermeneutics of suspicion in feminist Biblical interpretation, noting how it has explicitly – though perhaps illegitimately – precluded other modes of reading. In this final section I aim to explicate what is a fairly traditional doctrine of Scripture in a way that is consistent with the feminist critical enterprise, and can make space for the Ricoeurian double movement of suspicion and trust. Further, I will argue that to receive the Bible as Scripture and to claim that the Bible is (in some sense) the Word of God need not be a threat to feminist interpretation but a resource for it. For to consider the Bible as the Word of God is not to bind oneself to the "words of men" but to open up the possibility that through those

[114] Sedgwick's "inseparable" here is ultimately stronger than what I will propose. In what follows I try to articulate something more like the Reformation notion of *distinctio sed non separatio,* though the distinction is more than formal.
[115] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

words God can do more than their human authors intended. This section should not be considered an argument for a traditional doctrine of Scripture. Rather it is an explication of what I see such a doctrine might offer to feminist interpretation. It is also important to reiterate that reparative reading does not come at the expense of the critical but in complement to it. My aim here is to describe a doctrine of Scripture in such a way so as to make room for both.

4.1 The Bible as the Word of God

The central challenge for feminist Biblical interpretation is the Bible's traditional status as the authoritative Word of God: that men's words become God's law and patriarchy gets the divine stamp of approval. I contend however, that such a view misunderstands the traditional doctrine of Scripture. To view the Bible as the Word of God is to acknowledge it as simultaneously a human creation *and* as the medium through which God speaks. John Webster writes: "To talk of the Biblical writings as Holy Scripture is ultimately to refer to more (but not to less!) than those writings *per se*."[116] Letty Russell's starting point for developing her approach to Scripture was to assert that "the Word of God is not identical with the Biblical texts."[117] Traditional accounts agree: "the Word of God" refers not to the words themselves, but is the claim that through those words God speaks to us. To hear the Word of God in Scripture is to encounter something that transcends the humanness of the text, for it is to encounter God himself. If not, then God would be contained by creatureliness, and God's speaking would be circumscribed by our telling. "Holy Scripture," John Webster writes, "is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the Biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God's merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith."[118] The texts of the Bible, he says, "are subservient to the self-presentation of the Triune God."[119]

I am aware that to contend for a "traditional model" may win little favour from feminist critics. But my aim in delineating this double aspect of the Bible is to show that to accept the claim that the Bible is in some sense "The Word of God" is not to disallow the possibility of feminist criticism and suspicion. It is also to show that to approach the Bible with a degree of suspicion is not to rule out the possibility that through it God might still speak. This claim has

[116] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.
[117] Russell, "Introduction," 17.
[118] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 5.
[119] Ibid.

two equally essential elements. First, although discerning the divine discourse that is mediated through the Bible requires close attention to the texts themselves, God's speaking is not identical to the Bible's human discourse.[120] At least in some cases, this is patently obvious. In the Psalms humans speak to God, but God speaks through them to humans. Individual texts are interpreted as part of a larger whole (canon) and in light of the rule of faith. Traditional interpretation utilises tools such as allegory, typology, sensus plenior, and the four senses of Scripture. A trivial example perhaps, but Psalm 93:1 is now commonly interpreted in such a way so as not to force the reader to believe that the earth does not turn on an axis. So, to claim that Psalm 93:1 is God's Word is *not to* claim that God says the earth does not turn on an axis. Why? Because some distinction can be made between the meaning and force of the words, and the words themselves. Later parts of the Bible are used to clarify earlier parts in a process Ellen Davis calls "critical traditioning."[121] For Christians, the story of Jesus transforms interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: "we interpret Scripture rightly only when we read it in light of the resurrection."[122] Wolterstorff accounts for this as God's performing illocutionary acts by way of human locutionary and illocutionary acts. But God's acts and the human acts are not identical. The Bible's words, on this model, are transitive discourse.[123] Wolterstoff's own account is heavily reliant on speech-act theory, but other ways of explaining the relationship also exist. John Webster, for example, articulates the relationship under the term *sanctification.*[124] In any case, God's revelation or Word – though it is conveyed by means of the text, is an act of God not an act of the text. Revelation and Scripture are not strictly identical.[125] Revelation does not arise inherently from the text itself, but is the active self-presentation of the triune God.[126]

And yet – and this is the second, equally essential implication of our account – for revelation to occur it must occur in and through creaturely realities. Webster notes that "both naturalism and supernaturalism [in regard to Scripture] are trapped… in a competitive

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[120] For a thorough philosophical examination of the relationship between divine discourse and the human discourse of the Bible, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[121] Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 734.

[122] Richard B. Hays, "Reading Scripture in Light of the Resurrection," in *The Art of Reading Scripture,* eds. Ellen F. Davis & Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 216.

[123] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse,* 202-222.

[124] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 5-41. Here, sanctification refers to "God's activity of appointing and ordering the creaturely realities of the Biblical texts towards the end of the divine self-manifestation" (9-10).

[125] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 12.

[126] "Revelation is not an "intra-mundane" phenomenon." Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 15.

understanding of the transcendent and the historical."[127] What is needed, according to Webster, is a non-competitive relationship between the transcendent and the historical. This is particularly important for feminist hermeneutics. Feminist criticism tends to take seriously the historical realities of the Biblical text – indeed, it is axiomatic that the Bible reflects and reinforces the patriarchal cultures from which it arises. But much feminist criticism also accepts the competitive relationship between the transcendent and the historical. For feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, it is assumed that if the Bible is "the words of men" then it is *not* the Word of God. But if creatureliness excludes the possibility of the transcendent then no revelation is possible. Therefore, any doctrine of revelation requires acknowledgement of mediation, and acknowledgement of mediation does not exclude the possibility of revelation. For God to reveal himself to humans is to reveal himself through creaturely realities. It is necessarily to enter into a particular time and place, and be subject to its limitations as well as its possibilities. To take seriously the historical reality of Scripture is to recognise that the creatureliness of the text is neither external nor contingent.[128] To view the Bible as the Word of God, then, is not to divinise it,[129] but to recognise the texts of Scripture as the "fields of the Spirit's activity in the publication of the knowledge of God."[130]

Of course, many feminist interpreters do not rule out the possibility of knowledge of God altogether, they simply find the authority for this knowledge elsewhere. In much feminist interpretation and theology, authority lies in women's experience and women-church.[131] Rosemary Radford Ruether articulates this clearly in the opening pages of *Sexism and God-talk:*

> The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine.[132]

But as Phyllis Trible reminds us, even "prophetic movements are not exempt from sin."[133] Where does feminism find the criteria by which to judge itself? For Christians, recognition of

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[127] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 21.
[128] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 20.
[129] Ibid*,* 23.
[130] Ibid, 27.
[131] Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk,* 12-20; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons,* 75.
[132] Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 18.
[133] Phyllis Trible, "Five Loaves and Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 281.

the Bible's authority is, in part, a recognition of the need for an authority outside of the human mind, or as Ricoeur has said, the need to allow ourselves to be confronted by something other. All creatureliness is limited in its ability to fully represent or discern God, women-church as much as any other. Feminists too must acknowledge the limitations and distortions of human thinking and experience. Acknowledging this, Parsons writes, "that the man Jesus in particular can reveal something of what is authentic for all humanity generally…. Is surely a claim for an 'authority outside contemporary experience.'"[134] Thus *Christian* feminist theology and interpretation cannot assert the absolute authority of women's experience. Letty Russell developed a feminist account of the Bible's authority as "partnership" rather than "domination."[135] More recently, Sarah Lancaster has offered a narrative framework for thinking about Biblical authority which sees the authority of women's experience and the authority of Scripture as compatible and mutually enriching, and that can ultimately view the authority of Scripture, when properly understood, as of benefit.[136]

So far, I have stated that to view the Bible as the Word of God is to understand it as creaturely reality in the service of divine self-revelation. A non-competitive understanding of the relationship between the creaturely and the divine allows us to recognise the human elements of the Bible's production without reducing it to something solely human, and to leave room for God's speaking in and through Scripture without divinising either the object or the words. To view the Bible this way and to interpret for divine discourse is also to view the Bible as a whole – as canon – and to interpret accordingly. An important Protestant principle for Scriptural interpretation is that Scripture interprets Scripture. The reformed doctrine of Scripture, though perhaps responsible for some problematic developments in understanding the authority of the Bible, also offers resources. Here again, God's Word in and through any one part of Scripture is discerned with reference to more than those particular human words themselves. Interpretation involves convictions about the message of Scripture as a whole, about the nature of God and about what he might or might not intend. It involves judgements about how each part relates to other parts, assuming coherence and non-contradiction. In this way, a traditional understanding of the Bible as Scripture actually grants the interpreter access to a suite of hermeneutical resources which are not available to interpreters who reject any sort of theological unity in the Bible: canonical criticism, theological interpretation, Christological

[134] Parsons, "Feminist Theology as Dogmatic Theology," 118.
[135] Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," 144.
[136] Sarah Lancaster, *Women and the Authority of Scripture: A Narrative Approach* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 7.

reading, the rule of faith, or Augustine's rule of love. For Augustine, love of God is the goal of the Scriptures and interpretation must be governed by this principle. More than that, any and every part of Scripture is only properly interpreted (that is God's voice is only truly heard) if that interpretation promotes love of God and neighbour.[137]

It is worth noting, by way of example, how Augustine's rule of love functions differently to Ruether's method of correlation. Both articulate a critical principle which governs interpretation, but Ruether's feminist critical principle comes from outside the Bible and acts as its judge. For Ruether, Scripture itself nowhere articulates a full critique of patriarchy, though it authorises a modern interpreter to do so by offering a nascent tradition of critique of forms of social oppression which can and must be extended in our own day. This means that while the feminist tradition can appropriate the Bible, it cannot truly receive from it. Overall it pits Scripture against itself, and is not interested in Scripture beyond its correlation with the feminist critical principle. Augustine's principle, on the other hand, is a theological principle derived from the words of Jesus which functions to govern interpretation. Implicit in the principle – which is Jesus' own interpretation of the law – is the idea of Scripture's own self-critique and self-interpretation centred around the person of Jesus Christ. This means that individual parts of Scripture are not judged as either consistent or inconsistent with the principle and rejected or accepted thereby, but that all parts are only ever properly interpreted when they are known to be so. This is in fact, in many ways, a much more radical hermeneutical method. This assumes non-contradiction between the different parts of Scripture and commits to keep working until that can be seen to be the case. This means that interpretation of any passage of Scripture that does not promote love of God and neighbour is not God's Word, but remains still at the level of human discourse. In this method, no portion of Scripture needs to be jettisoned. It must be continually grappled with until God's meaning is discerned. Augustine is clear that our interpretations can fail to render God's intention. So, just as the true meaning of the law is love of God and neighbour, so proper interpretation of (God's discourse through) Old Testament narrative (for example) need not be restricted to its historical particularities and perspectives. Though Augustine's own conception of "love of God and neighbour" would not have included the feminist promotion of the full humanity of women in the way that is now understood, others have since seen the Bible to be progressively unfolding such a vision. Because of the continuous circular process of interpretation which must be undertaken on this

[137] Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Teaching* 1.84-95, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26-28.

model, such a vision is able to inform our understanding of God's perspective in earlier parts of Scripture too. And thus, when interpreting passages which do not seem to promote the full humanity of women, it is possible to grasp God's intentions through those passages as something over and above their own perspective.

Finally, to view the Bible as Christian Scripture is to view it as a unity, and to recognise that revelation in Scripture is progressive and unfolding.[138] This is what authorises "reading backwards" and a multi-directional process of interpretation. It enables us to recognise that God's will and plan is progressively made known with "increasing and cumulative clarity" and that no one text represents the fulness of that plan.[139] The Apostle Paul reminds us that even now we see "only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). To read the Bible as Christian Scripture is to hold that "texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author…. Scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama."[140]

4.2 Hearing God's Word

Objections to the Bible as the authoritative Word of God often rely on a caricature of the doctrine of Scripture as a kind of naive fundamentalist literalism. But, as I have shown, this is a misrepresentation. In fact, I suggest, in many cases interpretations proffered as objectionable are themselves accepting a highly reductive version of the doctrine, and are therefore not actually interpretations consistent with it.[141] If so, it follows then, that they are not interpretations which can function as objections to it.

What I mean, in the broadest terms, is this: under the claim that the Bible is the "Word of God," the "Word of God" refers not to the events in the Bible or to its words, but to its *meaning* understood as divine communication.[142] Though this arises in the first instance from a particular human author and human audience, it is not limited to these. The Word of God is God's authoritative speaking to the church today. When Christians claim that God speaks

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[138] Peter Adam, *Written For Us: Receiving God's Words in the Bible* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 72.

[139] Adam, *Written For Us,* 72.

[140] The Scripture Project, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture," in *The Art of Reading Scripture,* 2-3.

[141] Sarah Lancaster notes the particular objection to "verbal inspiration," noting that this is often assumed to be what is meant by calling the Bible the "Word of God." Lancaster, *Women and the Authority of Scripture,* 45. I have not here discussed inspiration, but will simply note that it is not the only (or the best) understanding of what is meant by inspiration.

[142] As stated in chapter 1 I adopt a "communication model" of Scripture, which involves all of author, text, and reader in the production of meaning. "Meaning is the communicative intention of the author, which has been inscribed in the text and addressed to the intended audience for purposes of engagement." Brown, *Scripture As Communication,* 22.

through the book of Judges, for example, what they mean, I think, is that God's Word to us is the meaning of the stories as understood in the context of the canon, and in the light of the resurrection of Jesus. Seen this way God's Word pronounces judgement on many characters and events in this book, it does not give their sins the divine stamp of approval.[143] Yes, this meaning arises from and is inseparable from the words of the stories. But it is not the words, actions, characters, or events themselves. Nor is it limited to one single, static formulation.

If I am right, then feminist interpreters who object to the Bible as the Word of God on the grounds of the androcentrism, male bias, and disregard for women seen in its pages, in many cases object on faulty grounds. This is because they object based on interpretations of the Bible which are not consistent with the model of Scripture they reject. Nicola Slee, for example writes that "we cannot read these texts as holy Scripture in the sense that we cannot share their evaluation of women or their ethical perspective."[144] The critical question though, is *whose* evaluation, *whose* ethical perspective? Slee goes on, "For how can the Bible be the Word of God if it commands and legitimates female suppression?"[145] But again, *who* commands, and how? We cannot prove the falsehood of the doctrine based on interpretations which do not function on its terms. To view the Bible as the Word of God means to read for God's communication. On a Christian reading, at least sometimes, God's communicative act is different from the original author's intended meaning – which authorises and encourages us to look for where else this might be so.[146] On a Christian reading, Old Testament events, characters, and law foreshadow the gospel of Jesus Christ, but do not contain its full expression. To reject the Bible as the Word of God based on patriarchy seen in its pages requires us to show that the promotion of patriarchy is God's intended meaning for the church. But as many interpreters have worked hard to show, when the Bible is read theologically, canonically and Christologically we have many reasons to insist quite the opposite.[147]

And thus interpretations which do not look for God's meaning are no ground for objection

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[143] Jacqueline Lapsley, Mary Evans and Phyllis Trible all note the internal critique of patriarchy offered by the narrator, Old Testament intertexts which reinforce this, the "critical traditioning" of canonical ordering, as well as some Christological connections. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word,* chapter 3; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 84-87; Mary Evans, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

[144] Slee, *Faith and Feminism,* 20.

[145] Ibid, 23.

[146] For example, Christian readers consider Old Testament law as authoritative Christian Scripture without understanding that to mean that Christians must obey Old Testament laws.

[147] Several examples have been offered in this work so far. On the book of Ruth, for example, see Richard Bauckham, "The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic"; Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

to the idea of God's speaking. This is simply the point, hinted at already, that to see the Bible as only about patriarchy is reductive. To read for fullness is to read for more than this. Ruether wrote that "all significant works of culture have depth and power to the extent that they have been doing something else besides justifying sexism."[148] This is no less true of the Bible than it is for other works of culture. The Bible has had and continues to have power in women's lives because though it contains examples of patriarchy, bias and sexism, it is not ultimately *about* these things.

Wolterstorff concludes that to interpret the Bible as and for the Word of God is to interpret for more than the human discourse, it is to seek God's illocutionary acts. Vanhoozer views it as seeking the perlocutionary aspect of communication. In both cases to read the Bible as Scripture is to read for more than the human locutionary and illocutionary acts. Hand in hand with our understanding of the meaning of particular words, sentences, and portions of the Bible and our investigations into what human authors might have intended by their writing of them, we carry our "convictions concerning the probabilities and improbabilities of what God would have been intending to say by appropriating this particular discourse-by-inscription."[149] To embrace a non-competitive relationship between the human and the divine in Scripture means we are not forced to choose between rejecting the Bible's status as the Word of God altogether due to its creatureliness, or submitting to the creaturely as though divine. Therefore I contend that feminist interpreters might choose to embrace an understanding of the Bible as the Word of God rather than reject it. For to do so is not to elevate the creaturely to the status of the divine, or to find oneself bound by the "words of men," it is to open up the possibility that God's speaking in Scripture is *more than* the "words of men."[150]

Conclusion

In this chapter we have interrogated the place of suspicion in feminist Biblical interpretation, recognised its limits, and sought a framework through which feminist interpretation might go beyond suspicion without repudiating its crucial critical work. It is important to reiterate that when Ricoeur used the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" (and in

[148] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "A Religion for Women: Sources and Strategies," *Christianity and Crisis* 39, no. 19 (December 1970), 309.
[149] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse,* 204.
[150] I recognise that a doctrine of Scripture needs an account of a number of elements not included here, perhaps chiefly an ecclesiology. However, my aim has not been to provide a full account or defence of the doctrine, but to articulate some implications of such a doctrine for feminist interpretation.

fact he did so rarely) it was always in order to place it within the hermeneutical arc, and to demonstrate its utility within a process of interpretation aimed at the restoration of meaning. Alison Scott-Baumann suggests that as the hermeneutics of suspicion has been taken up by others it has lost much of the nuance of Ricoeur's own conceptuality.[151] Ricoeur saw that suspicion describes the modern condition and is valuable, but it also tends toward hubris if not kept in balance. Scott-Baumann writes that "Ricœur's phrase 'exactly proportional' provides the cautionary note for much of this discussion; he explains the dangers both of an excess of suspicion and a dearth of suspicion to challenge our cultural lives."[152] And yet it seems that Ricoeur's phrase has at times been adopted without heed to this cautionary note. Feminist Philosopher of Religion Pamela Sue Anderson has made a similar observation about feminist theology: "It is a specific concern of mine that some feminist theologians have taken up a hermeneutics of suspicion as their method of feminist critique – without understanding the dual nature of Ricoeurian hermeneutics, of both faith (trust) and suspicion (mistrust) – and so, without the positive moment of faith there is no possibility of genuine dialogue."[153] Anderson saw that the positive movement of faith was essential for constructive feminist dialogue. Her critique of Daphne Hampson, for example, includes that Hampson's rejection of religious symbolism *in toto* arises from her consideration of masculinist symbolism for God as univocal. Transformation is not possible because the symbol signifies either everything, or it signifies nothing. On the other hand, a willingness to interrogate the meanings, the value, and the limits of the symbol opens up transformative possibilities.[154]

If, as Claudia Camp says, the stories of Scripture are not to be given any more authority than any other stories, then she is right to question why it be read at all. As we have seen, many feminist scholars engage with the Bible as just another resource among many to stimulate reflection. And yet, the Bible remains the Christian church's sacred text and the place where God's voice is sought and heard. Robert Jenson shows how outside an understanding of the Bible-as-Scripture, there really is no such thing as a Bible as a whole: "What justifies churchly reading of Scripture is that there is no other way to read it, since 'it' dissolves under other regimes."[155] The "Bible" has certainly been fragmented in feminist scholarship, but it has not

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[151] Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,* see especially chapter 4.

[152] Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,* 68-70.

[153] Pamela Sue Anderson, "Ricoeur in Dialogue with Feminist Philosophy of Religion," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 91, no. 1-2 (2015): 52-53.

[154] Pamela Sue Anderson, "After Theology: End or Transformation?," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 7, no. 1 (March 1993): 83-84.

[155] Robert Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 27.

yet been given up. And if it is not to be given up, then it is prudent to ask about methods for reading, and also about the aims and the fruits thereof. Ricoeur's concept of the second naiveté allows feminist reading to embrace both suspicion and trust, making space for "religious" reading within the feminist camp.

Thus far I have made the case for post-critique in feminist Biblical interpretation and outlined key foundational assumptions, but I have not defined or described its methods or its practice. In the next chapter we take a closer look at the practice of feminist reparative reading, both method and mood.

Chapter 3

Towards a Model for Feminist Reparative Reading

"The avoidance of love, in interpretation as in all other human activities, achieves an escape from pain only by embracing death."[1]

Introduction

If feminist hermeneutics is indeed to embrace a wider range of reading and interpretative strategies, what might that look like? And more importantly – if not characterised by a hermeneutic of suspicion, what makes them feminist? In chapter 2 we asked whether a feminist can consider the Bible the authoritative Word of God. In this chapter we fill out our picture of the possibility of a feminist second naiveté from the other side – with consideration not of God's speaking, but of our hearing. This consideration comes in two parts. First, we discuss some of the interpretive tools appropriate to such a conception of the Bible as Scripture. Second, we reflect on our model or image of the reader herself, in search of a paradigm which captures the dialectic of our hermeneutical model.

1 Critical Methods for a Feminist Second Naiveté

In order for feminist interpretation of Scripture to offer the kind of reparative possibilities that we are seeking, I propose to complement the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion with other methods of Biblical criticism. The feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, with its assumption that the Biblical texts reflect the patriarchal views and biases of its authors and their cultures, has often focused on getting to the world *behind* the text through techniques of historical criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and historical reconstruction. Conclusions about authorial intention are arrived at in order to be unpicked, and literary craft analysed in order to be dismantled. This attention to the social worlds behind the Bible – to omissions, assumptions, presuppositions and to biases (either explicit or implicit) – has helped us to see larger roles for

[1] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 34.

women in the Biblical worlds than the texts themselves consistently portray and than the history of interpretation has recognised. However, as we shall explore further in chapter 4, these techniques are explicitly focused on reading "against the grain." As such, they are not focused on hearing the text itself, its own priorities and message. I have already argued that the primary and defining feature of the Biblical texts is not their patriarchy but their function as the revelatory Word of God. And that, if so, then to read the texts only for their patriarchy or what it occludes is ultimately a reductive form of reading.

The three texts under study in this project are all from the Canonical Gospels – one from the Gospel of Luke, and two from the Gospel of John. As these are all narrative texts with explicitly theological purposes (Luke 1:1–4; Luke 24:45–48; John 20:31) I propose that a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion be complemented with other forms of textual criticism, in particular narrative criticism and theological interpretation. Interaction between these three methods can enable feminist hermeneutics to move beyond suspicion, to a feminist second naiveté. That is, to a willingness to listen, to understand, and to appropriate the world projected by the text, but where that projected world is acknowledged in all its complexity. I suggest that it is the narrative-theological approach itself which reveals the counter-traditions, gynocentric interruptions, and inner-Biblical traditioning already discussed. The narrative-theological approach also allows us to investigate the texts' illocutionary and perlocutionary acts and effects, and to read with an openness to divine encounter.

Because we are reading with feminist concerns, we will be particularly – though not exclusively – focused on the narrative characterisation of women and of women's discipleship, and on the implications of the text's theological claims for women. I aim to show that modern feminist critical concerns are indeed addressed by the text's own narrative and theological interests, sometimes quite radically, even as they still sometimes exhibit features of a patriarchal world. In fact, it is the presence of such narrative intentions and theological claims in and against such a backdrop that makes them so powerful and authorises reflection on further perlocutionary force.

In this section I provide a brief discussion of narrative criticism and of theological reading. It is not my aim to provide a full explanation of these methods and their features, which can be found readily elsewhere.[2] Rather, my own discussion is steered towards interaction with and implications for feminist reading.

[2] For an accessible introduction to narrative criticism of the Gospels, including its historical development, and key scholars, see Jeannine K. Brown, *The Gospels as Stories: A Narrative Approach to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

1.1 Narrative Criticism

In contrast to redaction, form, and historical criticism, narrative criticism is interested in a Gospel as a whole book, in its final form, as a narrative unity (a story), and in discerning its own primary concerns, particularly the likely "effects that the stories are expected to have on their audience."[3] Narrative criticism draws from the field of literary criticism, and attends to the "storied" form of the Gospels and their features. Attention to these storied features reveals that narratives must be examined at two levels: the story level, and the discourse level.[4] The story level includes the basic features which make up a narrative: setting, plot, characters. The discourse level recognises that authors deliberately tell and shape their stories in certain ways to communicate meaning. Examination of a narrative at the discourse level attends to literary devices which organise and frame the story, things like point of view, pacing, narration, dialogue, characterisation, and structure. All these elements reflect authorial choices, creating and limiting possibilities for meaning. Jeannine Brown summarises the story and discourse levels of a narrative as the "what" and the "how": "If the story level illuminates the "what" of the story (e.g., events), the discourse level focuses on "how" the story is told via rhetoric and stylistics. The discourse level involves the ways 'the implied author uses characters, settings, plot, and rhetoric to communicate meaning.'"[5]

Narrative criticism, then, views narrative texts as "forms of communication that affect those who receive or experience them."[6] Two central concepts here are that of implied author and implied reader. This approach seeks to derive the likely communicative concerns of the text from the text itself, rather than from the attempt to find the actual author and his or her historical situation and concerns. Implied author refers to "the perspective from which the work appears to have been written, a perspective that must be reconstructed by readers on the basis of what they find in the narrative."[7] So attention to the implied author involves attention to the *expressed* purposes of the narrative rather than reconstructions of the purposes of the "actual" author or redactor. The implied reader is "one who actualises the potential for meaning in a text, who responds to it in ways consistent with the expectations that we may ascribe to its

[3] Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation,* ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 240.
[4] This framework comes from Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).
[5] Brown, *The Gospels as Stories,* 14.
[6] Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 240.
[7] Ibid, 241.

implied author."[8] Attention to the implied reader thus invites a reader to enter the world of the text sympathetically and to read "with the grain" in order to determine the text's intended effect on its readers.

As we shall see, both of these moves are resisted by the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, which assumes that the text is hostile to women readers, that it reflects actual authors' deliberate and oppressive intentions, and that the real liberative message of early Christianity has been obscured. In my readings, I will take it that the Gospels' primary purposes are Christological, not patriarchal, and that to read with the grain is to read *first* for what the narrative reveals about Jesus and others in relation to him. This does not preclude other additional ways of reading – including suspicious reading – but I take it that if one refuses to read with the grain *at all*, then the texts' primary claims about Jesus cannot be adequately discerned. Behind this conflict is the question of how women can know *whether* and *in what way* the gospel of Jesus Christ includes them. Can this be discovered by reading "with" early Christian proclamation, or only, as it were, "behind" it? But while implied readers are "assumed to accept the value system that undergirds the stories they read"[9] (at least temporarily and for the purpose of understanding), the meaning of the narrative is not reduced to propagation of the value system of the text's historical and social world. Indeed, just as in many stories, the narrative tension of the Gospels and their key events of crisis and resolution are that the teaching and ministry of Jesus comes into conflict with religious, social, and political expectations in various ways.

Two implications of narrative criticism of the Gospels are worth drawing out explicitly here. First, that our texts must not be read in isolation but in the context of the Gospel as a whole, and with reference to its overarching aims and purposes. As readers we know more than the characters in the story and must read for the discourse level as well as the story level – that is, for the text's own implicit commentary or meaning-making via its literary features. This requires attention to structure, purposes, theology, literary techniques, and so on. Second, the flip side of our first point is that our individual texts also contribute to the whole, and to the overarching narrative unity and message. This means that just as we are required to read our text in light of its context, so this text forms the context for other parts of the Gospel, extending and deepening our readings of those. Richard Bauckham, for example, in his study of Gospel women suggests that although gynocentric narratives are rare, and explicit description of

[8] Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 242.
[9] Ibid, 244.

women's active discipleship might not be consistent throughout the entire narrative, when these do occur the reader is authorised to interpret the rest of the Gospel in this light. Referring here to Luke's Gospel, he writes, "if we read on from 8:1–3 in the company of Joanna and the other women, it will not be possible to read 10:1–20, where Jesus sends out the seventy-two disciples to participate actively in his own mission of preaching and healing, without assuming that the women are included among these disciples."[10]

Lastly, one of the features of narrative is its ability to encompass complexity and tension. There is never only one thing happening or one thing that can be said about a narrative text. Narratives invite us to look from different directions, to imagine the experience of different characters, to go back and see earlier parts differently in light of later parts, to be drawn along by misdirection and misunderstanding, sometimes to know more than characters, sometimes to know less. This means that "narrative theologising"[11] is a subtle art with multiple layers, connections, and concerns, each developing and interacting.

In each of the New Testament texts studied in what follows, I argue that a narrative-theological reading reveals a message that is liberative for women, and all the more so because it receives theological/Christological authorisation. I will argue that for women to "actualise the potential for meaning" of these texts under study is to work and speak for justice for women, to be invited into intimacy with Jesus in a status equal with men, to be called to proclaim the gospel of the resurrection, to receive and to carry the power and potential for newness and for healing through the Spirit of Christ, to be honoured as other than wife, mother, or sexual object, and to be released for mission. Vanhoozer is right that the implied reader of the Gospels is invited to be or become a disciple: "the implied reader of Scripture… 'is challenged to enter this world by becoming a disciple, a hearer of the word, a follower of Jesus.'"[12] Feminist opposition to reading "with the grain" argues that it invites us to share and to follow viewpoints, perspectives, and worldviews which we find objectionable. However, in each of the stories under study in this project, we are invited to enter in and to follow the example of brave, faithful, active, and vocal women disciples. To "follow" the text is to follow these women as they follow Jesus. In these stories women are presented as examples of discipleship, over against Jesus' male disciples. Their actions are actions to follow, their words proclaim the truth and must be heard and received by men. The men do not see clearly or do rightly until they

[10] Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies in the Named Women in the Gospels* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 200.
[11] This is a term borrowed from Brown, *Gospels as Stories,* 148.
[12] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?,* 381.

receive the women's testimony, and come to see what the women see. They are sent and affirmed by Jesus himself. Where a hermeneutics of suspicion is focused on deliberate exclusion and occlusion, narrative criticism focuses on deliberate inclusion, framing, and construction of meaning. It shows how taking the text's own cues rather than resisting them offers a more expansive and potentially transformative vision.

1.2 Canonical-theological Reading

Narrative criticism attends to the theological claims of a particular book of the Bible considered as a unified whole. But to view the Bible as Christian Scripture is also to recognise the formation and preservation of the canon, and to engage in canonical criticism. This invokes a kind of narrative and theological reading over and above the individual books of the Bible, viewing the canon itself as a unified and cohesive whole, in which the parts contribute to the whole and the whole informs interpretation of the parts. Recognition of the canon relies on certain claims about providence and ecclesiology. It also, at least in the more formally self-identified practice of this approach, often appeals to early Christian creedal formulations or to foundational Christian dogma as guides for interpretation. Robert Jenson, for example, states that the creeds are the church's "critical theory" for exegesis,[13] and R. B. Jamieson's *The Paradox of Sonship* adopts "classic Christology" as an interpretative toolkit to aid exposition of the book of Hebrews.[14] Canonical-theological reading promotes interpretation of the whole Bible in light of Jesus, as Jenson writes:

> What then would be the actual procedure of what might be called a 'creedal critical theory' for the reading of Scripture?… we should seek to discern a 'christological plain sense.' For indeed, Christ – as the creed tells us – is God's agenda in Scripture, and it is God whom we should always try to discern, as what the text before us 'really' imports.[15]

Traditionally, it might have been thought that it is precisely this sort of tradition-bound, historically focused, and dogmatic interpretation which is problematic for feminist readers. And it is true that neither the writers of the creed, nor the bulk of the mainstream Christian theological tradition have construed canonical-theological interpretation in ways which are suited to the feminist agenda. It is also true that most modern interpreters with an explicit

[13] Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 79ff.
[14] R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Apollos, 2021), 23.
[15] Jenson, *Canon and Creed,* 82.

interest in theological interpretation have little to no interest in feminist interpretation, or only refer to the discipline in order to refute a hermeneutics of suspicion. Thus far "Theological Interpretation of Scripture" (TIS) seems neutral to negative about feminism. A notable exception is Francis Watson's *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*, though we might note that this is now 30 years old.[16] Rowan Williams expresses some reservation about TIS's stated preference for the "pre-critical," helpfully exploring the limitations of such an approach and highlighting possible confusion about the role or conception of the *literal sense* in pre-modern exegesis. He is concerned with those forms of canonical criticism which impose homogeneity, lacking sensitivity to the diachronic and to the material elements of the narrative form of Scripture: time, space, history and culture. Intra-Biblical conversation ("conflict") should be not be too quickly resolved or flattened under claims of doctrinal unity:

> What I am suggesting here is that it is 'diachronic' reading of Scripture that gives us the 'interiority' of the text, and that this interiority is not a point of hidden clarity and security but a complex of interwoven processes: a production of meaning in the only mode available for material and temporal creatures. Synchronic reading of whatever kind relies on that suspicion of 'surface' phenomena that can make interpretation a systematic exercise in losing or ignoring the object, seeking the 'spirit' through the absence of the 'letter.'[17]

And yet, accounts of Scripture's unity from both Biblical scholars and theologians from the earliest days have always wrestled with how this unity is revealed and discerned amidst diversity. To claim the Bible as Christian Scripture is to claim that this diverse set of texts from different authors, times, places, cultures, perspectives, and purposes yet testifies to a coherent theological reality. The model of "narrative theologising" considered above must also be invoked here. Richard Hays explains:

> How does a dramatic narrative work? It will contain numerous voices, diverse characters, and many discrete scenes. It will unfold across time, and its words and images will gather denser significations as the plot develops. Consequently, its meaning can be grasped only when the totality of the action is considered from its endpoint. No one supposes that every character who speaks in a drama must represent the playwright's own point of view. For example, if we read the speeches of Polonius in *Hamlet* and think we are meant to accept everything he says, we are singularly bad readers of Shakespeare. Indeed, even the speeches of the hero do not necessarily articulate the full meaning of the play. On the contrary, the play's meaning comes

[16] Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).
[17] Rowan Williams, "The Literal Sense of Scripture," *Modern Theology* 7, no. 2 (1991): 129-130.

> to the audience through a complex interplay of character, speech, and action. The complexity of viewpoints in a drama is not necessarily a sign of incoherence; it may be instead a sign of the drama's depth of engagement with human life. The more complex the drama, the more is required of the audience by way of patient, mature, reflective reception. All of this is directly pertinent to our consideration of the problem of the unity of the Bible.[18]

On this model, scholars like Richard Hays and Richard Bauckham argue, Scripture's multivocality and polyvalence can be viewed positively rather than as an obstacle to unity. Different elements of Scripture each convey different aspects of the whole story. Each is insufficient on its own as "it can never be adequate to or exhaustive of the reality it renders."[19] This means that "the Bible's coherence cannot simply be read off the surface of the text as though it were self-evident to any impartial reader"[20] but requires close attention to *both* the detail of individual texts and to "the hermeneutical guidance of the distilled wisdom of a historically grounded interpretative community, the church."[21]

Daniel Treier develops an "evangelical dogmatics of Scripture" which wrestles with both the fixity and the freedom of the Bible's own hermeneutical self-presentation, acknowledging that "Scripture incorporates and regulates moral change within its form of moral coherence."[22] Arguing that "the coherence of Scripture's moral theology rests on reading salvation-historically,"[23] he cites several examples of developing, recontextualising, or changing moral norms,[24] as well as a nuanced view of where in the text the divinely-authorised moral perspective is to be found.[25] But it is precisely the fixed character of God himself that underlies this development. God's overall will remains the same, but must be continually re-expressed in new ways for new contexts. Underneath the unfolding salvation-history, God's character and "theology proper," Treier argues, remains the same. And while practitioners of theological interpretation might not be interested in feminist hermeneutics, I want to suggest that

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[18] Richard Hays, *Reading With the Grain of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 17.

[19] Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in Davis and Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture,* 43.

[20] Hays, *Reading With the Grain,* 20.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Daniel Treier, "The Freedom of God's Word: Toward an 'Evangelical' Dogmatics of Scripture," in *The Voice of God in the Text of Scripture,* eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 35.

[23] Treier, "The Freedom of God's Word," 36.

[24] Within the Old Testament this can be seen in the recontextualising of the law to new situations. More dramatic change is seen in the move from the Old Testament to the New: changing food laws and the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God are recognised as a change, but are also seen as the fulfilment and proper end of God's plan.

[25] Many of Scripture's characters, events, and words (e.g. those of Job's friends) are described here as "photographic negatives" – human perspectives which are described but are not to be adopted. Treier, 36.

theological reading under this sort of account of Scripture's unity and diversity offers a way for feminist interpreters to read the Bible as Scripture, claiming a consistent expression of the status of women and God's attitude toward them, despite a diversity of good and bad practice and historically-located enactments of God's will.[26] To claim this, we will need a textual foundation for such a primary doctrinal commitment. But if such a commitment *can* be found and articulated then, in line with the proposed practice of theological interpretation, it can be used as an ongoing interpretative key. Watson's engagement with feminist hermeneutics, building on the work of Phyllis Trible, offers just such a theological basis, not just for resisting patriarchy, but also for interpreting its presence within the Scriptures. We turn to this now.

Watson's *Text, Church, and World* devotes four chapters to feminist critiques of Scripture, engaging substantially with scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza, Ruether, Tolbert, Trible, and others. Watson is searching for a properly theological critique of patriarchy, arising from the text of Scripture itself, and finds it in a reading of Genesis 1–3.

> To demonstrate that the oppression of women does not have the first word, it is necessary to show that in the nexus of creation and fall there occurs a transition from an egalitarian intention to patriarchal reality. Patriarchy is not grounded in the ultimate order of things; it contravenes the creator's intention. The Biblical assumption is, however, that the tension between divine purpose and human reality is not permanent.[27]

Watson builds this account through exegesis of Genesis 1–3 and traces it in some detail through the Exodus narrative in order to show that liberation of women from patriarchy is acknowledged in the Bible's paradigmatic act of divine redemption:

> As far as the Old Testament, like the New, closes in the expectation of the universal, as yet unfulfilled act of deliverance, the inner-historical event of the exodus can be seen as an (admittedly fragile) anticipation of the event in which divine intention and human reality are definitely reunited. Patriarchy may fill up the interim, but it does not have either the first or the last word, and inner-historical anticipations of its final overthrow are to be expected.[28]

The core of Watson's account is that Genesis 1:27 represents God's original intention for equality between women and men, and that Genesis 3:16 is a secondary fallen reality: "the rule of men over their wives is, in the perspective of this story, a *secondary* development."[29] How

[26] It is interesting to note, for example, that in almost 35 issues of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* there is not a single article focused on feminism or feminist interpretation.
[27] Watson, *Text, Church, and World,* 191.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Watson, *Text, Church, and World,* 192.

this helps, hermeneutically, is that we can observe how instantly the story itself does not just narrate but embodies this secondary development. In Gen 3:22–24 the woman's presence is already subsumed under reference to "the man."[30] From this point on patriarchy is both real-world and textual reality. But if we accept the text's own explanation of this reality we are to see this as a diminishment of God's intentions for men and women. As the story goes on "a gap has opened up between the original intention and the subsequent reality, and the text not only *describes* that gap but also *enacts* it. The transition occurs at the moment when the woman is told, 'He shall rule over you' (3.16), and this dominance, with its implied silencing of an originally independent voice, *is accomplished by textual means.*"[31]

> The statement, 'He shall rule over you' faces in two directions, forwards and backwards. In its forward reference, it is a performative statement which ensures that the future of which it speaks will come to pass. That future is decreed not only for the first man and woman but also for their descendants…. All the complex ramifications of patriarchy stem from this sombre divine decree: the fate of Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, the Levite's concubine, Bathsheba and many others is already sealed… Yet the decree also has a backward reference, in the sense that it speaks of a state of affairs that is not original. It would have been straightforward enough to narrate the decree in connection with Eve's creation…. [but instead] patriarchal order [is] given this equivocal, unstable, secondary status which represents it as a necessary evil along with poisonous snakes, birth pains and backbreaking labour, evils which one seeks to minimise so far as possible[.] The Hebrew narrators were somehow able to transcend the all-embracing, self-evident patriarchal context in which they no doubt lived and worked, in order to assert that 'in the beginning it was not so.' If in its forward reference the decree determines the future, in its backward reference to a quite different divine intention manifested at the point of origin it places patriarchal ideology in potential crisis.[32]

Watson then argues that from a canonical perspective, this original intention expressed in Gen 1:27 can be viewed as a promise awaiting fulfilment, its possibility recurrently glimpsed as God moves to redeem and restore his people through history.[33]

Watson's account is obviously not the only way to construe things, but it provides a model of how canonical theological interpretation can inform feminist hermeneutics in useful ways. If subsequent expressions of patriarchal culture can be viewed as fallen reality which God enters in to in order to redeem and restore through the gradual and developing process of salvation-history, then they can be contextualised in a new way. Each story might have both

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[30] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 135.
[31] Watson, *Text, Church, and World,* 193.
[32] Ibid, 194.
[33] For Watson, this canonical perspective is based on the Pauline presentation of God's foundational promises in the Old Testament, particularly seen in Galatians 3-4.

"backward facing" and "forward facing" elements. This account provides an intra-Biblical critique of patriarchy, without demanding that all less-than-perfect expressions of God's original intention be excised from Scripture. These realities bear witness to the judgment on humankind, and to the need for redemption. This too can be God's Word for the world.

But there are other doctrinal commitments that feminists might make use of too. The doctrine of the Trinity – despite its masculine language – properly resists any attempt to masculinise or to sexualise God.[34] Early articulations of the doctrine of the Incarnation emphasised Christ's humanness, not his maleness. Theological consensus on these issues is sufficient to use these claims as guides for interpretation. And feminists can point out where mainstream readings assume, imply, or allow implications inconsistent with these doctrinal commitments. Vanhoozer concludes that the canon – and Jenson would add the creed – "functions as an instrument of ideology critique. The canon, moreover, calls for continued interpretation, a call that again puts into question the finality of human formulations (and institutions). Last, the canon provides an interpretive framework by which the past can illumine the present. The canon generates not an absolute, unchanging static tradition, but rather a dynamic tradition of critical reinterpretation."[35]

2 Models of Reading

In her book's second chapter, "Digging Down and Standing Back," Rita Felski offers these two descriptors as governing metaphors and paradigms of self-identity for the practitioners and practice of critique. The first image, digging down, describes what we most naturally and readily associate with the hermeneutics of suspicion as coined by Ricoeur, and as practiced in a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion such as that explored in chapter 4:

> Reading is imagined as an act of digging down to arrive at a repressed or otherwise obscured reality. Like a valiant archaeologist, the critic excavates a rocky and resistant terrain in order to retrieve, after arduous effort, a highly valued object.[36]

The second metaphor, standing back, though perhaps less straightforwardly recognisable as suspicious or symptomatic reading, describes forms of poststructuralism or deconstruction. Felski writes:

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[34] Janet Soskice, "Trinity and Feminism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 139ff.
[35] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning,* 380.
[36] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 53.

> The critic does not burrow down but stand back. Instead of brushing past surface meanings in pursuit of hidden truth, she stares intently at these surfaces, seeking to render them improbable through the imperturbability of her gaze. Insight, we might say, is achieved by distancing rather than by digging, by the corrosive force of ironic detachment rather than intensive interpretation. The goal is now to 'denaturalize' the text, to expose its social construction by expounding on the conditions in which it is embedded.[37]

This second type provides an apt description of the trauma hermeneutic practiced by Shelley Rambo in *Spirit and Trauma* that will be examined in chapter 5. While there might seem to be vast differences between these two schools in many respects, there are also more basic similarities. This is captured well by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their description of symptomatic reading as "an interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses."[38]

Rita Felski and George Steiner both note the essential detachment of this form of reading – the text at arm's length, the reader "above" or "outside."[39] How then might we image the reading practice of post-critique? Up-close rather than distant, open rather than controlling, under rather than over? As we turn to consider metaphors for the hermeneutics of trust, we stress again that this is the second naiveté and not the first. It is not naive credulity or submission to the text as it seems prior to critical reflection. The hermeneutics of retrieval is to return to allow ourselves to receive the world of the text as it arises from the process of critical distancing and enquiry. What we return to is more complex and so are we. In recognition of this more complex reality and of our particular feminist concerns, I am uneasy with traditional descriptions of the reader as in "submission" to, or as "servant to" the text.[40] Even if these terms are understood as operative only at the appropriation stage, we still require a process to work out what it is we are submitting to. Ricoeur's framework acknowledges the importance of the critical methods in this process, and assumes both moves (critical and receptive, explanation and understanding) are operative in the overall process of interpretation. Vanhoozer, in contrast, pays lip service to the hermeneutics of suspicion, but it is not clear when and how this

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[37] Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 54.

[38] Marcus and Best, "Surface Reading," 3.

[39] George Steiner, "Critic"/"Reader," *New Literary History* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 423-52.

[40] For reader as servant see Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?,* 402; Steiner, "Critic"/"Reader", 449. Though Vanhoozer explicitly repudiates an understand of this as "slavish obedience," he later also uses terms like obedience (436) and martyrdom (438). For submission, see Ricoeur: "To understand is to submit oneself to what the object means." ("Preface to Bultmann," 385). Vanhoozer's preferred image for the Christian reader is that of disciple, or follower (*Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 431ff*)*.

is supposed to operate if allowable only *after* understanding has been reached.[41] For Vanhoozer, the main "struggle" of Biblical interpretation is the struggle "between sense and self."[42] But here again he moves straight to Ricoeur's stage of appropriation, requiring the unmaking or dispossession of the reader by the world of the text. But how is the text's sense arrived at or discerned? Ricoeur shows that suspicion is a part of, and not opposed to, attending to meaning. Thus, what follows is the search for a metaphor for reading which can hold the tension – essential to the reparative impulse – between hope and fear, between risk and reward, between suspicion and faith. Something which practices trust without naivety, receptivity without submission, love without illusion. Unlike digging down and standing back, these images foreground the dynamic and interpersonal nature of reading, recognising the text as more than object, and therefore the reader as both actor and acted upon. And unlike submission, servant, or follower, these images highlight the active and interrogative stance of the feminist reader as she seeks to find and follow streams of living water.

Here we explore four metaphors for the practice of reading, building towards a construction which aims to capture the active and dynamic nature of a feminist second naiveté. We consider reading as hospitality (George Steiner), reading as love of neighbour (Alan Jacobs), reading as attunement (Natalie Carnes), and lastly, a hermeneutics of informed trust (Jacqueline Lapsley).

2.1 Hospitality – George Steiner

The first image that I want to explore as we seek to unfold a feminist reparative interpretation of the Bible is George Steiner's notion of the reader as offering hospitality to a text. Steiner famously contrasted critic and reader, a distinction he articulated in a number of ways, but summarily in the difference between "judicial authority" and "dynamic passivity."[43] The critic intends and maintains distance from an object to gain power over it, while a reader is involved with an "other," a "presence," which necessitates both giving and receiving. Like Ricoeur, for Steiner the end of reading is that the reader herself is the "one being read."[44] A reader is involved, impacted, transformed. The act of reading is an encounter with the transcendent.

In this image a reader is a receiver, in at least two senses of that word. The reader receives

[41] "In short, it is only legitimate to *overstand* a text once one has properly *understood* it." Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?,* 403.
[42] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning,* 406.
[43] Steiner, "Critic"/"Reader," 439.
[44] Ibid.

the text as does a host to a guest, with all the responsibilities that hospitality entails: to make welcome, to provide space, to attend, to listen. But in so doing the reader receives the text in a different way. She receives it also as a gift.[45] Something offered, intended, given; from which she is nourished and towards which – though this is a disputed point about gift-giving – she is answerable.[46] The reception of a guest creates both obligations and opportunities. It promises pleasure, it requires trust, and it carries risk: "As we shall note, the guest may turn despotic or venomous. But without the gamble on welcome, no door can be opened when freedom knocks."[47]

For Steiner, this mode of reception is required by the nature of the object. That is, reading has an ethical dimension. Specifically, a reader has responsibilities *toward* the text. We have discussed in the previous chapter the critic's sense of the ethical responsibility of writing about the text – the idea of the critic as activist that animates much ideological criticism. But according to Steiner, our first responsibility is to the text itself, to "meet the Other in all its singularity."[48] To be answerable to the text is to search out *its* meaning, which is to recognise: first, that it has one (that we do not create, but receive it); and second, that meaning relies on the assumption of a "real presence" in the text (or work of art or music etc).

This is Steiner's famous "wager on transcendence." His argument that meaning depends on the necessary possibility of God: "The conjecture is that 'God' *is*, not because our grammar is outworn; but that grammar lives and generates worlds because of the wager on God."[49] Whether God actually exists or not is not really the point, the point is that meaning depends on believing (as the subtitle of the book states) that "there is something in what we say." That there is some correspondence (however imperfect) between language and reality, between word and world. And that therefore when we understand, we understand *something*. What matters is not just that (or if) "there is something there," some "thing" that is referred to, but also the *act of trust* by the reader, who acts *as if* there is something there.[50] But this is exactly what is abandoned by Steiner's critic (whose exemplar is the deconstructionist). At the heart of the deconstructive enterprise, says Steiner, is this theological and metaphysical repudiation:

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[45] Ibid.

[46] See John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

[47] George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 156.

[48] Ricardo Gil Soeiro, "Introduction: The Wounds of Possibility," in *The Wounds of Possibility: Essays on George Steiner,* ed. Ricardo Gil Soeiro (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 7.

[49] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 4.

[50] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 229; Steiner, "Critic"/"Reader," 440.

there is no *Logos*, no "saying of being," no "being" in the word.[51]

Though it is not necessarily the Christian God that Steiner invokes, religious language, and specifically Christian language, pervades *Real Presences*. Incarnation, substantiation, transubstantiation – this is his language for the real presence:

> Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text (the piece of music, the work of art) *incarnates* (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) a real presence of significant being. This real presence, as is an icon, as in the enacted metaphor of the sacramental bread and wine, is, finally, irreducible to any other formal articulation, to any analytic deconstruction or paraphrase… To be 'indwelt' by music, art, literature, to be made responsible, answerable to such habitation as a host is to a guest – perhaps unknown, unexpected – at evening, is to experience the *commonplace mystery of a real presence*.[52]

There is "spirit" in the letter, presence in the word, "being" dwells in the text.[53] Ultimately, to read is to receive "that which comes to call on us."[54] The existence, or at least the assumption, of the presence in the text is what creates our obligations towards it and resists objectification. Notice how the image of host and guest, with its inherent anti-objectification, disallows certain modes of critique even as it recognises the limitations of its knowing:

> We realize full well that our comprehension, even as it deepens into intimacy, most particularly where it deepens into intimacy, will remain partial, fragmentary, subject to error and to revaluation. But this knowledge does not induce us to presume that the presence before us is one of spectral vacancy or falsehood. Nor, and this is of utmost relevance, does it prompt us to strip it bare, to dissect it in some brutal rhetoric or hermeneutic of total penetration and subjection.[55]

But what happens when the guest turns despotic or venomous? Must we receive all guests? Must we go on receiving guests when they prove themselves dangerous? Steiner offers little guidance here. When he speaks of risk it is the embarrassment of owning and trying to describe the ways in which we have been moved, that we have encountered mystery.[56] Hospitality, I

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[51] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 93.
[52] George Steiner, "Real Presences," in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 35.
[53] Steiner, "Critic"/"Reader," 440-441.
[54] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 179.
[55] Ibid, 176.
[56] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 179.

conclude, is not interrogative enough.[57]

2.2 Love of Neighbour – Alan Jacobs

Alan Jacobs takes Steiner's image of receiving a text as guest and gift – his quest to read with courtesy, or *cortesia* – and translates it into a theological register. With an account based on Jesus' "law of love" and Augustine's principle of charity, his theology of reading is "a hermeneutics of love."

A Theology of Reading is Jacob's attempt to describe and enact the answer to the question: "What would interpretation governed by the law of love look like?"[58] Though Jacobs is a literary scholar and not a theologian or Biblical scholar, this work takes as its foundation the thoroughly theological premise that Jesus' "law of love" (Matt 22:37–40) governs – for the believer – all of life's endeavours: "that there can be no realm of distinctively human activity in which Jesus great twofold commandment is not operative."[59] Jacobs sees his quest to read non-Christian literature "charitably," therefore, as a proper extension of Augustine's principle of charity as described in *De Doctrina Christiana.* A hermeneutics of love demands first and foremost, that books and authors "be understood and treated as neighbours."[60]

And so, like Steiner, for Jacobs this way of reading is necessitated not just by the ethical imperatives incumbent on every Christian believer in general, but is demanded also by the nature of the object. Following Nussbaum, Jacobs maintains that "there are some kinds of knowledge that are accessible to us only when we experience certain emotions, for example, love."[61] Only love offers a certain kind of attentiveness, productive of a certain kind of knowledge. Charitable interpretation requires the preservation, not erasure, of difference. It demands attentiveness. It registers – and will not reduce – a complex whole. Loving attention (as distinct from the close attention of deconstruction, for example) seeks a kind of faithfulness to the other: to "be true to" or to "do justice to" the other, it draws out the "open unity" or "open totality" of another – that is, "that which coheres without being fixed, schematized, or

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[57] Vanhoozer also utilises the image of hospitality (*Is There a Meaning in This Text?,* 397). Though Vanhoozer characterises this hospitality in a proactive not purely reactive way, E. Anne Clements recognises the limits of this image when she builds on Vanhoozer for her own feminist hermeneutics which she calls a hermeneutics of "hospitable awareness" (E. Anne Clements, *Mothers on the Margin? The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 6.

[58] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 11.

[59] Ibid, 10.

[60] Ibid*,* 13.

[61] Ibid, 43

finalized."[62]

For Jacobs then, just as for Steiner, love of neighbour is a risk just as it is an opportunity. Its claim on us is stronger than Wayne Booth's conception of books as "friends," for the Christian command to love neighbour, includes our enemies, not just our friends.[63] This is not to say that we cannot prefer some texts to others, perhaps love some more, or in different ways. Friendship with some is not excluded by love of all. But the obligation extends to all. And the risk brings reward. Faithfulness is "both an always compelling obligation and always available opportunity… It is a kind of love that is always productive of some degree of knowledge."[64] What does it risk? Overcoming suspicion to receive an other on their own terms risks what Nietzsche feared above all else – being taken advantage of: "being deceived in faith, hope, and love – after all, all three states of mind open one to deception – and [Nietzsche] would rather suffer anything than the humiliation of being fooled. This may be said to be the very origin of the hermeneutics of suspicion, the adolescent fear of being caught believing in that which others have ceased to believe in."[65]

Jacobs' account is stronger in its motivating force (love of neighbour vs. welcome of stranger), and probably in its resulting rewards, but it is still too naive in terms of risk. Jacobs' description of Nietzsche's ultimate fear as the humiliation of deception brings to mind Margaret Atwood's striking phrase: "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them."[66] We are interested, in this search for a guiding metaphor, not just in the ethics of reading, but also its practice. That is, not just in reasons to embrace the second naiveté, but also guidance on how to practice it. What does it look like for a feminist to inhabit the world projected by the dialectic of suspicion and faith? We need some account of the relationship between love and judgement, and of the process for discerning between friend, neighbour, and enemy. Love takes many forms, with differing degrees of vulnerability. Further, as with Steiner's account, Jacobs' model has the potential to suggest that the meaning of a text comes to us fully formed, if only it were allowed to express itself. But reading no more guarantees full understanding than hosting a guest at dinner does. Hospitality and love might

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[62] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 63. Here Jacobs is dependent on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

[63] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 64-65; Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An ethics of fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[64] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 64.

[65] Ibid, 88.

[66] While commonly quoted and attributed to Atwood, this exact phrase does not appear in Atwood's published works. Perhaps apocryphal, perhaps spoken in a radio interview in the 1980's, the quotation is most likely an abbreviation of a longer phrase found in "Writing the Male Character," in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose 1960-1982* (Anansi, 1982).

be what is enjoined of us, but they do not guarantee understanding. We might say such a mode is necessary for understanding, but not sufficient.

So, as models for feminist reading, both hospitality and love of neighbour are insufficient. The two following alternative models come from feminist scholars – one a theologian, one a Biblical scholar – and better capture the double movement of interpretation I am advocating.

2.3 Attunement – Natalie Carnes

Constructive theologian Natalie Carnes has recently made an argument for a form of post-critique in feminist theology that she has termed attunement.[67] As a word-picture, attunement is multivalent and dynamic. In relationships, with music, art, or even mechanics, attunement can wax and wane. It might be intense or relaxed, it can be intentional, or accidental. In contrast to the subject-object dynamic of both "digging down" and "standing back," attunement foregrounds a responsive two-sided relationship: subject to subject. Breastfeeding is the paradigm example. As a mother breastfeeds a newborn baby the two persons become attuned to one another: to bodies, to presence, to smell, to hunger, and to need. But breastfeeding is not just a physical attunement, it is an emotional and relational one too. The closeness, the intimacy, and the hormones involved all foster connection between mother and child. Deep bonding occurs. Love, trust, reliability, and responsiveness are communicated. Breastfeeding fosters security.

On the other hand, breastfeeding is not always easy. It takes work, practice, and attentiveness. It requires commitment, and sometimes suffering. To do so, the mother embraces vulnerability, both physical and emotional. And, as Carnes points out, the attachment of breastfeeding both follows from and sets the ground for, forms of separateness.[68] Attunement is not the obliteration of self through union, it is not passive receipt or submission, nor is it naïve.

> Because attunement speaks to our ability to be in relation to one another and the world, attunement can also speak to the negotiating of those relationships, even ambivalent ones… Not only do we tune out, tune in, and retune to texts and artifacts, but *we can decide to* tune out, tune in, and retune. I mean: attunement is not just something that happens to us but something we can meaningfully participate in.[69]

[67] Natalie Carnes, *Attunement: The Art and Politics of Feminist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).
[68] Carnes, *Attunement,* 15.
[69] Ibid.

Carnes is writing not of the Bible, but of historical theological texts. Nevertheless, her discussion is highly relevant to ours. So what might attunement offer the feminist reader of the Bible and theology? Primarily, Carnes argues, it provides a way for a feminist theologian to work at the centre and not just at the margins of the theological tradition. It provides a way to engage texts that both disturb and enthral us: texts in which misogyny, or sexism, or patriarchy, somehow go hand in hand with beauty, truth and liberation. For Carnes, the limits of critique in this context are two-fold. First, there is its flat-footedness. Critique is a one-trick pony. But once you have exposed Augustine's misogyny, for example, what then? To be clear, it is not that this first step is wrong, or not worth doing. It is both right, and necessary. But where does it leave us?

> If this is the sole reading strategy of feminists, it simply confirms what we already know: women are not the intended audience of the *Confessions*, nor are they fully human subjects in the book's imaginative world; at the deepest level, women are not fully included in the world of the *Confessions*. This critique, moreover, can imply a further claim: perhaps we shouldn't want to be. Some feminists go so far as to see a female theologian reading the *Confessions* as an attempt to authorize her voice through a problematic patriarchal inheritance. To love the *Confessions*, in this view, is to betray women or feminism.[70]

This observation echoes that made by Felski and Sedgwick about the supposed "superiority" of critique, and the implied inferiority of the alternatives, and captures the criticism expressed by Fiorenza, Camp, and others, about "glass half-full" feminist approaches. But this kind of critique often takes the feminist theorist, ultimately, to avoidance. Expose, reject, and move on from misogyny. A fair enough choice, in many respects; yet Carnes suggests that this leaves the feminist project always on the margins of theological discourse: "placing feminist theology outside the temporally-extended conversations that constitute the Christian tradition."[71] It is clear that this is indeed the case for many feminist Biblical interpreters. Their hermeneutic strategies give results for most texts which are unable to engage with the centre of the Christian theological tradition. No doubt many scholars consider that a benefit, not a drawback, but it certainly contributes to the marginalisation of feminist voices from any number of conversations. For Carnes, then, attunement provides a mode of reading which allows feminist interpreters to work at the centre of the theological tradition but also to engage that centre with key feminist questions and concerns. Further, it provides the feminist

[70] Ibid, 6.
[71] Ibid, 8.

theologian with resources for constructive work.

Attunement offers a development or extension of Ricoeur's idea of restoration/retrieval, and Sedgwick's reparation, emphasising the dynamic and multi-directional nature of the process. We are both actor and acted upon: I repair the text, and the text repairs me. This provides a positive, constructive and helpful elucidation of Ricoeur's dialectic between suspicion and trust. It is both our suspicion and our trust, our simultaneous interrogation of *and* our receptivity to the text that yields insight (in Ricoeur's terms enables interpretation). Carnes' reading of Augustine's *Confessions* turns Augustine back upon himself, demonstrating the ways in which Augustine's failures from a feminist point of view are in fact also failures according to his own program. Thus, it is hospitality to Augustine's wider theological program that enables a repair of some of his more problematic details. One can object to the sexism of Augustine's account of the breastfeeding infant, or one can repair it with Augustine himself.

> It is not really breasts or intemperance or greed that worries Augustine in Book One, anyway. The great anxiety of book 1, as expressed in its summative conclusion, is peeling apart creation from Creator, loving the first as if it is separable from the second, as if it contains its own end. To fail to love gifts as if they are from a giver is for Augustine a form of idolatry. It is love stopping short of its final end. What Augustine will learn, over the course of the *Confessions*, is not to love creation less but to love it properly, as signifying the Creator, and in that process, to learn to love creation more. Within Augustine's narrative, it does not make sense to describe the problem of his infant self's greedy desire for breasts as excessive desire. It is, more precisely, an excess of desire in a world that has not opened to meet it. The infant Augustine cannot yet desire the breast as the breast of God… The infant's excess of desire, then, indicates, not a sinful amount of desire but a desire that points beyond its putative object. The infant's desire is correlative to a world the infant has not yet apprehended.[72]

Here, it is the trajectory of Augustine's own text that offers the tools for repair. Rather than digging down or standing back, attuned reading results in a "filling out" or "building up" of the world of the text. The reader twists and turns not in order to see through or beneath, but to see better what is before them: to catch new light, to see new facets and different reflections.

There is some resonance here in Carnes' work on Augustine with the type of canonical-theological approach considered above. What Carnes offers here is an internal Augustinian self-critique. Receptivity to a wider narrative which offers tools for its own critical-traditioning. Note though how this constructive work is made possible by feminist critique. It is the "problem" of Augustine's misogyny and the interrogation of the attitudes expressed here which open the way to new understanding. If Augustine's attitude to the infant or to the breast remains

[72] Carnes, *Attunement,* 19.

unexamined or accepted on face value, we do not understand Augustine as deeply as we might. So attunement is a two way process.

> In these ways, attunement is not primarily about the interpreter coming into tune with the text or artifact. It names the text or artifact coming into tune with feminist commitments in a way that generates a new relationship between the text or artifact, the interpreter, and the community in which that text or artifact circulates. Rather than an accommodation to the patriarchy, attunement is an act of co-creation, a niche construction, that alters the landscape by mediating the artifact anew.[73]

Here we have a concept which does hold space for both suspicion and faith, and where construction of meaning relies on the interplay between the two. Attunement acknowledges the role and activity of the reader in the construction of meaning, and in the building of the vision which is ultimately to be actualised or appropriated. What attunement lacks, perhaps, is a limit. Though this may be only true in the abstract, as it seems likely that the texts under study will themselves provide their own limits to the sorts of possibilities they offer without being radically distorted. As a specifically feminist strategy attunement offers "a way of receiving what is there while also remaking it, creating a less idolatrous world."[74]

2.4 A Hermeneutic of Informed Trust – Jacqueline Lapsley

Feminist Old Testament scholar Jacqueline Lapsley has suggested that a hermeneutics of hospitality falls short because it does not adequately capture the reciprocal relationship of trust that is involved in the reading of Scripture. Scripture is read by humans, but it is first given by God. Interpretation demands an attitude of trust from the reader, but it also depends on an invitation from God that itself extends trust, for "God trusts us as a partner" in the interpretation of Scripture.[75] Lapsley builds her model on analogy with the story of the first humans and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Reading Scripture is like "taking the fruit" – it is to take up the power of moral awareness, to judge what is right and wrong: "the woman's reaching up into the tree to grasp the enticing fruit inaugurates a new era for humanity, characterized by true choice and the privilege and responsibility of interpreting their world."[76] Lapsley acknowledges that to compare Scripture to the tree of knowledge of good and evil is somewhat

[73] Carnes, *Attunement,* 9-10.
[74] Ibid*,* xviii.
[75] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word,* 19.
[76] Ibid*,* 17.

jarring, as that tree was forbidden and eating brought on judgement. Scripture, on the other hand, is given as a gift. But Scripture comes to us in light of that taking and that judgement, a gift given to nourish those who now live with such knowledge.

> The tree of the knowledge of good and bad is, oddly, a bit like Scripture itself: good to eat (to read and interpret…), a delight to the eyes… and above all, a source of wisdom and discernment… by reading Scripture, we understand our vulnerability and total dependence on God, yet Scripture also empowers us to interpret the world around us in relation to God's will for all of creation.[77]

Lapsley sees the attainment of this knowledge as inevitable in the story of Genesis 2–3: it is not so much about sin as about the burden of being fully human and of being free. For freedom entails the possibility of failure. Without the possibility of failure, there is no freedom, just as without knowledge of evil, there is no true knowledge of good. So what the woman chooses is "adulthood, a full, complex moral anthropology."[78] In the giving of Scripture then, God trusts humankind to exercise judgement. [79] In recognition of this feature of human nature, and God's call for humanity to exercise it as they go about their stewardship of creation, Scripture is a subtle creature:

> The Bible assumes a reader capable of judging, deciding, determining, interpreting, because we have all eaten of the fruit. In that sense Scripture is offered to us in the hope and trust that we will read it with all of our God-given intelligence. In sum, the word of God does not always float on top of the text, obvious and transparent in every case. Instead, we sometimes must use our full capacities as readers and hearers to discern the whispers that also make a claim upon us as a word from God.[80]

God's trust of us in recognition of our capacity is appropriately met by readers who in return exercise trust in God. Trust that God is one who knows and honours our full humanity, and trust that God invites us to bring our full capacities to the task of interpretation. Thus, this trust is not passive, blind, naive, or uncritical. Rather it is confident that it is precisely the challenges of Scripture that call forth our best selves. Lapsley calls this a hermeneutics of

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] It might be interesting to extend Lapsley's argument here to reflection on the Incarnation, and the responsibility God gave (and continues to give) to those who met Jesus to discern his identity for themselves. The Gospels narrate a variety of responses to Jesus – from discipleship through to opposition – as well as a variety of degrees of recognition and partial to true understanding of his identity. Discipleship was not dependent on full understanding, but opposition usually (perhaps not always) arose from misrecognition. The Gospels continue to invite readers to judge for themselves who Jesus is and how/if they will follow him.

[80] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word,* 18.

informed trust.[81] This model improves on the first two described above for two reasons: first, it accounts for the inherent value of both critical reasoning and faith (as does attunement); and second it does so based on reasoning from Scripture itself as both affirming and inviting such an approach. It makes no guarantees about what we might find when we approach, but it acknowledges our active participation in the process of interpretation, recognising that some knots are there to be untied.

3 Vulnerability

One strength of all the foregoing models lies in their recognition of the hard work involved. All require both trust and commitment, they are honest about risk, and they are able to capture and embrace the challenge and the potential ambivalence of the encounter. There is no naivety, no blind acceptance, brainwashing or gullibility. Each is born out of considered commitment – conscious, deliberate, purposive and hopeful. If Jacobs is right about Nietzsche – that the hermeneutics of suspicion is driven by fear – then reparative reading must choose to move past fear, and to open oneself to risk. In what we have examined so far, there are different motivators for such a move. For Sedgwick, and perhaps for Carnes, the risk is calculated against the rewards. The suspicious mode is limited, and some readers want more. But for Steiner and Jacobs, whether the risk pays off or not (though it is clear that both think it does), this kind of reading is required anyway. Rewards will likely follow – they are inherent to the nature of the case, to the subject from which the obligation arises. But they are not primarily, or in the first place, what is sought.

Second, all the models here suggest something dynamic and interpersonal. We do not just judge, we listen; we do not just act but are also acted upon. Our work on the text is to draw it out, so that it can "speak for itself" even as we recognise that what it speaks is not always plainly on the surface. In this mode we "get out" much more than, or even *other* than, what we "put in." For, loving attention amplifies rather than reduces. As such, the models are also able to hold the complexity and "mixed" nature of the subject. There is no demand for it to be deserving before it is loved. But neither does it command uncritical approval.

This exploration of the vulnerability involved in reparative reading is especially important for the feminist interpreter. For the risk is high. The harms of patriarchy and sexism are real and many. They are life-limiting, life-threatening, and in some cases life-ending. If our love of

[81] Ibid.

Christian Scripture serves only to enable – or even amplify – its destructive vision, then this is not a risk worth taking. Steiner writes of the embarrassment attendant upon this kind of openness, but to this we must add culpability. Although, perhaps this very contrast between the "power" of critique and the "vulnerability" of trust ought to raise our feminist hackles, not to mention our theological ones. Lori Branch suggests that the "machismo" of critique and the characterisation of belief as "vulnerable, feminine, naïve, ignorant, prey to ne're-do-wells"[82] itself might need a little bit of suspicion applied to it: "it has always seemed to me that our insistent refusal of the religious should look to us, by our own lights, in that great psychoanalytic metaphor, like a suture, a Band-Aid that we keep plastering over the same embarrassing wound. What is that scrape? That place where we're not whole, that this refusal points to?"[83] The wound, she says, is the vulnerability of belief.

For Branch, the vulnerability of belief lies not in embarrassment, but in the provisionality of language. Modernity made out that such provisionality was insufficient for knowledge. But the post-modern, post-secular, post-critique world, sufficiently chastened about modernity's own claims to knowledge, can recover other forms of knowing. More than that, as scholars such as Nussbaum have shown, such forms of knowing are essential for the fullness of human experience and human flourishing.

> The wager of this humbler though no less athletic form of reason is that there are other ways of thinking than materialist determinism or religious fundamentalism, ways of thinking for which better arguments can be made and which answer better to the full range of inner, spiritual experience, especially the experiences of questioning and of believing, of coming to trust or hope.[84]

Feminist philosopher of religion Pamela Sue Anderson has also sought to problematise the feminist rejection of vulnerability. While acknowledging the phenomenological experience of vulnerability as closely connected to susceptibility to violence, Anderson rejects a solely negative characterisation of vulnerability. Even at the phenomenological level, vulnerability also promotes enhancement, because it is also an openness to affection.[85] Anderson then argues for an "ethical level of vulnerability." Ethical vulnerability is an active pursuit: "an active,

[82] Branch, "Post-critical and Post-secular," 160-167.
[83] Ibid, 161.
[84] Ibid, 163.
[85] Pamela Sue Anderson, "Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability: Undoing an Oppressive Form of (Wilful) Ignorance," edited by Nicholas Bunnin, *Angelaki* 25, no. 1-2 (2020):36-45.

necessarily reciprocal, practice of embracing transformation in self and others."[86] Vulnerability opens one to positive encounter. And it is also what enables one to pursue accountability and justice after harm.

> Openness to being changed is a relational ontology, it is through others that transformation takes place, and it is from this basis that accountability becomes central to responding to violence: 'this openness can make possible a relational accountability to others on ethical matters'… Thus if injury has taken place, 'ethical vulnerability opens up an opportunity to restore justice, or to repair, the horrendous pain of wounds (vulnerabilities)…with relational accountability'.[87]

But Anderson is clear that vulnerability is not only a feature of women's lives, or women's lives under patriarchy, it is a feature of all human life. We are all vulnerable to harm, just as we are capable of growth. Claiming invulnerability is self-deception. And striving for invulnerability, "whether as the man with a gun for 'self-protection' or the philosopher with an argument for his shield against his vulnerability – puts us at a serious human risk. And it misses the opportunity that vulnerability can offer."[88] Vulnerability is a life-enhancing capability, and recognition of vulnerability brings one closer to the truth. So we must remember that all readers of the Bible are vulnerable. And in fact, the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus' interactions with different groups of people (Pharisees, Sadducees, teachers, tax-collectors, prostitutes, children, women, and so on) invites us to consider that those who come to the Scriptures without an awareness of their own vulnerability might themselves be vulnerable to particular forms of misunderstanding, self-deception, and idolatry. They do indeed risk damage to themselves and also to others. Christian theological anthropology also recognises both these aspects of the limits and vulnerability of human life. Limits and needs are a good and proper aspect of our created nature.[89] Yet, under sin, they also provide occasion for harm. As the true human, Jesus himself exemplifies this human condition: flourishing in dependence and relationship with the Triune God, while at the same time susceptible to the violence and anger of humankind. That God in Christ embraces created human needs and limitations demonstrates that they ought not be eschewed. But if relationship with God is, as Christa McKirland has argued, humanity's

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[86] Emily Cousens, "Anderson's Ethical Vulnerability: Animating Feminist Responses to Sexual Violence," *Angelaki* 25, no. 1-2 (2020):166.
[87] Cousens, "Anderson's Ethical Vulnerability," 167.
[88] Anderson, "Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability," 43.
[89] Christa L. McKirland, *God's Provision, Humanity's Need: The Gift of Our Dependence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 7-9.

"fundamental need," then recognition of this need is constitutive of human flourishing.[90] John's Gospel presents Jesus as the one who meets human need: bread from heaven (John 6:35); living water (John 4:10); light of the world (John 8:12); and resurrection life (John 11:25). So, the vulnerability of belief is not our only vulnerability, and perhaps it is not the one most likely to kill us. Jacobs agrees: "The avoidance of love, in interpretation as in all other human activities, achieves an escape from pain only by embracing death."[91] To disavow vulnerability is to practice self-deception. To know where and when and why and how to embrace vulnerability is essential.

Conclusion

So have we arrived at an image for a feminist second naiveté? Hospitality and love of neighbour do well at capturing the hermeneutics of trust. And while they make room for ambivalence about our objects of study, they do not offer guidance for negotiating such ambivalence. Attunement and informed trust do better. Both reveal how feminist critical work contributes to and enlarges understanding and can be practiced not only from a distance, but from a place of intimacy and trust. These two images empower the feminist interpreter to see their work as invited by Scripture and as an essential part of the church's ongoing conversation of interpretation. Both are offered by their authors in trust that there is reward to be found from such a practice: in recognition that while patriarchy infects the religious tradition, it is not the ultimate reality with which theology is concerned or to which the Scriptures point.

We finish, then, by trying to weave some of this chapter's threads together. First, Trible and Watson's theological stake in the ground that equality was God's original intention for humankind, and patriarchy a second, fallen development. Plus the subsequent observation that this development is not only described but also *inscribed* in the text just as it is in the real world. Second, Lapsley's suggestion that we are trusted as readers to bring our full faculties – including our feminist-critical minds and skills – along with our faith, to the practice of interpretation, which is an exercise of judgement. And third, Branch and Anderson's embrace of the potential of vulnerability for promise as well as pain.

For a feminist reparative reading of Scripture, the wager on *real presence* must be a wager on a particular kind of presence – on a God who intends equality and works to redeem

[90] McKirland, *God's Provision, Humanity's Need,* 14, 2.
[91] Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading,* 34.

inequality. Entering the world of Scripture with a hermeneutics of informed trust is to embrace the vulnerability not just of encountering pain but also of exercising judgement, and of failing to recognise truth from lie, or good from evil. Accepting God's invitation to do this work requires recognising and accepting our vulnerability to our own limited capacities, our idols, and our fears, and our own fundamental need for relationship with God. We cannot guarantee or prove ahead of time that the encounter on which we wager will occur. But we recognise that without such a wager, it certainly will not – indeed, cannot. Undoubtedly, the encounter will not be in all ways as we expect. But we are invited in regardless. Perhaps it is we, who are the guest after all. I have claimed that such a wager is enabled by canonical-theological reading. Perhaps others can find similar grounding elsewhere. Whether or not it sufficiently motivates reparative reading, I hope to have shown thus far that it at least enables it – to have demonstrated, that is, the possibility and promise of post-critique in feminist hermeneutics.

Part Two

Chapter 4

"Will Not God Grant Justice?"

Human Failure and God's Justice in The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8)

Introduction

In part 2 of this project (chapters 4–6) we put the proposal for post-critique in feminist hermeneutics into practice in readings of three texts from the Gospels. These chapters allow us to explore varieties of feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and to test the potential of a complementary hermeneutics of trust. I aim to demonstrate the real possibility of a feminist second naiveté in Biblical interpretation: readings which embrace both the critical and the reparative modes, offering genuine engagement with feminist concerns and questions while also looking for the promise of reading "with the grain." We start, in this chapter, with the Gospel of Luke, and one of Jesus' parables.

In Luke 18:1–8 Jesus tells a story about a woman who has been wronged, and who has to work hard to attain justice. In a world where we are increasingly aware of the sexual abuse, sexual assault, and domestic abuse of staggering numbers of women and children, *and* of the many and real challenges of succeeding in the pursuit of justice regarding these crimes, this short parable is surely relevant. Feminist interpreters have often highlighted this parable for this very reason. But many do not find that the parable – at least as Luke presents it – offers hope for modern women and those who seek to address injustice. In this chapter I consider alternative interpretative strategies for this text, with attention to this question of the empowering and liberating potential of the parable for women victims of injustice. The chapter proceeds as follows: first, an introduction to the parable and a presentation of three different feminist approaches. Here we see the results of redaction-critical work that treats Luke as "hostile" interpreter. I argue that the empowering potential of these interpretations is limited, constrained by their own methodological limitations. Second, I offer a narrative-theological reading of the parable, arguing that the parable and its Lukan frame cohere to present a positive message for women. Section 3 examines the theological issues of eschatology and justice raised by the parable, showing how Luke's wider context aids rather than hinders feminist theologians

as it emphasises justice in the present. Finally, I conclude with some observations about how this parable might therefore speak to the church today, in its response to our growing awareness of our own historic and present problem of the abuse of women.

1 Suspicious Approaches to Luke's Parable

Since Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking work *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation,* much feminist scholarship on Luke has adopted her claims about Luke's redactive activity and intentions. She argued – against earliest feminist work which viewed Luke's Gospel as especially positive for women – that Luke deliberately limits and constrains the roles of women in early Christian communities (and beyond) by a redactive process that presents women only in subordinate and passive roles.[1] Schüssler Fiorenza concluded that Luke "intends to downplay women's equal discipleship," to "subordinate women to the circle of male disciples" and to portray women "as *members* but not leaders of the Jesus movement."[2] Women listen to the word but they do not preach it, they host house-churches but do not lead them, they ἀκολούθει and support Jesus out of gratitude but they are not ἀκολουθεῖ, women διακονεῖν at tables (Luke 10:40; Acts 6:2), but do not engage in the διακονία of the word (Acts 6:4).[3] The critical insight developed by Schüssler Fiorenza (articulated more pithily later by Jane Schaberg and Sharon Ringe) was that: "attention must be paid not just to the number of women but also to what they are doing and saying and what they are not doing and not saying."[4] Luke has altered history, Fiorenza argued, and so must be resisted. Therefore attempts to find something positive or promising for women in the Third Gospel often speak of reading "against" Luke in some way: "against the grain"[5] or "against Luke's intent."[6]

1.1 Robert Price – Misappropriation of "Widow Traditions"

Robert M. Price has offered a "feminist-critical scrutiny" of Luke, arguing that the parable

[1] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 63-65; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 49-51.
[2] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said,* 65.
[3] Ibid, 63-65.
[4] Jane Schaberg and Sharon Ringe, "Gospel of Luke," in *Women's Bible Commentary,* ed. Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 498.
[5] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said,* 62.
[6] Schaberg and Ringe, "Gospel of Luke," 510.

in question is part of Luke's special material, specifically stories of celibate women stemming from communities of widows in the early church.[7] Price attempts to reconstruct these "widow traditions" utilising a hermeneutics of suspicion. What he finds is that the author of the third Gospel (in this reading, a churchman of the mid-second century) has incorporated a number of stories deriving from an "order" or group of women committed to celibacy and active in ministry in the early church.[8] Such an order is identified by Kraemer, Davies, and MacDonald in the second and following centuries and, Price argues, are likely those women whose existence is assumed by the Pastorals and specifically addressed in 1 Timothy 5:3–16.[9] The author of Luke-Acts then, along with the author of the Pastorals, is involved in a deliberate attempt to curtail the ministry of women and to define their proper place.

In the case of the parable of the persistent widow, argues Price, the author has taken a story whose purpose was to promote self-reliance and doggedness amongst the widow community in the face of their unjust and oppressive treatment by church officials, and turned it into a "woman-minimising," "numbing opiate" extolling "dependence upon the male God who might be so magnanimous as one day to lend an ear."[10] The original story (18:2–5) has been framed (18:1 and 18:6–8) in such a way as to drastically alter – indeed invert – its meaning: "The last thing [the author] wants to inculcate is the notion that women must learn to rely on themselves! He has added vv 6–8 just in order to cut the nerve of such resolve."[11] Price goes on: "Jane Via sees the widow as groveling right where Luke wants her: 'the woman represents the persistent humble petitioner before the deity.' Or, more to the point, before the deity's self-appointed male representatives, like Luke."[12]

Price also questions the usual interpretation of vv 6–7 as a lesser-to-greater argument which demonstrates the superiority of God vis-à-vis the judge. Instead, he thinks the author is deliberately ambiguous about the nature of God. Perhaps God *is* like the judge. Perhaps God *will* delay. The message is that one ought not expect too much. Thus "what this really amounts

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[7] Robert M. Price, *The Widow Traditions in Luke-Acts: A Feminist-Critical* Study (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997).

[8] The group includes younger women who are virgins as well as widows. Thus it is the vow of celibacy that unites the group, not widowhood. Price, *Widow Traditions,* 4.

[9] See Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston & Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); Dennis Ronald MacDonald, "The Role of Women in the Production of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," *Iliff Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter 1984):21-38; Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 298-307.

[10] Price, *Widow Traditions,* 199.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid*,* 199.

to is giving divine legitimation to the same apparent (no doubt real) indifference of church leaders to the concerns of widows."[13]

1.2 Amy-Jill Levine – Lessons in Moral Ambiguity

In her *Short Stories by Jesus*, Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine argues that parables are meant to challenge and disturb their hearers/readers. Our reaction to them, she writes, "should be one of resistance rather than acceptance."[14] Levine wants us to try to listen to Jesus' parables as his first hearers, first century Jews, might have done. She accepts that many were indeed original to Jesus (including the persistent widow, contra Price) but argues (with Price) that Luke's presentation of Jesus' parables is often "domesticating" or "moralising."[15] Luke, she argues, attempts to circumscribe the meaning of the parables, short-circuiting their multivalence by imposing a preferred meaning.[16] Levine is interested in how parables might speak to us today, but only after an understanding of how they might have been heard in their first-century context.[17] And while she acknowledges that for Christian communities the texts are more than historical artefacts, she wants to move directly from the parables as taught by Jesus (to whatever extent we can recover that) and understood by his hearers, to the parables as lessons today, intentionally bypassing the parables as used by the authors of the Gospels.[18]

Like Price, Levine sees vv 2–5 as the original core of the parable, probably from Jesus, and the surrounding verses as from Luke's hand. She too sees the redaction as an attempt to "tame" the widow – reducing her from a feisty, tenacious botherer who acts to get what she wants, to a powerless dependent, and neat model of patient prayer.[19] For Levine this is an inconsistent imposition on the parable: tenuous allegorising which causes us to misread the characters of the widow and the judge thereby obliterating the parable's surprising and challenging elements.[20]

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[13] Price, *Widow Traditions,* 200. Note Price's comments on the disciples in the story of the appointment of the Seven in Acts: "They can scarcely hide their annoyance at having to take time out from more important, more logocentric matters ("preaching the *logos* of God") to waste their valuable time on a bunch of nagging hags."
[14] Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 3.
[15] Levine, *Short Stories,* 12-15.
[16] Ibid, 15.
[17] Ibid, 19.
[18] Ibid, 26.
[19] Ibid, 239.
[20] Ibid*,* 242, 255.

So what might a first-century Jewish audience have made of the parable itself, minus Luke's manipulation? First, the widow in this parable challenges rather than fits our stereotypical ideas about widows as poor and powerless. The Hebrew Scriptures prime us to see widows as objects of pity, and in need of help, and most Christian reconstructions of widows in Jesus' time follow suit.[21] But in truth we do not know the circumstances of this particular widow. She is not specifically said to be poor, and she certainly has the time, the freedom, and the wherewithal to advocate for herself. Further, Levine argues, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that on the whole, widows' circumstances were likely less pathetic than is commonly assumed.[22] In addition, we see that the widow does not respect the verdict of the judge. Second, just as we have typecast the widow, so have we prejudged the judge. The description of the judge as unjust is Luke's comment (v 6), not from the parable itself, and Levine suggests that lack of fear of the divine – though it may be unwise (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7) – is not necessarily unjust.[23] Similarly, "nor had respect for people" (v 2, 4) may suggest impartiality in a positive sense, as the phrase "no respecter of persons" does today. That said, she concedes that "first-century auditors would have seen the judge as a negative figure."[24] Third, a central issue for interpretation is the rendering of the Greek term ἐκδικέω (Ἐκδίκησόν, 18:3, ἐκδικήσω, 18:5) which is most commonly translated "grant justice." Levine argues that it is significant that ἐκδικέω and not δικαιοσύνη/δικαιόω is used here. The latter term is used almost solely in a positive sense, that is, to render a favourable verdict or take up a just cause (or at least to treat the claimant in that way);[25] while the former term – the one used in this parable – includes the positive sense, but also has the suggestion of punishment (2 Cor 10:6) and sometimes revenge (Rom 12:19). This leads to the possible translation "avenge" or even "vengeance."[26] Levine suggests that the widow is not just seeking justice, she is asking to be "avenged," and likely is seeking to punish her opponent. Without Luke's commentary the term's sense is, at the very least, ambiguous.[27] Fourth, ὑπωπιάζῃ (v 5, usually "wear me out") is in fact a boxing term with the literal meaning "to give a black eye" or "to strike in the face."[28]

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[21] Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; 27:19; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 22:3; Job 31:16-19; Psalm 94:6, 146:9; Ezekiel 22:7; 44:22; Zechariah 7:9-10; Malachi 3:5.

[22] Levine, *Short Stories,* 249.

[23] Ibid, 242.

[24] Ibid, 253.

[25] Walter Bauer and William Danker, eds., *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (BDAG)* 3rd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 248-9.

[26] Bauer and Danker, *BDAG,* 300–301.

[27] Levine, *Short Stories,* 242.

[28] This is the first meaning offered by *BDAG*, though even there it acknowledges the usage in Luke 18:5 as possible hyperbole, and thus meaning (2): "to bring someone to submission by constant annoyance, *wear down.*"

Again, Levine suggests, we ought not move too quickly to soften this term. Does the widow threaten violence or intimidate the judge? Is her "persistence" really praiseworthy, or is it a form of coercion? It depends on whether we see her cause as good, but – as we have just seen – Levine wants us to keep an open mind there as well.[29] In either case, the judge's verdict is based on expedience, not on justice. She concludes: "whether we find him sympathetic or not, [the judge] is co-opted by and so complicit in the widow's schemes. When he accedes to her request, he facilitates her vengeance."[30]

So perhaps everything we thought about the parable is wrong, because Luke's framing has pushed us in entirely the wrong direction.[31] No longer the parable of the "Persistent Widow" or the "Unjust Judge," Levine suggests instead the "Vengeful Widow and the Co-opted Judge."[32] The widow is not clearly righteous, the judge not clearly unjust. And if the cause is not righteous, then the methods certainly are not. What then is the message of the parable?

> The parable proper ends with the judge's decision and so it ends as a story about corruption, violence, and vengefulness. Stereotypes of judges and widows both fall. Justice is not clearly rendered.[33]

The parable forces us to reconsider our stereotypes and our need for moral clarity.[34] Can we allow that neither figure is wholly good or bad? Can we allow individual and complex backstories and motivations, rather than relying on generalisations? She goes on to offer a number of ways the parable might prompt reflection for modern readers – on notions of vengeance, justice, violence, sexism, self-interest and self-protection, systemic oppression and our own collusion. True systemic evil is revealed, and though we seek to deny or repress it, "our task may be to resist the parable rather than rescue it."[35] None of this has anything to do

(Bauer and Danker, 1043). The only other New Testament usage is 1 Corinthians 9:27 which the NRSV renders "punish my body," where it has the sense of the strict discipline and self-control of an athlete, rather than violence towards oneself.

[29] Levine, *Short Stories,* 243.

[30] Ibid, 254.

[31] Levine suggests that Luke is uncomfortable with the ambiguity of the parable, and thus his commentary is an attempt to control it. She concurs with Price that not only has Luke artificially introduced the theme of prayer, and the eschatological context, but that this also has the effect of blunting the widow's action and independence, and therefore of "containing and constraining women." (*Short Stories,* 255).

[32] Ibid, 244.

[33] Ibid, 254.

[34] A more recent work which builds on Levine's observations is that of Febbie C. Dickerson, *Luke, Widows, Judges and Stereotypes* (London: Lexington Books, 2019). Dickerson's is a womanist reading particularly concerned with the way in which stereotyping of the characters in the parable contribute to unhelpful stereotyping of black men and women.

[35] Levine, *Short Stories,* 262

with the justice of God, though Jesus wishes us to "find a moral compass."[36] The parable can only be a negative prompt, for "Jesus was invested in fairness, reconciliation, and compassion," none of which are to be found here.[37]

1.3 Barbara Reid – The Widow as God-figure

Unlike Price and Levine, Barbara Reid is willing to allow a theological interpretation of the parable, though she locates the figure of God not in the judge (as per the usual interpretation) but in the widow.[38] Similarly discarding Luke's additions (v 1 and vv 6–8) as attempts to make the parable fit other concerns,[39] Reid nevertheless adopts the traditional interpretation of the story's two main characters: the judge as dishonourable coward, and the widow with a righteous cause.[40] Without verses 6–8 however, Reid argues that we have no reason to see the judge as exemplary (not even in a negative sense, or in the argument *a minori ad maius*), and we have every reason to see the widow as bold, determined, and in the active pursuit of justice.[41] The imagined standoff between the two is almost comical – the rich, powerful, high-status man cowering beneath a vulnerable woman – and it challenges us to "wrestle with unfamiliar notions about what God is like and what justice in the realm of God looks like and how it is achieved."[42]

The widow is the God-like figure and the example for the disciples to emulate. And just as in the example of Jesus himself, she reveals power in seeming weakness.[43] The widow is not simply a quiet woman who prays, she is a loud activist. Therefore the message of the parable is that "when one doggedly resists injustice, faces it, names it, and denounces it, until right is achieved, then one is acting as God does."[44] The story (considered on its own and without Luke's accompanying interpretation) resists stereotypes and the containment of women to passive roles, it speaks against the presentation of God in exclusively male terms, it models non-violent confrontation,[45] it celebrates small victories, and it gives courage to Christians who

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[36] Levine, *Short Stories,* 266.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Barbara E. Reid, "A Godly Widow Persistently Pursuing Justice: Luke 18:1-8," *Biblical Research* 45 (2000): 31.
[39] Reid, "A Godly Widow," 27-28.
[40] Ibid, 29-30.
[41] Ibid, 30.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 32.
[44] Ibid, 31.
[45] Reid interprets ὑπωπιάζῃ in its metaphorical sense.

grow weary of seeking justice against the odds.[46]

2 A Feminist Narrative-Theological Reading

Though the three interpretations described above all differ in important respects, all are feminist readings, all make use of a hermeneutic of suspicion, and all three argue that a feminist reading of the parable must peel away Luke's narrative frame and consider the story as an "original unit" (whether one that originates from Jesus himself or from a later tradition). Moreover, they all share the view that Luke's interpretative comments are intended to alter the meaning of the story and specifically to rein in the character of the widow. The result of this approach in all three cases is also to remove any guarantee of the goodness of God, or confidence in God's desire or ability to achieve justice. God functions to prop up patriarchy, to challenge our moral surety, or perhaps, to achieve justice – but only in so far as we do. There exists no "good judge" to contrast with the judge of the story, nor any confidence in justice.

But Luke's Gospel is more pluriform than these accounts suggest. Brigitte Kahl and Turid Karslen Seim have shown that an impulse for resistance and towards liberation can also be found within the text. To be certain, it is not the only message: it exists alongside and tangled up with opposing forces and positions. But still, room is opened up for a more positive view of the gospel. Indeed, it is this "double message" or "counter-reading" inscribed into the text itself, that is said to explain why interpretations of Luke have been so mixed. Kahl suggests that the text's internal contradictions might arise from Luke's attempt to communicate "with opposing groups of readers and in different voices."[47] Seim, on the other hand, is less concerned with the positions or aims of the author, but on the evidence internal to the text. Seim finds conflicting evidence within Luke's Gospel, but sees this as consistent with the narrative form: "narrative texts have an inbuilt polyphony in that they allow for, and even may include, several contradictory voices."[48] Individual episodes take place in a larger sequence, and their ordering, framing, progression, and so on all contribute to an overarching narrative. But at the same time, individual episodes can stand in complex and ambivalent relationship to each other, and even to the overall story. Seim's conclusions about Luke's "double message" are remarkably

[46] Reid, "A Godly Widow," 32-33.

[47] Brigitte Kahl, "Reading Luke against Luke: Non-Uniformity of Text, Hermeneutics of Conspiracy and the 'Scriptural Principle' in Luke 1," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke,* ed. Amy Jill-Levine (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 75.

[48] Turid Karlsen Seim, "Feminist Criticism," in *Methods for Luke,* ed. Joel B. Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53.

consistent with the trajectory offered by Trible/Watson explored briefly in chapter 3. For example, though Luke describes narratively the failure of the early Christian community to hear and recognise women's testimony (for example Luke 24:9–11), he presents this not as the illegitimacy of the women's testimony in and of itself, but of the men's failure to heed it. Thus though Luke accurately narrates the male bias and androcentrism of the community's functioning, he does not present this as normative or ideal. The women's witness is not believed, and yet the women are recorded as the first witnesses to and of Jesus' resurrection.[49] So, Seim concludes "it is not without irony that the picture is finally presented; the women are indeed good enough and well-qualified, but the men suspect and reject them. The male consolidation of power occurs against a background to which the men have shown weakness and failure rather than strength. The Lukan construction contains a double, mixed message."[50]

In what follows, I offer an alternative feminist reading that is inclusive of the whole of the pericope (18:1–8) seeking to incorporate both the original parable and Luke's narrative frame. To answer the common charge of the scholars considered above, I will need to show how reading *with* Luke need not constrain or limit women disciples of Jesus. In order to do so, I argue two things: first, that the parable and its frame be allowed to be mutually interpretative; and second, that a wider narrative context is necessary for understanding how prayer and action are related to God's justice. I argue that my reading remains a feminist one as it seeks both liberation and justice for women, and particularly for women victims. This reading will affirm the active pursuit of justice, while also acknowledging that justice is ultimately in God's hands. I argue that this latter recognition need not instil passivity, but is rather the ground for a Christian approach to justice.

2.1 Context

Verse 1 links the telling of the parable to the prior scene spatiotemporally, and also thematically.[51] The hearers of the parable are the disciples (αὐτοῖς 18:1, referring back to 17:22) who accompany Jesus on his way to Jerusalem (17:11).[52] The possibility of "losing heart" and

[49] Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke and Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 162.
[50] Seim, *Double Message,* 249.
[51] Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington II, *The Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 482; Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 637.
[52] I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 671; Levine & Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke,* 482; Alan J. Thompson, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Luke* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 277; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (BECNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1446.

therefore being unprepared for the coming of the Son of Man has been raised in the prior section (17:22–36). Thus the parable is presented as an encouragement for how to live until his coming.[53] Those who "pray continually"[54] (18:1) who "cry out day and night"[55] (18:7) are those who will be found to have faith (18:8). Persistent turning to God in faith is necessary because at times the Lord's coming will be desired but not seen (17:22). Hence the focus in the parable on the "delay" (18:7). But the encouragement to persist through the experience of delay comes from the second thematic link between the two sections – that of the certainty and finality of the coming of the Son of Man (17:30–36). Delay can be endured because an end is assured. And it is the certainty of justice (18:7–8) or perhaps judgement (hence references to Noah (17:26–27) and to Sodom (17:28–29)) that will occur at that time that makes not losing heart a necessity. One does not want to be found without faith at the coming of the Son of Man.[56]

The theme of prayer is often noted as something of an imposition here – a hobby horse of Luke's which leads him to manipulate his material. But I suggest we allow the context to govern the meaning of prayer, rather than use a prior conception of prayer to overwhelm the other concepts at work here. Joel Green argues that prayer here "serves as a metonym for confidence in and openness to the benefaction of God."[57] Darrell Bock suggests that Luke has in mind not just prayer in general, but prayer "for God's justice and the Son of Man's return."[58] Importantly, Bock notes that this is not passive; it is an "activity," hence the need for encouragement to persevere.[59] We note also a similar pairing of prayer and persistence in Jesus' parable in 11:5–8, of prayer and action in the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:2–4), as well as other examples of women's active, influential, and socially and politically engaged prayer (Mary (Luke 1:46–55), and Anna (Luke 2:36–38, who worships "night and day").[60] Forbes and

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[53] Levine & Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke,* 482; Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 637.

[54] πάντοτε with the present infinitives (προσεύχεσθαι and μὴ ἐγκακεῖν) gives the sense of continually (i.e. repeatedly) as opposed to continuously (i.e. without ceasing). Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 671; Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1447; Thompson, *Luke,* 277.

[55] Again, the sense is "at all times of day," (in the day, and in the night), rather than continuously (all day and all night).

[56] While I acknowledge the textual difficulties raised by Lang (2011), I here follow the main lines of interpretation offered by Green (*The Gospel of Luke,* 637ff) accepting that the referent of "the days of the Son of Man" (17:22) does include (even if it is not limited to) the events of the Parousia. T. J. Lang, "'You will desire to see and you will not see [it]': Reading Luke 17.22 as Antanaclasis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 3 (2011): 281-302; T. J. Lang, ""Where the Body Is, There also the Eagles Will Be Gathered": Luke 17:37 and the Arrest of Jesus," *Biblical Interpretation* 21, no. 3 (2013): 320-340. If Lang is right that 17:22-36 refers to the passion and not the Parousia, though this severs the thematic link between 17:22-36 and 18:1-8, it does not necessarily alter the meaning of 18:1-8, which includes its own reference to the Parousia (v 8).

[57] Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 637.

[58] Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1447.

[59] Ibid.

[60] See F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and*

Harrower conclude: "the widow in our parable is both a model for prayer, and a model of those who, through active partnership with God in prayer, struggle resolutely and persistently for justice in the world."[61]

This direction of interpretation is confirmed by an understanding of metaphor as inter-animating; metaphors, Janet Soskice has shown, give us "two ideas for one."[62] Early thinking on metaphor tended to consider it simply as decoration, ultimately reducible to (more important) propositional content, or even as potentially misleading and therefore best avoided.[63] Modern work on metaphor in cognitive- and socio-linguistics, however, has shown that metaphors are "indispensable cognitive instruments of communication that enable readers/hearers to gain knowledge or insight that is often only available through a particular metaphorical lens. Moreover, their meanings are not wholly determinate, nor paraphrasable into literal speech."[64] Metaphors invite us into a "shared perspective," offering relational knowledge.[65] The image or story does not just illustrate some external point or proposition, but forms part of the content of what is conveyed. This means that Luke's framing (18:11, 6–8) and Jesus' interpretation (18:6–8) need not be seen as rendering the widow passive, but rather as inviting hearers into active discipleship and prayer as the response required of relationship with the God of justice.

2.2 Characterisation

The Judge

Verse 2 introduces the judge and despite the caution issued by Levine above I find that the presentation of the judge is intended to form a negative appraisal. Speculation on his ethnicity or what form of legal process he represented (Roman, Jewish, religious or secular) is common but unnecessary;[66] the description given is sufficient, he "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Three strands of evidence lead us to understand the judge negatively. First, the description appears to be proverbial, found in several extra-Biblical sources where it denotes

Persistence in Luke's Gospel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 303-308.

[61] Greg W. Forbes and Scott D. Harrower, *Raised From Obscurity: A Narratival and Theological Study of the Characterisation of Women in Luke-Acts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 120.

[62] Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 43.

[63] See discussion in Erin M. Heim, "Paths Beyond Tracing Out: The Hermeneutics of Metaphor and Theological Methods," in *The Voice of God in the Text of Scripture,* eds. Oliver B. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 114-117.

[64] Heim, "Paths Beyond Tracing Out," 115.

[65] Ibid, 117, 120.

[66] See for example Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1447.

someone "fiercely independent" and lacking in compassion,[67] perhaps even "thorough wickedness."[68] Second, Luke elsewhere portrays those who "fear God" in a positive light (Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26). Third, the judges of Judah were instructed to "let the fear of the LORD be upon you" (2 Chr 19:7), explicitly linking fear of the Lord with the role of judge in the minds of Jewish hearers. Moreover, this instruction is linked to God's own justice and judgement, naming human judges as God's representatives. Marshall concludes "the point here is that the judge does not take the judgement of God seriously."[69] This fits the context identified from chapter 17 and the distinction being made between those who live in light of the judgement of God and those who do not (17:34–35).

The Widow

Verse 3 introduces the widow. The similarity of wording between 18:2 and 18:3 (ἦν ἔν τινι πόλει, ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει) suggests the characters are to be compared.[70] And just like the judge, the widow has important background. Numerous Old Testament texts recognise widows, along with the poor, the orphan, and the foreigner, as those who are vulnerable, as objects of God's special attention and generosity, and as those to whom Israelites must also be generous.[71] Exodus 22:22–24 notes that God "will certainly hear" the cry of a widow who has been taken advantage of. Deuteronomy 19:17–21 links generosity to widows (and others) with fear of the Lord. And interestingly, it also includes defending the cause of the "fatherless and the widow" as evidence of the Lord's *impartiality.* Deuteronomy 27:19 goes further saying "cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." And in the prophets "providing widows justice becomes… almost a shorthand for covenant faithfulness."[72]

Many commentators therefore describe the widow as helpless and powerless.[73] As we have

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[67] Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1447-1448.

[68] Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 863, pointing to Freed ("Parable of the Judge," 42) who draws special attention to Dionysius Rom. Ant. 10.10.7; Josephus Ant. 1.3.1; 10.5.2. Culy et al. suggest "did not give a rip about people." Martin Culy, Mikeal Parsons and Joshua Stigall, *Luke:A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 562.

[69] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 672.

[70] Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 638.

[71] "Defender of widows" becomes synonymous with the name and character of God. So Psalm 68:5; Ex 22:22-24; Deut 10:16-18; 14:28-29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-22; 26:12-13.

[72] Mal 3:5; Isa 1:16-17, 23; 10:2; Ezek 22:7.

[73] So Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (helpless, powerless); Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 672 ("typically needy and helpless person"); Levine & Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke, 484* (helpless, marginalised, disenfranchised).

seen, feminist scholars object to this characterisation, and they are right to do so.[74] Our parable's widow is certainly not helpless. And it simply does not follow from the recognition that a certain class of persons might be societally or systemically disadvantaged or vulnerable that any particular one of those persons need be helpless, powerless, pathetic or passive. These particular provisions in law arise due to recognition of the disenfranchisement of widows, orphans and foreigners. And so they are an attempt to redress the limitations of a culture and social system, not the inherent weakness of individuals. Vulnerability – if it is socially constructed – is not the same as lack of capacity or agency. To put the point in terms crucial to feminist theory more generally: to recognise that women are vulnerable in patriarchal cultures is not to say that women are weaker or less capable than men, it is to say that society is structured in such a way that men can and do exercise power – both personal and structural – in a way that marginalises women. Therefore laws, provisions, or services that work to benefit women in patriarchal cultures aim not at helping women because women cannot help themselves, but at helping women to work within systems that are stacked against them.[75] This is what philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff terms *corrective* justice: a provision in case of breakdown of *distributive* or *commutative* justice.[76]

So, we can recognise the vulnerability of the widow's situation – perhaps even the need for special treatment – without accepting a characterisation of her as helpless, or downplaying her portrayal as one who takes initiative and acts to ensure that she receives what the law provides for. She is both vulnerable and bold. She is both a victim and an agent. Moreover, she remains vulnerable only so long as the judge continues to deny her rightful claim to justice.[77]

As for ἐκδικέω, when we include 18:6–8 the term becomes even more significant,

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[74] It is on this basis that Febbie Dickerson rejects any interpretation of the parable as about the righteous pursuit of justice. She writes: "Readings that situate the widow as seeking justice locate widows as perpetually in a marginalized position." (Dickerson, *Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes*, 58.). As we shall see I do not think it follows necessarily that to see her as wronged is to view her as inherently vulnerable and needy.

[75] A modern example would be affirmative action or preferential hiring practices, an ancient one Levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10). Best-practice models in the field of violence prevention also reflect this dynamic. Two Old Testament stories bear out this analysis in resonance with our parable. Tamar (Genesis 38) and Ruth (book of Ruth) are both childless widows. Both come under the reach of the law of levirate marriage but are unable – initially – to fulfil it. Both women must act boldly – perhaps even somewhat shockingly – in order to provide an heir, and both are commended for doing so. Dickerson acknowledges that the stories of Ruth and Tamar challenge the stereotype of widows as helpless and needy but denies the possibility that this could be part of Luke's relevant background, stating that Luke "domesticates the active widow" (*Luke, Widows, Judges and Stereotypes,* 69).

[76] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), ix.

[77] This is consistent with William Herzog's main points of interpretation in his influential *Parables as Subversive Speech.* He writes that the parable exposes "the conflict between the Torah as it exists ideally and the Torah as it functions in practice. In addition, this chapter focuses on the importance of the widow as an oppressed woman whose voice breaks the culture of silence in which she is immersed and forces an accommodation with the Torah as practiced by the judges of unrighteousness or injustice." William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)*,* 215.

appearing a further two times, plus the use of ἀδικίαςin verse 6. It is unfair therefore to suggest that Luke's commentary entirely displaces the original focus of the parable. But what of its meaning? Is Levine right that what the widow wants is not justice but vengeance – for her opponent to be punished? It seems a stretch to see punishment (or even the opponent) as the focus here, as the object of ἐκδικέω is the wronged party.[78] That said, it is not altogether clear why a desire for appropriate penalty or punishment for the wrongdoer necessarily turns the widow into a morally ambiguous or negative example. We must resist the characterisation of women who desire to see consequences handed down to men who harm them as vindictive, spiteful, or unforgiving. If the widow has indeed been wronged then she is right to pursue justice, including appropriate penalties, which sometimes have proper motives other than vengeance or revenge. To procure justice for a victim will sometimes include imposing a cost on the perpetrator. All that said, the Old Testament background combined with Luke's explicit description of the judge as ἀδικίας is enough for us to recognise that we are intended to view the widow's cause as just. She does nothing worse than to demand that the judge do his duty.[79]

2.3 Resolution: The Judge's Verdict

The Judge's refusal of the widow's claim is entirely consistent with his characterisation – he does not fear God, nor does he follow God's commands. He recognises no special claim on her part, nor responsibility on his. When he does relent, it is only because it is in his interest to do so. The judge's soliloquy provides the turning point of the story[80] though it puts him in questionable company[81] and confirms the previous description of him (18:2). Levine concludes that this is "a legal decision based not on merit but on threat."[82] It remains the case though, that there is merit to the widow's claim, even if it is not this which ultimately motivates the judge. The merit of the claim is not removed by the pragmatic means of its deliverance.

But is it true that the judge is under threat? It is likely that the usage of ὑπωπιάζῃ here is

[78] So Marshall notes re: v 7: "ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν means 'to vindicate,' in the sense of punishing offenders and or of rescuing those who are in trouble… Here the latter thought is uppermost, since there is no mention of the opponents of the elect… the thought, therefore, is not in any sense vindictive." Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 673-4.

[79] Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech,* 230.

[80] Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 640, as also in the parables of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) and The Dishonest Manager (16:1-9).

[81] The Rich Farmer (12:16-21); The Unfaithful Servant (12:42-46); The Prodigal Son (15:11-32); The Dishonest Manager (16:1-9) and the Wicked Tenants (20:9-16), see Levine, *Short Stories,* 253.

[82] Levine, *Short Stories,* 264.

intended either in a figurative[83] or hyperbolic sense.[84] This is consistent with παρέχειν μοι κόπον in 5a, suggesting that the judge just really wants to be rid of her – she is causing him work/labour, and her continued coming begins to cause embarrassment. But the reversal of situations is notable too. In this story, it is the widow who seeks justice and the judge who experiences vulnerability. The one who ought to have secured the fortunes of the widow – the powerful, capable, instrument of righteousness (the judge) – has failed, and it is "the lowly widow" whose initiative and action secures the good. Though God's law provides for justice, human representatives of that law will fail, and sometimes the godly must call them to account. The force exercised by the widow is not violence or coercion, but juridical power: she is on the side of justice.

2.4 Theological Interpretation

Verses 6–7: The Judge and the Justice of God

"And the Lord said" (εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος, 18:6) signals the change from the story to interpretation. "Listen" (ακούω) is used commonly by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels when teaching in parables to encourage a certain kind of hearing that "leads to appropriate action."[85] Price has argued that the focus on the judge here shifts the meaning of the unit from the widow to the judge, and that without it the story would be simply about the widow.[86] But the parable and the comments are about both the widow and the judge.[87] We are to learn from both characters in different ways.

The emphatic negative οὐ μὴ combined with the subjunctive ποιήσῃ (18:7) gives a rhetorical question with an emphatic "yes" for an answer.[88] Hence the usual interpretation of

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[83] A figurative sense is preferred by a majority of commentators (so Thompson, *Luke,* 278; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 673; Bock *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1449; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985)*,* 1179; Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech,* 230; Culy et al, *Luke,* 564; though not Bauer and Danker, 1043), though there is a disagreement over whether the judge is a) emotionally worn down, or b) fears being shamed (Culy et al, *Luke,* 564; John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 868.

[84] Joel Green suggests something close to this, though he does not use the term hyperbole. Though he prefers a more literal translation ("give me a black eye"), he understands this as something like a rhetorical device: a humorous exaggeration, incongruent for the character of a widow, and designed to startle the audience. (*The Gospel of Luke,* 640).

[85] Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 640. Matthew 13:3-15, 43; 15:10; 21:33; Mark 4:3,9,12, 23; 7:14; Luke 8:8,10,18; 14:35; 18:6.

[86] Price, *Widow Traditions,* 195.

[87] Blomberg has shown that we can draw lessons from more than one character. Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 274.

[88] Thompson, *Luke,* 278; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 673-4; Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1451.

the judge's character as a "lesser to greater" argument (also known as *a fortiori, minore ad maius,* or *qal va-homer*). If the judge – who is unjust – will grant justice, *how much more* will God? Yes, he will grant justice! No, he will not delay! To bring the point home further the closeness of relationship between God and his people is emphasised. The judge deals with an unknown widow, God with "his elect" (τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ).[89] This term also brings the eschatological context back into view and broadens the reference from one woman to all of God's people.[90] Both elements – the lesser-to-greater argument, and the priority of relationship – strengthen the link with Jesus' teaching in 11:5–13, emphasising God's readiness to "give good gifts to his children." But the lesser-to-greater argument is not just about the greater goodness of God and therefore the certainty of God's justice, it is also about the nature of the claim. Rabbinic literature shows that the *qal va-homer* ("light to heavy") argument was often used for Torah interpretation, arguing from an example in "this smaller, less important matter" to a verdict for "this greater, more important one." In this case, if a human judge will deliver the right verdict in this (unknown everyday) case, how much more will God grant justice for those who have a just claim.[91] Further, Anthony Thiselton and others have argued that Jesus' parables should be understood as speech-acts or language events. They are utterances whereby Jesus does not only *say* something, but also *does* something: "Jesus does not use the language of parables to convey ideas or concepts. In the very uttering of the parables, Jesus calls, promises, demands, or gives."[92] Verse 7 indicates this parable's function as a promise of God's vindication.

The most difficult element of the whole pericope is 7b. Thompson gives three main options,[93] while Bock offers twelve![94] The NRSV's translation ("Will he delay long in helping them?") is well supported by commentators as most contextually consistent with 7a and 8a.[95] It is further supported by Sirach 35:18 and surrounding, a passage which has many parallels

[89] Thompson, *Luke,* 279; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 674.

[90] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 674.

[91] Louis Jacobs, "The "qal va-ḥomer" Argument in the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 35, no. 2 (1972): 221-227; Richard Hidary, "Hellenism and Hermeneutics: Did the Qumranites and Sadducees Use *qal va-ḥomer* Arguments?," in *Hā'îsh Mōshe: Studies in Scriptural Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature in Honor of Moshe J. Bernstein,* eds. Binyamin Y. Goldstein, Michael Segal, and George J. Brooke (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 162-165.

[92] Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Parables as Language-Event: Some Comments on Fuchs's Hermeneutics in the Light of Linguistic Philosophy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, no. 4 (1970): 438. (Here Thiselton is referring to work by Fuchs. I have removed references to the German, which he included in brackets.)

[93] Thompson, *Luke,* 279.

[94] Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1452-1454.

[95] Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1453; Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 641; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 674-676.

with this parable.[96] The problem with this view arises if the emphasis on immediacy is seen to stand in tension with Luke's concern elsewhere to acknowledge the delay of Christ's return.[97] Alternatively then, Culy et al. suggest, "Isn't he patiently waiting for them to do just that?" (that is, to cry to him day and night). This rendering gives a reason for the delay, whilst still providing assurance. Moreover, it reinforces the contrast between the judge and God, showing that – unlike the judge – God wants τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ to seek him out. Contextually speaking, this option seems weaker, but possible.

Verse 8: Imminence or Delay?

Jesus declares that justice will come "quickly" (18:8a), though 8b, 18:1 and 17:22 suggest not immediately. This reflects the tension – present more widely in Luke-Acts – between imminence and delay in thinking about the return of Christ. I take it that the primary point here is not timing but certainty.[98] 8b pivots again, directing attention away from God and to Jesus' followers. Certainty combined with at least some sense of delay provide the motivation for persistence and readiness. Πίστις here is certainly to be understood with the sense of faithfulness.[99] The widow then is our model of faith/fulness – presented as persistent prayer and the pursuit of justice.

3 Feminist Concerns about Eschatology and Justice

It is important now to consider in more depth the themes of eschatology and justice that this parable raises. Justice is a key concern of the pericope, but exactly what justice amounts to, or when and how it occurs are at best underdetermined and at worst, confused. Is justice achieved today, in the current world? Or is it delivered at the coming of the Son of Man? Is justice "earthly" – tangible, physical, temporal (that is, social, relational, economic, political, legal) – or does it refer only to an eschatological event, or to a "spiritual" reality? Is it simply approval or rejection at the coming of the Son of Man?

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[96] Sirach 35:12-20. Thematic links include God's justice and impartiality, God listening to orphans and widows, a widow seeking justice against an opponent, prayer, specifically prayers for justice.

[97] See Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber, 1960), 96-97.

[98] Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 294-295; Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 642. Cf. Febbie Dickerson, for whom the problem of delayed justice/vindication provides further reason to resist Luke's narrative framing of the parable (Dickerson, *Luke, Widows, Judges and Stereotypes,* 27).

[99] So Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 676-677; Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53,* 1455-1456; Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 642-643. The use of the article with πίστις (τὴν πίστιν) is unusual and usually taken to be anaphoric, referring back to 18:1 and thus suggesting faithfulness as persistent prayer (Thompson, *Luke,* 280; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* 676).

As we have seen, one of the concerns about the Lukan framing of the parable is that its meaning is altered from an encouragement to action to an instruction to wait. It takes the power away from the widow and renders her passive. She is no longer instrumental in securing justice for herself, but becomes one who must wait for God to deliver it. Not only that, but the meaning of justice itself is altered: postponed from the present to the future, and no longer specific but generalised. This observation echoes the main lines of concern from feminist theologians about much Christian eschatology. As Catherine Keller summarises:

> Often feminism rejects any eschatology as dualistic, deterministic, and otherworldly. Certainly, feminist theory privileges history over eternity, social justice over supernatural deferral, and responsibility over salvation. Its hope is oriented to life, not afterlife.[100]

To put the point more strongly, it is often argued that this privileging of eternity over history, and the deferral of justice has too often served "the interests of oppression and denial."[101] It will "justify earthly suffering and frustration by the promise of heavenly compensation."[102] Feminist readers must allow ourselves to feel the full force of this critique. Many, if not the majority of women victims of violence and abuse will never receive justice on earth. Many crimes go unspoken. When spoken they are disbelieved. If prosecuted, they very often fail.[103] Many women do not pursue justice because they feel that to do so would be fruitless, having seen how patriarchal cultures struggle to take with full seriousness the experiences and testimony of women. It is undoubtedly true that in many cases Christian theology has exacerbated this tendency.[104] Theological concepts such as forgiveness, reconciliation, submission and *imitatio Christi*, if not carefully constructed, conspire with patriarchal culture to make godliness look like passivity and to keep women in oppressive

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[100] Catherine Keller, "Eschatology," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 87.

[101] Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Some Last Words About Eschatology," *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 221.

[102] Plantinga Pauw, "Some Last Words," 221.

[103] The "2019 Rape Inspection" by the HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) found that of 58,657 allegations of rape in the 2018/2019 year in the UK, only 1,925 were successfully prosecuted. It concluded: "the justice system is failing victims." HMCPSI, "2019 Rape Inspection: A thematic review of rape cases by HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate," (December 2019), 7. Accessed on 25/05/2020, at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmcpsi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/12/Rape-inspection-2019-1.pdf

[104] For explorations of Christian theology and Violence Against Women see Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: a Feminist Critique* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1989); Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune, eds., *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

situations with the promise that "all will be alright in the end" or "this life is not really what matters." The following excerpt from Australian reporting on domestic abuse within the church reveals exactly this:

> A few years ago, a Victorian woman alerted her pastor to the fact that her husband was raping, hitting and verbally abusing her, while taking drugs. When the pastor told her to pray about it, she asked: 'What if he kills me first?' The pastor's response was: 'At least you'll go to heaven.'[105]

So, we should take this worry seriously. Does Luke's framing of the parable in terms of prayer (v 1), faith (v 8) and the coming of the Son of Man (v 8) undermine the cause of justice? Does it discourage women victims from seeking justice now, encouraging them instead to simply pray? Or, to put the question in terms of the text, what kind of faithfulness is the Son of Man looking for?

As it concerns the history of interpretation, this feminist critique hits the mark. The parable has often been simplistically rendered – summarised entirely by its opening phrase, it encourages us all "to pray always and not lose heart." Ancient interpreters of this ilk include Augustine, Origen and Cyril.[106] Modern commentators include William Barclay, Craig Evans, and Luke Timothy Johnson.[107] David Crump's exposition of the parable in his Biblical theology of prayer might be seen as a particularly egregious example. Crump warns explicitly against any "creep" in our interpretation to practical, social application – however worthy it might be. The parable, he says, is just about prayer.[108]

We have four reasons to see that the eschatological dimension of the parable's meaning does not subsume the importance of the pursuit of justice here and now. First, we have already noted the tension throughout Luke-Acts between imminence and delay. Some scholars read Luke as presenting Christ's return as either clearly imminent (so Nolland, J. Bradley Chance) or distant (Conzelmann). Both views are oversimplifications, for each have textual support. Luke, it seems, is ambivalent about the timing of the return of the Son of Man (18:7–8; 21:31-32; cf 12:45; 17:22; 18:1; 19:11), perhaps suggesting that (following Jesus in Acts 1:7) too

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[105] Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson, "How to navigate the research on domestic violence and Christian churches: A few frequently asked questions," *ABC News Online,* 24 July 2017, updated 5 October 2017, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-24/how-to-navigate-the-research-on-domestic-violence/8738738

[106] Dickerson, *Luke, Widows, Judges and Stereotypes,* 44-48.

[107] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: The St Andrew Press, 1975), 222; Craig Evans, *Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 266-267; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 273-274.

[108] David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 88.

much focus on timing is misguided. So, regarding the Parousia, two elements seem more important to Luke than timing. First, as in our parable, teaching about the return of Christ is very often accompanied by instruction about how to live in the meantime (12:35–48; 17:20–35; 19:11–26; 21:34–36; also Acts 1:7–8.) This is true whether the passage in question indicates an imminent or a delayed coming. Second, Luke also presents the kingdom of God as, at least in some sense, already at hand "today" (4:21; 19:9).

For Luke the kingdom of God has both present and future dimensions which are not incompatible. That is, belief in a future coming (even an imminent one) need not render the present irrelevant, nor does a focus on kingdom work in the present reveal a lack of hope in the future. Any eschatology which renders the experiences of the present irrelevant grossly misrepresents Luke's presentation of the coming of Jesus. Jesus is not just coming (future), he has already come. And with him God's future has begun.[109] Further, Luke's presentation of what that means is emphatically not to "devalue life in this world,"[110] as Ruether and other feminist critics assert. This interpretation is based on the importing of a later dualism, one that is foreign to the Old Testament prophetic framework within which Luke presents Jesus. Jesus' programmatic statement about his ministry (4:18–19) is for the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed. He inaugurates "the year of the Lord's favour" (4:19, from Isaiah 58:6; 61:1–2), the "year of jubilee/release" (Lev 25:10).[111] The arrival of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus brought the (previously thought future) justice of God to the here and now in very concrete ways. We have already noted the Old Testament's particular concern for widows and other vulnerable persons in relation to justice. Luke presents Jesus as embodying this concern in the present in his interactions with the Widow of Nain (7:11–17, note v 16 "God has come to help his people") and the haemorrhaging woman (8:42b–48). Both women receive not just spiritual, emotional, and/or physical benefit, but Jesus' miracles also result in their social and economic prospects being improved.[112] In Acts, Luke affirms that the risen Jesus carries on this work through the church by the indwelling of his Spirit (Acts 1:7–8; 2:17–21).[113]

Third, we see this dual nature of the kingdom reflected in the immediate context of this

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[109] For discussion of Luke's eschatology and the priority of the present see, for example, Green, *Theology of the Gospel of Luke,* 94-101; Darrell Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 389-405.

[110] Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk,* 250.

[111] Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke,* 78.

[112] So Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 292, 349. We note too that the story of the hemorrhaging woman, along with the woman of 7:36-50 present further examples of vulnerable women who take initiative, act in faith, and are commended by Jesus.

[113] Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts,* 390ff.

parable. We have already noted that 17:22–36 speaks of the future coming of the Son of Man, but immediately prior, in 17:20–21, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God already "in your midst."[114]

Fourth, and lastly, though verse 1 introduces the parable as a lesson in prayer, verses 7–8 carry on the central concern of the parable itself – that of justice. The repeated use of ἐκδικέω links parable and frame, and allows us to see them as mutually interpretative. The argument that the imposition of the theme of prayer tames the widow into someone dependent and harmless, or provides "rationale for the denial of other work"[115] rests on faulty assumptions about prayer, namely that it is passive and ineffectual. But if we are intended to understand the parable as being about prayer, then we must allow the parable to inform our understanding of prayer. If faithfulness in prayer looks like the widow in our parable, then prayer is active, prayer is pursuit of justice, prayer is an exercise of faith (v 8), prayer is crying to God day and night (v 7), prayer must be like a widow persistently knocking at a judge's door (see also Luke 11:5–13). The widow is only tamed if we apply assumptions about prayer to her, rather than allow her to become a model of prayer for us. Thus I think we are to see prayer and the pursuit of justice as going hand in hand, just as we are to see the arrival of the kingdom of God in Jesus as of a piece with its future coming.[116] What we cry out for God to deliver in the future, we also pursue in the present. Our prayers and our lives work in tandem. As St. Basil the Great writes in his homily *On the Martyr Julitta*:

> We should not express our prayer merely in syllables, but the power of prayer should be expressed in the moral attitude of our soul and in the virtuous actions that extend throughout our life. This is how you pray continually – not by offering prayer in words, but by joining yourself to God through your whole way of life, so that your life becomes one continuous and uninterrupted prayer.[117]

If the kingdom of God is a reality, and the risen Christ continues his work through the

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[114] Conzelmann notes the challenge of reconciling these differing perspectives in 17:20-21 and 17:22-37, resolving it by suggesting that Luke's concept of Kingdom is entirely future, and that any earthly manifestations are "the message of the Kingdom" but not "the Kingdom itself." Similarly, on 4:16-30 he suggests that in the coming of Jesus "the end is foreshadowed, but has not yet arrived." As we have seen, I regard Conzelmann's view as an unbalanced accounting of the evidence, particularly Luke's OT framing of Jesus' coming. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke,* 122, 103.

[115] Price, *Widow Traditions,* 11.

[116] So Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 641: "crying out to God" (v 7)… must be correlated with practices consistent with the dogged pursuit of justice (vv 2-5); "faith has been narratologically expounded with reference to its pursuit of justice."

[117] St. Basil the Great, "On the Martyr Julitta," in *On Fasting and Feasts,* translated by Mark DelCogliano and Susan R. Holman (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013).

church by his Spirit, then Christians are called to participate in that reality, to live lives that reflect its truth. This is the reason for the New Testament's emphasis on changed lives and communities in the present. The judge in the story was ἀδικίας precisely because he refused to instantiate God's values – to render justice where it was due. Conversely, the widow is an example of one who is found faithful *at* that future time because she is one who is faithful *until* that time.[118]

So, must eschatology blunt our pursuit of justice and flourishing in the present? It need not. And when we put the question in Luke's own terms rather than dogmatic ones, it is easier to see why. Where and when is the Kingdom (including the justice) of God? It is both "now and not yet," both present and future. What we hope for in the future we also live for now. Further, and perhaps more importantly, what God promises to complete in the future, God is also at work doing now by his Spirit.

I have here offered a narrative-theological reading of the parable of the Persistent Widow including and in light of its Lukan frame as a form of feminist post-critique. This interpretation reads "with" Luke by accepting his interpretative keys of prayer, justice, and eschatology. I have argued, though, that reading with Luke does not entail reading *against* the original unit of the parable itself. Instead, I have suggested that the two can be mutually interpretative. Ultimately, I argue that this remains a feminist reading because it reveals that women who are victims of injustice deserve God's favour, and are encouraged to seek it.[119] It suggests that faithfulness in turning to and crying out to God during the difficulties of the period of delay in the coming of the Son of Man *properly includes,* as Green says, "the active quest for justice."[120] Therefore, the reparative reading captures the emphasis on action and agency of the feminist redaction-critical readings, while grounding that action in God's promise and faithfulness. The parable encourages us to pray for deliverance and also to act for justice. That justice ultimately does not depend solely on our own ability to achieve it is no diminishment of agency, nor a demand for passivity, but a hopeful and liberative promise. There will be vindication. And it is hope in this sure future that animates our work now.

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[118] On this point, Spencer notes recent reconsiderations of faith which emphasise faithfulness. Spencer, *Salty Wives,* 312.

[119] Spencer, following Schottroff resists any focus on the judge/God character, in order to keep interpretation focused on the widow as model of discipleship and prayer, and not to overshadow her by the male character. Ultimately I think this is unhelpful. The parable invites reflection on both characters, and it is the assurance of God's Justice that animates the active quest. Spencer, *Salty Wives,* 293.

[120] Green, *Gospel of Luke,* 638.

4 Finding God's Justice – A Hermeneutics of Faith and Persistence

4.1 When Justice Fails

There is one further element of the parable that is perhaps particularly pertinent, both practically and pastorally, for women victims of violence who remain members of religious communities. That is the recognition of the need for persistence when God's justice seems far off. For many women who have experienced abuse or violence from religious men, and for those who support them, the temptation to "lose heart" is very real. And whilst Price's reconstruction of the text's background is unconvincing, his observation that male religious leaders often "stand in" for God is well taken.[121] Most evidence suggests that women in churches experience violence, sexual harassment, and various forms of abuse at much the same rates as women in the wider population.[122] The distinctive problem for women in Christian churches and communities is not the rate of abuse or violence but the responses of their leadership to disclosures of abuse or violence. That is, religious leaders will often disbelieve, or engage in minimising and victim-blaming behaviours.[123] When these actions come from a person with spiritual authority, one who "stands in the place of God," they shape women's perceptions of God, as well as of God's attitude towards them and what has happened to them. This has profound spiritual consequences, is often re-traumatising, and in some cases constitutes spiritual abuse.[124] Judith Herman's recent work *Truth and Repair* highlights the essential role of public justice and vindication in the process of recovery from trauma. She writes:

> If trauma is truly a social problem, and indeed it is, then recovery cannot be simply a private, individual matter. The wounds of trauma are not merely those caused by the perpetrators of

[121] Price, *Widow Traditions,* 198.

[122] There is little reliable evidence, partly due to methodologic and definitional issues (different studies classify "religious persons" or "church attendance" in multiple and varied ways, for example). Some studies seem to suggest that church attendance is protective (Steven R. Tracy, "Patriarchy and Domestic Violence: Challenging Common Misconceptions," *JETS* 30, no. 3 (2007): 573-594; others that "nominal religion" is a risk factor (W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). One UK study found that "incidence in the Methodist Church reflected the incidence in society as a whole" (The Archbishop's Council, *Responding to Domestic Abuse: Guidelines for those with pastoral responsibilities* (Church House Publishing, 2006), 2.

[123] For recent examples in the Australian church context see reporting by Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson, "'Submit to your husbands': Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God," *ABC News Online,* 18 July 2017 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028?nw=0; "Raped, tracked, humiliated: Clergy wives speak out about domestic violence," *ABC News Online,* 24 Nov 2017, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-23/clergy-wives-speak-out-domestic-violence/9168096?nw=0.

[124] Erica Mandi Manga, "The characteristics of Spiritual Abuse," *Common Grace,* 2018, accessed 29/05/2020 at https://www.commongrace.org.au/the_characteristics_of_spiritual_abuse

> violence and exploitation; the actions or inactions of bystanders – all those who are complicit in or who prefer not to know about the abuse or who blame the victims – often cause even deeper wounds. These wounds are part of the social ecology of violence, in which crimes against subordinated and marginalised people are rationalised, tolerated, or rendered invisible. If trauma originates in a fundamental injustice, then full healing must require repair through some measure of justice from the larger community.[125]

Herman is not sanguine about the achievements of legal justice, even in its best forms. She notes that often it is not a legal accounting that is most sought, so much as a truth-telling:

> Public acknowledgement of the truth [is] the necessary beginning of justice… Every survivor I interviewed for this book, and I daresay every survivor with whom I have ever worked, has wished above all for acknowledgment and vindication. Survivors want the truth to be recognised and the crime to be denounced by those in their communities who matter to them. But this means that survivors must actually matter to their wider communities. It also means that their credibility must be judged without prejudice.[126]

How does one keep faith in God's justice when God's representatives so often fail to deliver it? Unlike Luke's readers, Christian women survivors are persecuted not by opponents of the faith but by their own religious leaders. Women need to be reminded that though some religious leaders may indeed be much like the judge, God is not like the judge.[127] God knows the truth, and his justice is sure. Thiselton notes how parables invite us to enter their worlds, "in which distinctive values and verdicts confront the hearer at a deeper level than that which may be reached by theoretical discussion."[128] In this parable we enter a world characterised by injustice, but also one which reveals the power of the pursuit of justice.

4.2 Finding Justice: A Feminist Hermeneutics of Faith and Persistence

The place of the Scriptures within Christian communities allows a comparison between the experience of God mediated via Christian communities described above, and many women's experience of reading the Scriptures and hearing them taught. Encountering God via Scripture can be hard work, and it can be painful. Sometimes God's justice and goodness seem hidden.

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[125] Judith Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (London: Basic Books, 2023), 3.
[126] Herman, *Truth and Repair,* 15-16.
[127] Unfortunately this comparison is all too easy to draw, when those who do finally act on allegations do so only when they can no longer get away with covering them up. See reporting on sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention, e.g. David Roach, "Southern Baptists Disfellowship Church Over Abuse for the First Time," *Christianity Today,* 19 Feb 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/february/southern-baptist-church-disfellowshipped-over-abuse-ec-meet.html
[128] Thiselton, "The Parables as Language-Event," 446.

In the introduction to her book *Texts of Terror,* Phyllis Trible presents the story of Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok (Gen 32:22–32) as her paradigm for engagement with the Biblical encounters with terror.[129] Jacob's wrestling provides encouragement for her own struggles "at the boundary of faith and feminism."[130] God wounds, even as he blesses. She writes: Jacob's defiant words to the stranger I take as a challenge to the Bible itself: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'"[131] But note the uncertainty implicit in this model:

> The fight itself is solitary and intense. We struggle mightily, only to be wounded. But yet we hold on, seeking a blessing: the healing of wounds and the restoration of health. If the blessing comes – and we dare not claim assurance – it does not come on our terms. Indeed, as we leave the land of terror, we limp.[132]

Trible's work has been important for me, but in my own theological work thinking against the backdrop of trauma, sexual violence and the abuse of women, the Jacob story as model doe not seem quite right. Jacob was an usurping, manipulative, deceitful and cowardly trickster. The women of his household were unloved, and as a result, jealous and competitive. Jacob's encounter with God and his resultant wounding was a much-needed humbling experience which resulted in a change of character. For Jacob, becoming Israel was about learning to submit himself to God's rule. Further, the model implies a power struggle: the taking of something not intended to be given. Jacob is more like the unjust judge than the widow, and too many women are already wounded and limping. And so I submit that our widow might provide a more fruitful paradigm for feminist engagement with the Scriptures.

My tentative proposal then, furthering the conceptual modelling work done in chapter 3, is that the Parable of the Persistent Widow might be thought of as a guide not just for conceiving of our relationship with God in prayer and action, but also a program for our engagement with the Bible – a model of a feminist second naiveté. In particular, it can be a model for our engagement with those parts of the Bible which seem to so inadequately deal with acts of violence against women. The parable gives us two things to guide our reading: a conviction, and a method. Our guiding conviction (perhaps we could even call it faith) is that God will grant justice. Our method is persistence. These two things combined mean that we look toward,

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[129] The same story is used also by Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020)*,* 165 and Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?,* 381.

[130] Trible, "Wrestling With Words," 230.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 4-5.

rather than away from the Bible in order to find justice. We keep looking until we find it. God's heart might be obscured by androcentric texts and traditions, but it is not lost. As Ellen Davis writes: "when we think we have reached the point of zero-edification, then that perception indicates that we are not reading deeply enough; we have not probed the layers of the text with sufficient care."[133] This is a feminist engagement with Scripture which practices both suspicion and trust: active interrogation that yet remains open to the good.

For Davis, it is the "critical traditioning" of the canon, the inner-Biblical hermeneutic, that authorises such an approach to Scripture.[134] Likewise for Richard Bauckham, who has argued that the book of Ruth functions canonically to authorise us to press beneath other narratives "written purely or largely from a male perspective."[135] Drawing from the understanding of parables described above (that parables are speech-acts whose imagery is irreducible to pure "propositional content" and which invite us to enter their worlds and be reoriented by Jesus' perspective), and from our understanding of the *qal va-homer* argument, this parable offers a similar kind of authorisation. The parable functions as a promise, but also as a call to action to seek justice in the face of injustice.

Conclusion

The reparative reading of the parable provided above shows the benefits of moving beyond suspicion in feminist hermeneutics. The suspicious readings examined offered little hope, viewing the Christian tradition as resistant to women's claims for equality and justice, and suggesting that the best to be hoped for is what can be secured by our own efforts. On the other hand, a reparative reading which takes feminist concerns seriously, while remaining open to the possibility of God's speaking, and attentive to the text's genre and rhetorical features, instills confidence, hope, and a foundation for persistence. With a reparative approach we can do more with texts of terror than to read *in memoriam.* We can enact a kind of "resistance" that is itself authorised by the text: to simultaneously resist and receive the text. For our resistance is not to God himself but to unjust and faithless men (the judge) who fail to do God's work as they should. When it comes to the text of Scripture, we can say the same. Resistance is not to God himself, nor to the Word of God given in and through Scripture. Resistance is to the human element of the text and its use – the ways in which God's Word or will is obscured, denied,

[133] Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 734.
[134] Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 734.
[135] Richard Bauckham, *Is the Bible Male? The Book of Ruth and Biblical Narrative* (Grove Books, 1996), 17.

disobeyed, neglected, or simply not yet fully grasped or realised.

The parable encourages us to pray for deliverance and also to act for justice. That justice ultimately does not depend solely on our own ability to achieve it is, I argue, no diminishment of agency, nor a demand for passivity, but a hopeful and liberative promise: there will be vindication. And it is hope in this sure future that animates our work now. This reading – unlike Trible's model and the suspicious readings examined – shows that we can have confidence in the outcome. We can have confidence in God's disposition towards us and confidence that God's justice is sure. So, we can assure women and all those who struggle to see the goodness of God in some parts of the Scriptures that it is right to interrogate and to pursue justice. In this way, the Son of Man *will* find faith when he comes – a faith that perseveres both in prayer and in action on behalf of the oppressed, and that travels that path not in spite of, but in step with the Scriptures.

Chapter 5

Trauma and Recovery in Biblical Interpretation:

The Problem of Stuck-ness and the Power of Resurrection

"If we discount the story of God's gracious action, what remains is decidedly nontherapeutic."[1]

Introduction: Trauma as a Feminist Issue

In her landmark 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery* Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman established our understanding of women's "private horrors" as traumatic events. She argued that the impact of horrors such as incest, child sexual abuse, and domestic abuse and violence is best understood as a form of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Powerfully, Herman demonstrates that in cases where abuse is ongoing or chronic – as is common in forms of domestic and sexual abuse of both women and children – the closest parallels are to those who have suffered as political prisoners, victims of torture, in slave labour, or in concentration camps. *Trauma and Recovery* was the field-changing text which enabled a new understanding of domestic abuse as *captivity*, maintained by *coercive control.*

Understanding domestic abuse as an ongoing pattern of coercive control rather than simply as isolated incidents of "violence" allows us to see the many and varied ways in which domestic abuse can manifest (emotional, physical, psychological, economic, spiritual). Further, it helps us to account for the significant and ongoing psychological impacts experienced by survivors. Herman writes: "the psychological impact of subordination to coercive control may have many common features, whether that subordination occurs within the public sphere of politics or within the private sphere of sexual and domestic relations."[2] The distinctive impact of chronic abuse led Herman to propose a new diagnostic label: "complex post-traumatic stress disorder." Complex-PTSD more accurately captures the features of the kinds of trauma responses arising

[1] Ellen F. Davis and Richard B Hays, "Introduction," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, xiv.

[2] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 75.

from prolonged and repeated trauma.[3]

Trauma studies began to gain legitimacy only as recently as the 1970's and 80's. In 1980 war trauma was recognised as a diagnosis and included in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM) as "post-traumatic stress disorder." It was around that same time that the burgeoning feminist movement began to bring to light the violence that remained a routine part of women's domestic and sexual lives. The safety and solidarity of women's consciousness-raising groups – not dissimilar, in fact, to veterans groups – gave women the confidence to begin to speak out publicly. Violence against women and its traumatic effects began to be investigated honestly for the first time and the results were staggering. One study in the early 1980's found one in four women had been raped, and one in three had been sexually abused in childhood.[4] The feminist movement gave women a new language, even a new paradigm, for understanding and articulating their own experiences.[5] It gave them permission and authority to name them for themselves. Herman writes: "entering the public discussion of rape for the first time, women found it necessary to establish the obvious: that rape is an atrocity."[6] Susan Brownmiller wrote powerfully of rape and sexual violence as a means through which men's power over women is maintained.[7] Rape was "the feminist movement's initial paradigm for violence against women in the sphere of personal life" but as time went on, investigation broadened to include forms of violence in ongoing domestic relationships, including domestic abuse and child sexual abuse.

The role of violence against women in the maintenance of male power and female subordination brings us again to the primary question of this study. For one of the most troubling aspects of the Bible's patriarchal and androcentric bias is its treatment of violence against women. Whilst very few commentators explicitly approve of the violent acts themselves, the silencing of women's voices, victim-blaming, and minimising are all standard practice, both reflecting and reinforcing the maintenance of male power and female

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[3] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 119.

[4] D. E. H. Russell, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Sexual Harassment* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984) cited in Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 30. Herman points out that these numbers complicate the definition of trauma as "an event outside the range of ordinary experience." See discussion in Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 34; also Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Currently, in Australia, ANROWS estimate that one in four women have experienced domestic abuse (Jess Hill, *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Domestic Abuse* (Carlton, VIC: Black Inc., 2019), 4.

[5] Described helpfully by Miranda Fricker as overcoming "Hermeneutical injustice" (a form of epistemic injustice). Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 147.

[6] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 30.

[7] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975),14-15.

subordination. If the Christian tradition and its sacred texts speaks about women's suffering in such ways, Christian women know that in these places they too are likely to be silenced, blamed, and their harms minimised.

In this chapter we turn to trauma studies and trauma theology as another tool for feminist interpretation of Scripture. As Biblical scholars and theologians seek to incorporate the insights and methods of trauma theory into their work, they have developed what has come to be known as a trauma hermeneutic. I will argue that the trauma hermeneutic is rightly seen as a form of suspicious reading. So, we will ask: what does a trauma hermeneutic offer for feminist interpretation, and what are its limitations? And what are the possibilities "beyond" suspicion for trauma hermeneutics in feminist interpretation? Our text for study is John 20:1–18, Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus after his death. We examine Shelly Rambo's trauma reading of this text and present a feminist reparative reading of the same. In contrast to Rambo's presentation of Jesus as ghostly apparition, I offer a reading of Mary's encounter as a narrative of post-traumatic remaking, enabled by the real presence of the resurrected Jesus.

1 Trauma Hermeneutics

From these recent beginnings in psychiatry and psychology, the study of trauma has grown into an interdisciplinary endeavour with significant reach and important implications. It has expanded to consider not just individual trauma, but communal and historical forms of trauma, and has been taken up with enthusiasm within critical studies in the humanities – in particular, in the fields of sociology and literature. We can now speak of something like "trauma studies" or even "trauma theory" although, much like feminist studies or feminist theory, these terms denote a diverse body of work circling around similar questions or concerns, rather than any discernible unity of method or perspective.[8]

Insights into trauma and interpretation have also made their way into Biblical studies and theology. Serene Jones, one of the first theologians to work on trauma, began with the observation that not only is the Bible "one long series of traumatic events,"[9] but Christianity's defining event itself is utterly traumatic:

[8] Eric Wertheimer and Monica J. Casper, "Within Trauma: An Introduction," in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life,* ed. Eric Wetheimer and Monica Casper (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 3-4.

[9] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), xi-xii.

> It's hard to imagine anywhere in literature or in the annals of human experience a more traumatic event than the torture and execution of this man Jesus… It was designed to terrorize the people who watched it and to humiliate, shame, and utterly destroy the person experiencing it. So, for Christianity, understanding trauma is not just a kind of secondary issue – it is rather the most central event of our faith.[10]

In the introduction to *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, editors Elizabeth Boase and Christopher Frechette describe "trauma hermeneutics" or "the trauma lens" as "sensitivity to the nexus between historical events and literary representation… [bringing] into focus the relationship between traumatic experience and both the production and the appropriation of texts."[11] The insight that trauma texts carry meaning "not captured by the plain sense of a text"[12] opens up new avenues for meaning and interpretation. Undoubtedly, large portions of the Christian Bible emerged out of contexts of trauma, such as slavery, conquest, exile, and oppression. Chapters in this volume treat portions of Scripture variously as stories of individual trauma, resistance, and recovery (Juliana Claassens on the rape of Tamar); as "survival literature," performing the function of communal meaning making by providing narrative structure around otherwise overwhelming events (Ruth Poser on Ezekiel, Elizabeth Boase on Lamentations); or as potentially illuminating resources for recovery and healing in modern readers (several chapters in section 3 of the volume). Each of these approaches utilises an understanding of trauma to gain insight into the characters or implied authors of the texts in order to aid interpretation, or to offer their stories as pastoral resources for traumatised readers. Boase and Frechette conclude "trauma hermeneutics reflects upon the capacity of the text to support both solidarity and identity in ways that enhance well-being."[13] More specifically, the text can aid survivors to give voice to their own experience and to construct their own trauma narrative by "offering words that resonate with the experiences of collectives and individuals."[14]

Despite the keen uptake of trauma theory by Biblical scholars, trauma studies remains somewhat on the fringe amongst theologians. This is not to say that there is not important or influential work in this area, simply that the body of work remains small. Serene Jones and Shelly Rambo produced the first monographs on trauma theology in 2009 and 2010

[10] Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, xi-xii

[11] Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase, "Defining 'Trauma' as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma,* ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 13.

[12] Ibid, 13.

[13] Ibid, 14-15.

[14] Ibid, 15.

respectively,[15] and since then there has been steady but limited work particularly in feminist theology, and practical theology (especially in preaching and pastoral care).[16] Just as in trauma studies more generally, feminist work was an important impetus for early trauma theology, and remains a central, though not exclusive, focus today.[17] In what follows I am concerned with the trauma hermeneutic or "lens" as it is taken up in trauma theology. I will engage the work of constructive theologian Shelly Rambo. Rambo starts from a place of suspicion of traditional Christian interpretations and traditions which can be seen to invalidate, suppress, or pass over trauma. The trauma hermeneutic she develops is not the only form of trauma hermeneutics, however, it is representative in that it allows traumatic events and traumatised persons themselves to set the limits on engagement with the Biblical texts. Trauma provides either the explanation or the interpretation, unseating the (properly) theological.[18]

2 Shelly Rambo's Theology of Remaining

Shelly Rambo was a student of Serene Jones at Yale Divinity School in the early 2000's, during a period of burgeoning interdisciplinary collaborative work on trauma. Many early

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[15] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured* World (2009); Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

[16] Jennifer Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Aftermath of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017); Eric Boynton and Peter Capretto, eds., *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of* Theory (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary and the Body in Trauma* Theology (London: SCM Press, 2018); Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018); Scott Harrower, *God of All Comfort: A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of this World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019); Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross, eds., *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture and Church in Critical Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 2020); Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021); Joshua Cockayne, Scott Harrower & Preston Hill, *Dawn of Sunday: The Trinity and Trauma-Safe Churches* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2022).

[17] Rambo suggests that the groundwork for these focused efforts was laid by feminist and liberation theologies and theologians, particularly the work of Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, and God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); and Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). Rambo's own work has focused more on war veterans and survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Serene Jones has written on domestic abuse and reproductive loss, along with terrorism and race. Jennifer Beste's book deals specifically with women survivors of sexual abuse. Phyllis Sheppard examines the traumas of black women.

[18] I note at the outset some similarity with the work of Scott Harrower in *God of All Comfort.* Harrower interrogates the trauma hermeneutic by undertaking a horror-reading of the Gospel of Matthew followed by a reparative ("blessed") reading. I am in many ways indebted to Harrower's work and familiar readers may recognise much similarity. However, these parallel engagements with trauma and reparative readings are set within quite different larger projects. Harrower's work develops a "Trinitarian Response to Horrors," developing an account of mind-to-mind knowledge of God and spiritual seeing ("blessed reading") enabled by the Holy Spirit. My project here takes a different form, focused as it is on reading and readers, and on feminist concerns in particular.

trauma theorists worked together at Yale in the 1990's and early 2000's including Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth, bringing together psychoanalytic and literary approaches, particularly deconstruction. With a background in literature, Rambo saw how this distinctive phenomenology of suffering might ask important questions of Christian theology.[19] Rambo's first book *Spirit and Trauma* presents what she calls a "theology of remaining," or a "theology of the middle." The middle is "the figurative site in which death and life are no longer bounded. Instead, the middle speaks to the perplexing space of survival."[20] For Rambo, this notion of "middle" describes the experience of trauma – the invasion of life by death, the continued return of the traumatic event, the "excess, or remainder, of death in life that is central to trauma."[21] The usual Christian linear redemption narrative of death to life, Rambo argues, obscures this middle space, and thus it "fails to witness the experience of trauma."[22] Christian narratives of redemption, therefore, must be reconfigured by being relocated to this middle space: "to account for what exceeds death yet cannot be interpreted as new life."[23] For Jones, the problem of trauma in theology was essentially an epistemological one, a problem of "access" for the survivor. For Rambo, the problem is rooted more deeply in theology itself – in the very notions of life and death as they are narrated and conceptualised in the events of the cross and resurrection.

2.1 The Influence of Cathy Caruth and Literary Trauma Theory

Rambo takes up the trajectory of trauma scholarship of the Yale school, and specifically the literary trauma theory of Cathy Caruth. Her mode is literary criticism, and her method deconstruction. Rambo's trauma lens invokes the disruptions of "time, body, and word" that are the result of trauma, casting one's experience of all three into doubt. Under such circumstances, what remains? "The world is gone" and "another world emerges."[24] Her concept of "remaining" or the "crisis of the middle" is based on the work of Jacques Derrida. In his essay "Living On" Derrida understands "survival" as "living on" or "over-living:" "life

[19] Rambo describes something of this autobiographical background in an interview with Chelle Stearns in *The Other Journal.* Chelle Stern's and Shelly Rambo, "The Spirit's Witness: An Interview with Shelly Rambo," https://theotherjournal.com/2015/08/31/the-spirits-witness-an-interview-with-shelly-rambo/ accessed 26 Jan 2021.
[20] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 7.
[21] Ibid, 6.
[22] Ibid, 6.
[23] Ibid, 8.
[24] Ibid, 21.

exceeding itself."[25] Rambo writes:

> Surviving is not a state in which one gets beyond death; instead, death remains in the experience of survival and life is reshaped in light of death – not in light of its finality but its persistence. Persons who experience trauma live in the suspended middle territory, between death and life.[26]

Rambo adopts Caruth's positive reframing of the failure of reference as "simultaneously, an awakening of theory to witnessing trauma."[27] Deconstruction yields a way of reading which allows one to approach the otherwise inaccessible. Rambo's trauma readings of the Christian Scriptures can be understood to function similarly. She argues that a deconstructive reading allows one to approach (however imprecisely) the hidden dimensions of the text and can explore "the ways in which they can attest to traumatic experiences."[28] Such a reading is necessary, she claims, because of the influential role that Christian Scripture plays in the formation of people and communities. Traditional readings and theological categories have failed to witness to the experience of trauma, and so failed to speak to the depths of human suffering. Accessing the unknowable behind the knowing can give theology new language to speak to suffering: "I reexamine the theological 'lexicon' for its potential to speak in and beyond its limits, in and beyond the shattering of its own interpretive frameworks."[29] The result is a dramatic re-drawing of the theological maps: "Trauma theory provides a distinctive lens through which to interpret sacred texts and for rethinking the claims and central beliefs arising from them."[30] Specifically, the ever returning, interrupting, spectre of death which defines the trauma lens upsets the traditional relationship between death, life, and redemption.

Two elements of Rambo's theoretical approach are worth stating explicitly. First, the literary approach means that Rambo gives particular attention to literary and rhetorical features of the text, and to its aesthetic dimension. Theology arises from these, rather than being expressed by them. Second, the practice of deconstruction is central: hers is a reading that focuses on the gaps, elisions and omissions – the "silence" of the texts. This practice unmasks or unearths "dimensions of the texts that otherwise lie buried."[31] It is a rejection of language as

[25] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 25.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 30.
[28] Ibid, 30.
[29] Ibid, 17.
[30] Ibid, 30.
[31] Ibid, 31.

a straightforward framework of meaning, rather, following Caruth, it finds the referent of language in what is beyond representation or understanding.[32]

2.2 Theological Resources: Von Balthasar and the Theology of Holy Saturday

The primary theological construct through which Rambo explores this notion of "remaining" and "middle" is that of Holy Saturday. Building from the work and experience of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr on Christ's descent into hell, Rambo asks: "If we look from the site of Holy Saturday, what do we see? Holy Saturday reveals a distinct landscape of suffering that cannot be understood exclusively in terms of the passion neither can it be interpreted in relationship to resurrection."[33] Holy Saturday is middle space. In hell on Holy Saturday, the Son is dead. So too is he cut off from the love of the Father.[34] And yet strangely, argues Rambo, it is also a site of redemption. For something emerges from death: "a testimony to the persistence of love in utter forsakenness and abandonment."[35] What emerges from the wound of the crucified Christ is the "residue of love."[36]

But, having begun with Balthasar and Speyr, Rambo ultimately moves beyond them. She critiques their work for moving too readily to resolution, stating: "their increasing drive to develop a logic of redemption from the site of Holy Saturday leads them away from a vital testimony to the middle."[37] What Rambo objects to, specifically, is Balthasar and Speyr's construal of the meaning of Holy Saturday in Christocentric terms and in relation to the cross and resurrection.[38] Balthasar does not want Easter to come early, but it does still come. Rambo argues that this traditional formulation elides the seeds of an alternative way of parsing redemption from Holy Saturday, but that an "alternative witness" exists in and behind Balthasar

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid, 46.

[34] Rambo, with Balthasar, writes of Christ's descent to "hell." Though there has been some divergence on this point, traditionally the church has held that Christ's descent to "the dead" (as expressed in the Apostle's Creed) was not to hell (the place of eternal torment) but to *hades* (the waiting place of the dead). Rambo does not discuss this distinction. Matthew Emerson notes how Balthasar and Speyr's account of Holy Saturday as a site of suffering and humiliation represents a significant departure from its traditional formulation, and is a kind of hybrid view between Calvin (who saw the descent as a site of suffering, but one that occurred on Friday on the cross), the Fathers and Eastern Orthodoxy (who place the descent on Saturday as a moment of victory), and Roman Catholic mysticism (the concept of "the dark night of the soul" and Adrienne von Speyr's experience). Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 114-116.

[35] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 53.

[36] Ibid, 57

[37] Ibid, 47.

[38] Ibid, 48.

and Speyr's own language and logic. It is this alternative witness that Rambo seeks to unearth through a deconstructive reading of Balthasar. Detached from the cross and from resurrection, Holy Saturday takes on a new valence. Taking seriously the intractability of trauma, Rambo demands that theology must not move to resurrection in order to narrate redemption, but that redemption can and must be found *"*in the middle." From Holy Saturday redemption "is a weary residue of love that 'trickles on in impotence, unconsciously, laboriously, towards a new creation that does not yet even exist.'"[39] This is not the victory of resurrection, not even the secure bond of love between Father and Son, but "a testimony to Spirit, to a love that survives and remains not in victory but in weariness."[40]

When speaking of Spirit, Rambo rejects Balthasar's Augustinian formulation of the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son, and the "secure bridge that keeps this story from being a tragic one," and replaces it with an image of the spirit as "a fragile thread" emerging out of the crevasse or "a rope that fails to bridge the chasm."[41] In so doing, Rambo wants to sever not just the connection between death and resurrection, but also between Father and Son in the Godhead.

2.3 Rambo's Hermeneutic Applied

What is the result of this framework on Rambo's interaction with New Testament texts? In chapter 3 Rambo deals with two narratives from the Gospel of John commonly thought of as resurrection appearances: the appearance to Mary Magdalene in John 20:1–18 and the stories involving the beloved disciple in John 20 and 21. Through Rambo's trauma lens these are not resurrection stories but stories from the "middle." They are not resurrection appearances or sightings, but stories of obstruction, un-seeing, and absence. Jesus is an evasive and withholding ghostly figure. Mary's witness is unreliable, and her moment of recognition (20:16) is rendered as distanced and disoriented. Through a trauma lens confusions and disjunctions of sight, sound, and speech abound. Mary is grasping yet ever-denied, such that the many decades of her elision and mistreatment find their ground here.[42] Through Rambo's

[39] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979), 152, cited in Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 80.

[40] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 80. Adam Tietje has argued that Rambo presents a profound misreading of von Balthasar. He notes her explicit rejection of von Balthasar's orthodox Trinitarian account of the Spirit, and (as described above) of the narrative of death and resurrection. Tietje is right that Rambo works against what Von Balthasar intends, but she does so deliberately. Adam Tietje, "*Contra* Rambo's 'Theology of Remaining': A Chalcedonian and Pastoral Conception of Trauma," *ProEcclesia* 28.1 (2019):22-38.

[41] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 72, 77–78.

[42] Ibid, 90.

trauma lens Mary becomes the site of the "crisis of witness" which reflects not just an unfair history of interpretation, but "a distinctive truth.. about the events taking place."[43] To be fair, the failure of witness is not Mary's failure, it is inherent to the nature of the experience she has. And yet this is, ultimately, a deficit reading of Mary. The beloved disciple too, is slow, distant, and unseeing.

At first, this might be read as simply the observation that the coming back to life of a person one loves might be a deeply traumatic and disturbing event, one which pushes the limits of our knowledge and experience; an event which rightfully disturbs the usually taken-for-granted connection between our sense experience and reality. Or, perhaps, it is an acknowledgement of the human-ness, the imperfection of the first disciples and a recognition of the doubt, fear, misunderstandings and confusion that visit all of us from time to time. But Rambo's reading goes further than this. She makes clear that the failed witness of Mary and of the Beloved disciple is not their own failure, but represents the way that the very concept of witnessing must be redefined around the site of trauma. Witnessing to something unknown transforms witness itself into misunderstanding. Not only that, but it upsets our idea of the "object" of witness: "witness is not directed at an identifiable object of witness… Seeing and believing are tied to what has not yet been understood."[44] This is not simply the difference, say, between knowledge and belief, between seeing and believing, or the different kinds of "seeing" which are presented to us in the Gospels. Rambo's claim is stronger: "the events themselves are ungraspable in any straightforward way."[45]

> Jesus is neither dead nor alive, neither absent nor present… Is Jesus the object of their witness?… Are they witnessing someone or something at all?… direct access to the person of Jesus is no longer possible in the wake of his passion. They do not… witness directly to his resurrection.[46]

Thus Rambo's reading denies not just the reliability of the knowledge, or comprehension of the disciples who first witness Jesus' resurrection. It is not just the claim that they might fail to represent reality. The core idea of trauma literary theory that traumatic events are in some sense "unknowable" and that traumatic reality is unrepresentable, here takes us to a reading in which the unrepresentable is in fact un-real. That is, this reading affirms as *true* the unreliable

[43] Ibid, 91.
[44] Ibid, 93.
[45] Ibid, 97.
[46] Ibid, 97.

representations of traumatic experience and memory. And thus, these resurrection appearances in John's Gospel – surprising, confusing and confronting as they may be – these stories which are written so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31), now testify to "the way in which death persists, refusing any promise of life ahead."[47] Here, Jesus is not alive, nor present. Instead, visions of Jesus are post-traumatic symptoms.

3 The Limits of Suspicion in Trauma Hermeneutics

3.1 The Limits of the Trauma Lens

Shelly Rambo has proposed a shattered trauma lens which deconstructs not just the testimony of the characters and the text, but also the reality that ostensibly underpins it. On this reading Jesus is not raised and there is no divine Spirit. But the disciples who outlive Jesus bear witness to his death, and so to the possibility of survival. Rambo's aim is to legitimate the experience of trauma and to theologise from within it. What does this reading offer to trauma survivors?

Scott Harrower, in his book *God of All Comfort,* names the trauma hermeneutic used by Rambo as a form of paranoid reading. He writes: "trauma scholars suggest that not only is a paranoid reading the default for a trauma survivor, but it is also an appropriate interpretative approach in order to sensitively reckon with trauma."[48] But the problem with a paranoid reading, noted Sedgwick, is that it always finds what it is looking for.[49] The consequence of this, suggests Harrower, is that the trauma hermeneutic "generates and cements the normativity of the violent and traumatic worldview it seeks to find, thereby perpetuating violence at the core of reality."[50] So from a desire to avoid Christian triumphalism which fails to take radical suffering seriously, Rambo deliberately and explicitly resists Jesus' resurrection and the theological resources it offers. She keeps the stories, but casts them with the pall of Holy Saturday, turning the risen Jesus into a ghostly apparition. I concur with Harrower that ultimately this kind of reading hinders rather than helps trauma survivors. First, we will draw

[47] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 97.
[48] Harrower, *God of All Comfort,* 70. In this book Harrower spends time developing a "horror reading" of the Gospel of Matthew. A horror reading represents the type of reading (potentially) natural to trauma survivors, inculcated by trauma and limited by it. A suspicious reading, on the other hand, adopts such an approach self-consciously.
[49] Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling,* 130.
[50] Harrower, *God of All Comfort,* 86.

out some conceptual confusion inherent in this model, before turning to the limitations of its results.

Rambo's account relies on the concept of "middle" space (between death and life, Holy Saturday, trauma as "middle"). She adopts the concept of the middle metaphorically, but at the same time intentionally removes it from its actual location in the "middle." I suggest that without this grounding, the concept becomes unstable. Rambo adopts a framing of John's Gospel as inaugurated eschatology in which the disciples themselves are "Easter Sunday" so to speak, as they remain to witness to Jesus' life. This is a theology of remaining, but one in which the "middle" becomes the whole.

The persistence of trauma is undoubtedly an important reality to bear witness to, but is it one we want to cement as normative? It is not always clear exactly what Rambo means when she refers to the space "between" life and death. Metaphorically, and in the context of trauma, we might understand the import as something like the intrusion of an experience close to death, or, in Herman's terms, the persistent feeling of the threat of annihilation: the persistence of the traumatic experience within life after the event, usually described as the post-traumatic experience. At times, this is seemingly what Rambo intends, but at other times she clearly pushes further. These foundational terms require definition and unpacking which she does not attempt to provide.[51] What was the nature of life before trauma, and what was its relationship to death? And what comes after? Traditional theological categories already have a way of describing this "middle" space within the larger theological narrative of creation-sin-redemption-eschatology.[52] Rambo rejects this traditional story but provides no alternative. But this resistance to endings clearly problematises the concept of middle. Is the "living-on" actually just akin to living post-fall, living with death and decay (though in a particularly forceful or disruptive way)? For that matter, as regards her use of Derrida, who *survives/*lives-on/overlives? Does death? Or Mary? (Certainly not Jesus.) It is Mary who survives the traumatic event, and is the focus of the reading. But it is death which seems to overlive. What about those trauma survivors who themselves feel that they have "over lived" – that perhaps they should have died, and maybe sometimes wish that they had? While recognition that life is sometimes lived in the shadow of death is essential, it is not all that Christian theology has to offer.

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[51] Harrower's framework of shalom and horrors, even though much broader, is clearer and more intelligible.

[52] See, for example, Harrower's framework in terms of shalom and devastation. Scott Harrower, *God of All Comfort,* Chapter 2. In this sense, I am not sure Rambo is right to say that the "middle" is "a largely untheologized site." Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 7.

Theologically, we must say the same thing about the concept of Holy Saturday as "middle space." Holy Saturday is only Holy Saturday because it is the day that stands *in between* the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. If Jesus had not risen on Easter Sunday, neither Good Friday nor Holy Saturday would be remembered as they are. The death of Jesus and his descent to the dead would be no more or less important than the death of any other man or woman. Whatever we make of where Jesus goes or what he does on Holy Saturday, that day takes its significance as a middle only because of what comes after. Rambo rejects von Balthasar's emphasis on the cross, his Trinitarianism, and his move to redemption – emptying his theology of Holy Saturday entirely. Further, if with Rambo, Jesus does not actually rise from the dead, then how does the image function as an image of survival? Indeed, it turns out that for Rambo, the Spirit that remains is not the Spirit of God but "the human spirit who remains to witness the death of God."[53] Jesus is simply dead. She goes on: "I wanted to say that there was something about the Holy Saturday presence, absence, and witness that intimates a theology of redemption but doesn't necessarily redeem. I don't think that I say that there is no redemption in the cross, but I come close to saying, instead, that we redeem each other through our witness."[54] Holy Saturday can be, I believe, a productive framework for fruitful theological reflection about suffering, grief, darkness, despair, death and much more. But it is only within the framing of death and resurrection – and for that matter, Jesus' death and resurrection – not divorced from it, that Holy Saturday draws its potency.

The same is true, at least theoretically, for the survivor of trauma in their own experience of "middle." The recurring intrusions of traumatic memory, the bodily manifestations of the overwhelming experience, and the redundant over-functioning of the failed defence mechanisms, exist in the life of the survivor because of a particular experience or event in the past (even if the event remains unremembered or acknowledged), and they persist until such a time as (if ever) the truth of those events is able to be told, acknowledged, and reckoned with. It remains a kind of middle so long as, and precisely because, it defies the usual processes of integration and resolution. To be clear, I do not underestimate the impact of trauma or the difficulty of recovery. I accept that trauma is, by definition, something from which one never *fully* recovers. And I resonate with Rambo's impulse to resist the language of "after" if it used to suggest that the traumatic experience is "over." But psychiatric and psychological work on trauma remains focused on recovery because it holds that at least some progress toward

[53] Stearns and Rambo, "The Spirit's Witness," https://theotherjournal.com/2015/08/31/the-spirits-witness-an-interview-with-shelly-rambo/
[54] Ibid.

recovery is possible. In some cases, psychologists even document post-traumatic growth not as a "return to baseline" but as an "advance from baseline."[55] Sometimes the cognitive re-forming required after trauma in areas such as interpersonal relationships, self-perception, and outlook on life, can ultimately be perceived as of benefit.[56] So the "after" is not the same as the before: this is rarely (if ever) what recovery means. Trauma lives on. But treatment and transformation of traumatic symptoms and responses is possible, such that trauma need not always live on as an uncontrollable and controlling intrusive experience in the present, but as an integrated event from the past. Its force in the present can be transformed, or at least mitigated.[57] Some authors choose to speak about post-traumatic remaking rather than recovery, to emphasise the inability to "go back."[58] Others speak of post-traumatic growth. Whatever language is used, and with the understanding that trauma survivors remain permanently changed by their experience, pastoral and therapeutic practitioners continue to work towards healing.

3.2 Making Room for Recovery and Hope

Is hope possible for survivors of trauma? And if so, what reading strategies might engender hope? And what resources can feminist interpretation afford? Judith Herman describes the way in which trauma survivors need help from others at every stage of recovery. She summarises:

> The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationships with other people, they must be reformed in such relationships.[59]

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[55] Joanna Collicutt McGrath, ""Post-traumatic growth and the origins of early Christianity," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 9, no. 3 (2006), 295.

[56] Ibid, 295-296.

[57] The prospect of progress toward recovery need not diminish the horror of the traumatic event. It is not the case that to truly recognise the depths of evil we must allow that it is completely and entirely overwhelming. Herman writes: "the survivor may wonder how she can possibly give due respect to the horror she has endured if she no longer devotes her life to remembrance and mourning… She need not worry. She will never forget. She will think of the trauma every day as long as she lives. She will grieve every day. But the time comes when the trauma no longer commands the central place in her life" (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 195).

[58] Remaking is resonant with the Christian vision of resurrection, which does not propose a "return" but a transformation of the body (1 Corinthians 15:35-54). See also Cockayne, Harrower and Hill*, Dawn of Sunday,* 7.

[59] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 134.

Herman's three stages of recovery are 1) establishing safety; 2) remembrance and mourning; and 3) reconnection with ordinary life. All three require the presence of safe people and communities. All three involve the survivor developing the imaginative capacity to situate herself in a new and different story – one in which she is loved, can trust, has power, can act, can name and judge what has happened to her, can grieve what is lost, and can develop a new self and a new sense of meaning and purpose. For Christian women this may include re-establishing a relationship of safety, trust and meaning with God and with the Christian community and its leaders. Very often this will involve the reading and interpretation of the Bible. So the stories the Bible tells, the possibilities it holds out, and where it situates us as readers and believers are crucial. What do the Christian Scriptures and the Christian church proclaim to survivors of trauma?

I fully appreciate and acknowledge the ways that problematic interpretations of the Scriptures have perpetuated and enabled acts of abuse and harm, and I share the feminist concern about eschatologies which result in the white-washing of horrors.[60] That is – I am of accord with many of the underlying perspectives, concerns, and aims of trauma theologians concerning the experience of women and other sufferers of trauma in our communities. However, the trauma hermeneutic as here described does not deliver the best that Christian theology has to offer. This is because it deliberately cuts itself off from Christianity's most powerful resources for hope and healing. One Australian author has described the paranoid reading as "a cake made of sawdust and ashes."[61] My worry then is that Rambo – so committed to remaining at the site of death – is nourishing us with ashes.[62] For a time we may feel that ashes are all that are appropriate, all we want, or even deserve, but that is trauma talking. And the Christian story, finally, is incomplete, unless it recognises a force that is greater than death. Representation of the Christian story without the possibility of resurrection life – however well intentioned – practices its own act of elision, and one that risks undermining a survivor's ability to re-establish safety, trust, and meaning with God, the Scriptures and with Christian community.

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[60] Rambo is motivated by the same critique of traditional Christian eschatology that was raised in our last chapter: narrative endings being used to cover over to bandaid or to leave behind people's experiences of suffering. On whether resurrection entails forgetting see Danielle Tumminio Hansen, "Remembering Rape in Heaven," *Modern Theology 27* (2020): 662-678.

[61] Lohrey, cited in Harrower, *God of All Comfort,* 74. Harrower provides a particularly interesting discussion of Australian culture and mindset and its relation to horrors and paranoid reading.

[62] See also Job 13:2.

What all this amounts to is what I am calling the problem of "stuck-ness."[63] The repeated intrusion of traumatic memories, fragments, and nightmares, and the body's involuntary responses and reactions, can make a survivor feel as though they are "stuck" in the past. These symptoms are caused because the trauma – in the form of sound, touch, smell and emotion, and the fight/flight response that it elicits, is "stuck" in the brain.[64] The goal of therapies is to un-stick the memories by allowing them to discharge by integrating with other parts of the brain. Stuck-ness is a feature of trauma, but it should not govern our hermeneutic. Recall Rambo's opening to her first chapter: "Trauma is the suffering that does not go away. The study of trauma is the study of what remains."[65] This is true enough. But it also true that the trauma response which Rambo refers to here is not a good or a desirable thing. It is caused by the body and brain finding a way to cope with the unbearable. At the time, the body's response enables the sufferer to survive, but after the event it lingers on, maladaptive.[66] What once enabled survival now inhibits flourishing. So while many of us must learn to live "after the storm," it is not beneficial to inscribe this experience as normative or ideal.[67] By not giving room to hope, life, and the possibility of transformation, I worry that the trauma hermeneutic risks reifying or further inscribing the trauma experience. As Harrower concludes: "the last thing traumatized people need is a Gospel that only reinforces the worst aspects and experiences of their existence."[68]

3.3 Critiques of Caruth and the Limits of Deconstruction

Rambo's trauma readings of the Scriptures are built on the work of deconstructionist Cathy Caruth. And while Caruth remains central to the conversation in literary trauma theory, her work has also come under criticism. Dominick LaCapra argues that Caruth: "comes dangerously close to conflating absence (of absolute foundations and total meaning or knowledge) with loss and even sacralizing, or making sublime, the compulsive repetition or

[63] This language is adopted from Bessel van der Kolk's description of the post-traumatic experience, and applied here to the trauma hermeneutic. Bessel van der Kols, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain, and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2014).
[64] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps The Score, 45-46.*
[65] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 15.
[66] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 45.
[67] Scott Harrower, *God of all Comfort*. See also Natalie Collins, "Broken or Superpowered? Traumatized People, Toxic doublethink and the Healing Potential of Evangelical Christian Communities," in *Feminist Trauma Theologies*, 202-203.
[68] Harrower, *God of All Comfort,* 86.

acting-out of a traumatic past."[69] Indeed, Rambo makes the connection between trauma and the divine explicit.[70] Just as Caruth saw a natural affinity between trauma and deconstruction, so Rambo suggests a resonance between trauma, deconstruction, and theology: all three see in language the simultaneity of knowing and unknowing.[71] LaCapra notes two features of trauma theory which contribute to this sacralising tendency. The first – what he calls traumatropism – is the notion that any kind of "working through" or recovery from trauma might be seen or felt as a betrayal.[72] And yet this insistence on unknowability is ultimately a hindrance to survivors. Though the truth of events may be hard to access and even harder to face, reconstructing the story of the traumatic event is an important stage in a survivor's healing. Herman is clear that reconstruction is not erasure but integration. She writes: "In the process of reconstruction, the trauma story does undergo a transformation, but only in the sense of becoming more present and more real. The fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling."[73] To tell the truth about what happened – however imprecise or unstable that story may be at any given moment – is to bring evil to light. And while owning the depths of evil in our world might feel unbearable, it is the essential first step toward justice. Indeed, very often other's unwillingness to hear the truth and accept it is a major compounder of harm.[74]

The second feature is a kind of "transference" which results in a valorisation of the listener or witness. LaCapra describes certain kinds of writing about trauma as mimesis or vicarious victimhood,[75] and there are points in Caruth's writing where such a description seems justified. She states: "there's a double survivor situation, but a survivor and a proxy survivor, and it's the meeting of those two that constitutes the witness."[76] These two features then – the reverence of "unknowability" and the valorisation of the witness – combine to form a kind of sacralising not just of the victim of trauma, but also of its theorist.

LaCapra maintains that Cathy Caruth consistently conflates traumatic event and ongoing

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[69] Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 121.
[70] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 10.
[71] Ibid.
[72] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), xiv.
[73] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 179.
[74] Herman, *Truth and Repair,* 3.
[75] LaCapra, *History in Transit,* 129.
[76] Cathy Caruth, "Interview with Robert J. Lifton," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 145.

experience in her work,[77] leading to a confusion of the transhistorical and historical dimensions of trauma.[78] My sense is that Rambo's engagement only at the level of the literary means that a similar dynamic befalls her trauma theology. Little attention is paid to theologising actual traumatic events, to the place of the traumatised person, or even the ongoing traumatic experience, within a wider life story. This foregrounding of the phenomenological, yet abstracted, aspects of the intrusive traumatic experience lends her work an immediacy and an importance. But it also raises the two related problems described above. Thus, what begins as an admirable resistance to any form of reductionism in theorising trauma, can become a kind of "trump card" for the field's own relevance and importance, while at the same limiting its usefulness for real survivors of trauma.[79]

4 Beyond Suspicion in Trauma Hermeneutics – Resources for Hope

In response to Rambo's positioning of trauma survivors in Holy Saturday, Cockayne, Harrower, and Hill offer a model for a Christian response to trauma at the "Dawn of Sunday."[80] At the Dawn of Sunday hope is visible, though not yet fully realised:

> Like the story of Jesus, our stories hold the tension of standing between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, between brokenness and beauty… And yet, the story of the Trinity, Christ, and the church tells us that there is something better than feeling stuck in death or wanting to return to life as it was before. We don't long for resuscitation; we long for resurrection. With Christ and in him, we long to stand at the boundary between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, with one foot on either side, looking the bleak reality of horrors and trauma full in the face while remaining open and postured toward the light of healing and recovery just over the horizon. The metaphor of remaining in the dawn of Sunday means that we seek to understand the stakes of horrors and trauma in order to facilitate recovery in the church.[81]

For these authors, resources for hope and healing for survivors of trauma find their grounding in the safety of relationship with the Triune God: "rediscovering our profound bonds of attachment to God the Trinity is essential to a holistic rediscovery of a sense of safety in the wake of horrors and trauma response, because being lovingly united to God is the primary

[77] LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 112.
[78] Ibid*,* 116-117.
[79] Tom Toremans, "Deconstruction: Trauma Inscribed in Language," in *Trauma and Literature,* ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 61-65.
[80] Cockayne et al, *Dawn of Sunday: The Trinity and Trauma-Safe Churches*.
[81] Ibid*,* 7.

attachment that humans need."[82] In the remainder of this chapter I seek to outline a framework for an understanding of John's Gospel and of John 20:1–18 as offering resources for traumatised persons via its pastoral purposes and proto-Trinitarian theology.

In 1968 J. Louis Martyn's *The History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel* offered a field-changing reconstruction of the socio-historical and socio-religious background to the Gospel of John. Martyn argued that the Gospel of John was produced by the Johannine community in response to the trauma of their persecution by the Jews, specifically expulsion from the synagogue (as reflected in John 9:22; 12:42 and 16:2) and later, trial and the threat of execution.[83] Though the specific details of Martyn's reconstruction are strongly put in doubt by later scholarship, the major contours of his account of the historical origins of the Fourth Gospel remain influential.[84] Varying proposals now exist for the primary historical traumatic event, from Jesus' death and resurrection (Collicutt),[85] the incarnation (Reinhartz),[86] or the destruction of the temple (Porter).[87] Accepting any or none of these, it remains the case that the Gospel functioned as a text for community meaning making and narrative identity formation for early Christians, and that it continues to function in this way for disciples of Jesus today. Christopher Porter's recent study describes this part of the Gospel's purpose as "retelling story, redrawing boundaries and reinscribing identity."[88] Thus, a trauma-informed reading of the Gospel of John might proceed by viewing the Gospel as a trauma text, rather than with the "trauma lens." Viewed this way, what kind of identity is reinscribed?

John's Gospel is notable for its distinctive presentation of the Spirit, also identified as the Paraclete. Preparing for his departure (13:33; 14:3, 25, 28), Jesus promises the Paraclete as a continuation of his own presence with the disciples (John 14:16, 18, 20). The disciples must remain in the world and will experience trouble (15:18; 16:2–3), but they do not do so alone. The Gospel's answer to the problem of the suffering of Jesus' disciples after his departure is the promise of the risen and ascended Jesus' return to dwell with them by the Spirit. So in a sense, John's Gospel already contains all the elements of Rambo's theology of remaining: a

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[82] Cockayne et al, *Dawn of Sunday,* 58.

[83] J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 154-157.

[84] William M. Wright IV, *Rhetoric and Theology: Figural Reading of John 9* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 34-42.

[85] Collicutt McGrath, "Post-traumatic growth and the origins of early Christianity," 297.

[86] Adele Reinhartz, "Incarnation and Covenant: The Fourth Gospel Through the Lens of Trauma Theory," *Interpretation* 69, no. 1 (2015): 40.

[87] Christopher A. Porter, *Johannine Social Identity Formation after the Fall of the Jerusalem Temple: Negotiating Identity in Crisis* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[88] Porter, *Johannine Social Identity Formation,* 40.

traumatised community, living "after" Jesus, ongoing suffering, the disruption of time, and a presence who remains. But whereas in Rambo's work the promised Paraclete is the disciples themselves as they endure and witness in the wake of Jesus' death, John's Gospel presents the Paraclete as the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus alive and active in the lives of the Johannine community.[89]

Rambo contends that redemptive narratives that move to resurrection "participate in the forgetting that lies at the heart of trauma." Easter Sunday, she suggests, is too often used to smooth over "oppression, violence, and the injustices of history." She goes so far as to say that "resurrection is… the language of the oppressor."[90] So we might ask: do we find such tendencies in traditional theological renderings of resurrection and Paraclete in John's Gospel?[91] Certainly, the presence of the Paraclete is predicated on Jesus' resurrection and ascension (16:7).[92] And while there is a future dimension assured here (Jesus' promise to "go and prepare a place" for the disciples (14:2)), the primary focus is the role of the Spirit in the period of Jesus' absence: by the Spirit, Jesus and the Father will make their home with the disciples (14:23).[93] The consolation offered by this theology is not about the removal of suffering, but about presence and solidarity with and in human experience. Truly, this presence is intended to be of comfort, but it is not triumphalist.

Understanding John's Gospel as a trauma text, together with this way of construing resurrection and Paraclete offer a way forward for a double-movement reading of Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus that benefits from both suspicion and retrieval. The trauma hermeneutic enables a trauma-informed approach: acknowledging the suffering that lies in and behind the text, along with the ongoing trauma of many readers of the text. Moving to retrieval enables the taking up of the resources offered not just by the text's locutions (or gaps between) but also by the worldview and the illocutionary stance of the (implied) author. John 20:31 provides an important interpretative key to the whole Gospel of John, revealing its grain. The work of the Paraclete is presented not just for the disciples, but also for readers of the Gospel

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[89] Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 116. This is true whether or not we accept Maryn's "two-level drama."

[90] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* 129.

[91] Here, it must be noted that the history of interpretation of John's Gospel has a troubled relationship with anti-Semitism, and Martyn's own work can and has been taken in this direction. I acknowledge this possibility but seek to show it is not a necessity. For a discussion of the presentation of "the Jews" in John's Gospel, including a reading of Martyn in this respect see Adele Reinhartz, "A nice Jewish girl reads the Gospel of John," *Semeia* 77 (1997): 177-193.

[92] Koester, *The Word of Life,* 128.

[93] Ibid*,* 127-129.

who continue to live in the time of Jesus' absence: the Paraclete brings the presence and address of Christ to the present (16:13b).[94] This is the very opposite of Rambo's presentation of Jesus – a ghostly, shadowy figure who remains always out of reach (both physically and cognitively) even as he talks, sits, walks and eats with his disciples. In the theology of John's Gospel, disruptions of time include not only the intrusion of traumatic memory, but also the possibility of the in-breaking of the presence of God.[95]

Rambo's theology for trauma survivors is, ultimately, that the human spirit can survive to testify to the death of God. In a theological reading of John's Gospel that takes up its own narrative cues, the resurrected Jesus is real, alive, and present with his disciples in both the trivialities and the traumas of their everyday lives. Union with Christ by the Spirit means that we live his story and he lives ours. This is solidarity with Jesus – but a solidarity that is broader than just his suffering on the cross. Jesus' solidarity with his disciples extends to all of life, and to all their sufferings too. Importantly, it is not elided by resurrection but enabled by it. In this way, believers can find their stories in the story of Jesus, but they also find themselves part of a larger story – both historically and theologically. To those who remain in the shadow of death, who like the disciples live on in fear and confusion, the Paraclete comes to continue the work of Jesus. Not in weakness – a trickle, or a fragile cord – but as the power of the resurrected one, and with the security of one who "makes his home" (14:23). Death brings not the absence but the glory of Jesus (16:14). And this good news for the disciples is not future abstraction, but present reality.

5 John 20:1–18 as Post-traumatic Remaking

Finally we come to our theological reparative reading of John 20:1–18. My proposal is that while acknowledging the trauma of the early disciples' experience, the Gospel of John invites us to read Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden not as testimony to the trauma of his absence, but as an experience of post-traumatic remaking made possible by the presence of Jesus. As the chapter invites its readers into true recognition of Jesus' identity, something new is made possible for them too, by the Spirit of the living Christ. Drawing out details from

[94] Koester, *The Word of Life,* 132.

[95] Martyn is noted for the language of apocalyptic "invasion" (J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 93). This concept has been critiqued on various grounds including theologically (see for example Robert W. Jenson, "On Dogmatic/Systematic Appropriation of Paul-According-to-Martyn," in Joshua Davis and Douglas Harink, *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (Corpo: Cascade Books, 2012)). Here I note the unsuitability of the language for trauma theology.

the text of 20:1–18 in conversation with Judith Herman's staged model for trauma recovery and with Cockayne, Harrower, and Hill's theological resources, I will present Mary's story as one that makes room for remembrance and mourning, the possibility of finding safety, and the invitation to reconnect with community and with possibilities for the future. This is a movement through suspicion to faith in miniature. Or, as Mark Stibbe writes, "John 20 takes us from the tomb as a place of despair to the tomb as a place of discovery."[96]

Examining John 20:1–18 in isolation, Rambo's interpretation fails to consider the narrative within its own literary context, and ignores significant interpretative cues. While we can agree that Mary's witness is not presented as wholly exemplary, we can recognise this characterisation as the familiar Johannine device of misunderstanding leading to *anagnorisis*.[97] Mark Stibbe notes how the chapter as a whole moves through a number of responses to the resurrection appearances – that of Simon-Peter and the beloved disciple (20:1–10), Mary Magdalene (20:11–8), the wider group of disciples (20:19–23) and Thomas (20:24–29), before concluding with the Gospel's own purpose statement (20:31). This purpose statement describes the Gospel's desired response to Jesus, and forms the end-point of the development of this theme throughout the chapter. As the chapter explores the faith-response of various characters to the resurrected Jesus, these characters move through a journey from non-recognition to recognition. Eventually all the characters (except Simon-Peter) come to the recognition of Jesus' identity and to personal faith, but in each case this is a process.[98] Here, just as throughout the Gospel, this technique relies on the author and the audience knowing more than the characters. The narrator reveals that Mary saw Jesus but she did not realise it was him. This dramatic device creates a point of tension for the reader. Will she discover who the gardener is? Will her grief turn to joy? Though Mary is shrouded by tears, the reader is not. And the narration sets up the expectation of discovery.

Mary's encounter (20:11–18) is cleverly structured in two halves – a conversation with the angels, and then a conversation with Jesus. In each encounter Mary is asked why she is crying (first by the angels (20:13a), then by Jesus/the gardener (20:15a)), she responds with the reason for her grief (Jesus' body is gone (20:13b, 15b)), and finally Mary "turns" to "see" Jesus (20:14,16). The two halves are paralleled: the first two elements are the same in each, with

[96] Mark Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 198.

[97] Stibbe, *John,* 203. Also Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012)*,* 1189; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 85.

[98] Stibbe, *John,* 202-204.

development occurring in the third element. Mary moves from non-recognition to recognition of Jesus. The first time (20:14) Mary turns and sees but she does not recognise Jesus. In verse 16, Mary turns and declares her recognition[99].

Safety

What causes Mary's moment of recognition? Rambo observes correctly that *anagnorisis* happens before Mary turns to Jesus the second time.[100] The parallels and the contrast in these two mini-narratives (20:13–14, 15–16) emphasise the difference in Mary's "seeing" in these two moments. Assuredly, her recognition of Jesus comes not from physical sight, but from Jesus' own revelation of himself to her in his calling to her by name. Just as Jesus' calling Lazarus by name effects his resurrection from the dead (John 11:43), here Jesus calling Mary's name is also an act of making new.[101]

Before Mary knows Jesus, Jesus knows her. It is his knowing her and calling to her which awakens her recognition of him.[102] This recalls Jesus' identification of himself as the Good Shepherd earlier in John 10 – the shepherd whose voice the sheep recognise and follow.[103] In these verses, Jesus emphasises that the sheep are his own (10:3), that he knows them (10:14) and calls them by name (10:3). Those that are his sheep listen to his voice and follow (10:3–4), those who follow are safe in his care (10:9–11). The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (10:11, 15), and "takes it up again" (10:17, 18). When Jesus reveals who he is by calling Mary's name, Mary's alienation and anxiety are overcome as she experiences the safety of loving attachment. Jesus' call re-establishes the presence of his secure love, undiminished even by death, and enables her own in response. Notice too that Jesus' call does not force, but enables Mary's response. Mary turns and she moves toward Jesus. Mary remains agential.

This moment reveals why relationship with God the Trinity has the potential to be healing for trauma survivors: secure attachment with God depends on God, not on us. Jesus' knowledge of Mary and his love for her survive death. They are indestructible. In Mary's encounter with

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[99] Stibbe, *John,* 201.

[100] Notwithstanding some confusion over which way she turns, given the earlier "turning" toward Jesus (v 14).

[101] This chapter is paralleled with chapter 11, as the closing chapters of the two main sections of John's Gospel. But here there is an interesting reversal. In chapter 11 Jesus raised Lazarus by calling his name. Here Jesus – the raised one – calls Mary's name. Stibbe, *John,* 199-200. Also Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbol, Gender, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 213.

[102] Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 224.

[103] Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 1190-1191; Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 641; Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 224.

Jesus in the garden, Mary is enabled to re-establish safety in the security of Jesus' knowledge of and unfailing love for her.

Remembrance and Mourning

The story also makes space for remembrance and mourning. Though it is overall a fairly short story, Mary's encounter is more personal and more extensive than all others in this chapter. In 19:25 we are told that Mary stood near the cross and witnessed Jesus' death along with several other women disciples and Jesus' mother, and as soon as she is able Mary visits Jesus' tomb (20:1). In the initial discovery there is a flurry of activity. The male disciples rush to the tomb, and rush back again. But then Mary is alone. Three times the text draws attention to Mary's tears (20:11, 13, 15). If we read this chapter as a parallel with John 11 where "Jesus wept" when he saw the place where Lazarus was laid (11:35), then we need not see this expression of grief as negative. It is not inappropriate, nor does it necessarily indicate failure of faith. Powerfully, the story accompanies Mary in her mourning.[104]

But Mary does not only cry, she also speaks. Three times, too, she gives voice to her grief (20:2, 13b, 15b). Unlike the question posed to Mary Jesus' mother in John 2:4, Mary Magdalene is allowed to answer for herself. In the whole of chapter 20 only two disciples speak for themselves – Mary and Thomas.[105] And though both Mary and Thomas both end with recognition and faith, it is significant that space is given to the expression of their struggle not only in narration but also in dialogue.[106]

Reconnection

Finally, we see in this brief narrative the way that Mary is re-established in community and given a sense of purpose. Though Mary has already re-established a strong personal connection with Jesus, she remains otherwise alone in this encounter.[107] To move forward, Mary's

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[104] Contra Don Carson who views the angels' question as a reproof. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 640.

[105] Note that the Synoptic Gospels have Mary come to the tomb with other women. Keener suggests that the author of the Gospel of John would have known of this tradition – indeed he places multiple women at the cross, and uses the plural in Mary's report in 20:2. Why have Mary alone here then? Keener writes: "The focus on Mary may permit the focus on personal relationship the narrative seems to develop (compare 20:16 with 10:3), and fits John's characteristic 'staging' technique of often focusing on individuals (e.g. 3:1–9; 4:7–26; 5:1–9; 9:1–7; 11:20–37)." Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 1178. Also Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 220.

[106] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 182.

[107] The use of *Rabooni* ("my master") rather than *Rabbi* ("master") here is seen to emphasise personal connection rather than indicating inadequate understanding. Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 224; Stibbe, *John,* 203; Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 1191.

relationship with the bodily presence of Jesus must change.[108] Jesus' body will ascend to the Father, but he will establish his presence on earth through sending his Spirit to accompany the disciples. Mary must rejoin the community who together will experience Jesus' giving of the Spirit.[109] Mary is sent as a messenger to the other disciples to tell of Jesus' resurrection and coming ascension. Verse 18 closes the pericope with Mary having "announced" to the disciples – ἀγγέλλουσα here forming an *inclusio* with ἀγγέλους (angels) in verse 12.[110] In 20:2 Mary ran to the disciples to announce the disturbing news that Jesus' body was gone. In 20:18 Mary now announces that she has seen him, and "she told them that he had said these things to her."

Within this framing the ostensibly abrupt verse 17 ("do not hold on to me" (NIV, RSV, NRSV), perhaps better as "do not cling to me" (NASB, ESV)) is interpreted not as Jesus' rejection or rebuke of Mary,[111] but as his guiding her toward the future.[112] Jesus has announced that he must ascend to the Father, and that he will send the Paraclete in his name (14:2–3, 16–18). Though Jesus' death seems an unwanted and fear-filled event, Jesus has said that it is not only necessary but beneficial (16:6–7). Jesus' resurrection confirms his identity and work, but Jesus will not remain bodily with this disciples forever.

Moreover, Jesus' message through Mary to the disciples (20:17b) reinforces his identity, which he now shares with his disciples. The community's identity is grounded in their participation in Jesus' own identity: disciples share Jesus' sonship with the Father. This confirms the security of relationship with Jesus, extending it to the Godhead. This also demonstrates how safe attachment to Jesus enables transformed relationships in the new community – now brothers and sisters. Αδελφούς (v 17) should be understood to include both male and female disciples. When Jesus says "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17b) he draws Mary in to his closeness with the Father. The "brothers" then include Mary and other women disciples who by faith in Jesus also share "sonship." And yet it remains significant that these words are spoken first to Mary, and entrusted to her to pass on.[113] Without Mary's testimony the disciples would not have heard

[108] Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 1194.
[109] Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 225.
[110] Stibbe, *John,* 197.
[111] Note Carson's claim that Mary is "firmly repulsed." Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* 644.
[112] It is possible that this happens less abruptly than the narration suggests. If Jesus words are better translated "stop clinging to me" rather than "don't touch me," it is possible that they are spoken only after some time. That is, that Mary embraces Jesus, but eventually must let go. Craig Keener suggests something like this, perhaps: "More than likely Jesus simply places a temporal limitation on Mary's embrace." Keener, *The Gospel of John,* 1193. Also Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 225.
[113] Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 225.

these things. In John's Gospel, it is women who bear witness and testify to Jesus' self-revelation and to pivotal narrative moments.[114]

Conclusion

Dori Laub writes about how traumatic events distort self-perception and sense of identity, inhibiting possibilities for connection and growth in the future. Speaking of a holocaust survivor, she writes:

> Her previous inability to tell her story had marred her perception of herself. The untold events had become so distorted in her unconscious memory as to make her believe that she herself, and not the perpetrator, was responsible for the atrocities she witnessed. If she could not stop them, rescue or confront the victims, she bore the responsibility for their pain. In other words, in her memory of her Holocaust experience, as well as in the distorted way in which her present life proceeded from this memory, she failed to be an authentic witness to herself.

Note the connection here between distorted memory of the event and distorted image of self. And note how both are false and limiting. Rambo's reading tells a story about Mary – and thus of readers – that is constrained by the distortions of trauma, allowing it to govern ongoing experience. But just as this reading embraces only one element of interpretation (suspicion), so it only allows one aspect of Mary's personhood. In contrast to Shelly Rambo's trauma reading of John 20 I have presented a narrative-theological reading of Mary's encounter with Jesus as a narrative of post-traumatic remaking. This personal and extended account gives space to Mary's tears, grief, and despair. It narrates movement in Mary from disintegration to integration, through the Johannine device of misrecognition and recognition. Mary's *anagnorisis* is enabled by the secure knowledge and love of Jesus – seemingly broken by death, but here restored at Jesus' call. It is Jesus' knowledge of and calling of Mary (his voice) which grounds her secure trust in him, the Good Shepherd. And finally, Mary is enabled to move forward in community, in "kinship" with others, and is given a mission and a purpose. In this story, Mary moves from suspicion to faith, in a journey consonant with Herman's stages of trauma recovery. It is a story in miniature, to be sure. But as we have seen, Jesus' promise of the Paraclete to accompany future disciples is not triumphalist but profoundly realistic about struggle and suffering. Mary's encounter demonstrates the way in which the Spirit's ongoing presence with disciples of Jesus can bring them into relationship with the Triune God.

[114] Ibid.

In Rambo's trauma reading of this account, the figure of Jesus is not one of hope or of life, but a figure of death. Jesus is not there, and he cannot be witnessed. His "presence" signals death's living-on. But death already invades human lives, and Rambo's dead Christ offers nothing new to survivors of trauma, only more of the same. In Christian theology, Christ's resurrection is not merely his "survival" of death, but his defeat of it. Christian theology offers more to survivors than an eternal, unchanging, life in the middle. It offers hope of something new: that the future can be different from the past. In a reparative feminist reading, John 20:1–18 is a story of Mary's faithfulness, love, and commitment; of an encounter with the resurrected Jesus that is transformative and life-giving; and of Mary's central place in the story of Christianity and the announcement of its message. In the Fourth Gospel, Mary is first to find the empty tomb, and first to see the resurrected Jesus. It is her grief that draws her there, and so it is her grief that places her where God's newness can reach her. As such, this story does not deny trauma, but meets it with hope.

Chapter 6

Marriage and Metaphor in John 4:4–42

Introduction

A great deal has been written in the last decade about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–42), thus the reader might be forgiven for approaching this chapter with some weariness. Is there anything more to be said? Excellent work has been done to interrogate bias in the history of interpretation of this text, exposing characterisations of the Samaritan Woman (as serial adulterer, harlot, prostitute) which rely much more on assumption than on exegesis. Investigations into historical-cultural norms and practices around marriage, divorce, re-marriage, and widowhood in both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture have offered alternative – perhaps more likely – interpretations of the woman's status and background (divorce or widowhood). Surveys of historical interpretation suggest that the prevailing modern, and overwhelmingly negative, view of the Samaritan woman owes more to Reformation priorities and theological categories than to textual evidence. Some of this work has been done by explicitly feminist interpreters, but also by those who might not name themselves as such but who are concerned with the Bible's teaching about and impact on women. In many cases, the work does not alter the primary meaning or import of the story in the overall context of John's Gospel. However, it does significantly impact the characterisation of the woman, and therefore the conceptual space for women within the story of Jesus. In what follows I will readily draw from and build on such work. So what is new?

Much of the work just described would fit the categories of loyalist or revisionist feminist work on the Bible. But as we have seen in chapter 2, other feminist scholars are uneasy with these kinds of "glass half full" approaches, claiming that they too readily cover over deeper and more fundamentally problematic features of the stories. Meredith Warren has recently levelled such a charge, arguing that even those scholars seeking to rehabilitate the Samaritan Woman's reputation are ultimately participating in her slut-shaming and contributing to rape culture in the discipline of Biblical studies. In this chapter – our final text study – we re-examine feminist critical modes of interpretation of John 4:4–42 in light of Warren's charges. What happens if we (with Warren) refuse to move beyond suspicion? As in previous chapters I seek to analyse a form of feminist suspicious reading, drawing out its implications for women

readers seeking resources for liberation. We find that the liberation on view in this account is sexual liberation – and a contested form at that. In response, I offer a narrative-theological reading that seeks to honour the Gospel's own narrative unity and literary context, its historical-cultural background, as well as its intertextuality in canonical context. I aim to show that Warren's reader-response feminist critical reading is ultimately too literal. Applying modern categories to this ancient text results not just in anachronism, but in an error of genre classification. This de-contextualised reading misses narrative and literary clues intended to govern interpretation. In short, it misses the text's own narrative and symbolic world, and subsequently fundamentally misreads both major characters. A theological reading, on the other hand, shows interest in the woman beyond her sexuality, offering a portrait of an intelligent, engaged, responsive and active disciple of Jesus.

1 Slut-shaming the Samaritan Woman

By now, many of the reasons a feminist might be interested in John 4:4–42 are familiar. It contains the longest speech by a woman in the Scriptures and the longest conversation with Jesus in the Gospel of John. It is one of several Johannine stories which feature women in prominent and positive roles, and the literary pairing with Nicodemus puts the woman in an even more positive light. Many consider the Samaritan woman to be Christianity's first evangelist. But is this just wishful thinking? In her 2021 article "Five Husbands: Slut-shaming the Samaritan Woman," Meredith Warren argues that interpretations of the Samaritan Woman's story that highlight Jesus' inclusivity, even those which see the woman as more victim than sinner, perpetuate slut-shaming because they adopt a fundamentally negative and judgemental attitude to the woman's sexual agency and activity.[1] They see her relationship history as something that she needs to be either forgiven for or rescued from. But slut-shaming does not just occur at the level of interpretation, Warren argues that both the narrator of the Gospel and Jesus himself also participate in slut-shaming.

It is certainly true that some interpretations of this story have seen the force of Jesus' words as aimed at exposing the woman's sin and forcing her to see her need for forgiveness. Craig Farmer traces this framing of the interaction to the Protestant Reformers, whose writings on this text exhibit a marked change from earlier patristic and medieval exegesis.[2] Calvin's

[1] Meredith J. C. Warren, "Five Husbands: Slut-shaming the Samaritan Woman," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 17, no. 2 (2021): 51-69.

[2] Craig S. Farmer, "Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,"

comments here are representative of the harsh portrait that develops and remains influential. Regarding the woman's marital history, Calvin writes:

> I do not think He is referring to one act of adultery, for when He says that she has had five husbands, we may suppose it happened because she drove her husbands to divorce her with her wanton and stubborn ways. I interpret the words like this: Though God joined you to lawful husbands, you never stopped sinning, and at last your divorces cost you your reputation and you gave yourself up to prostitution.[3]

For Calvin, the woman's utter wretchedness is the backdrop against which the extent of Christ's goodness and grace is revealed: "and that to a hussy who did not deserve Him to speak to her at all. A wonderful example of his goodness indeed! For what was there in this unhappy woman, that suddenly from a prostitute she became a disciple of the Son of God?"[4] Interpreting the woman's background this way allows Calvin to draw out two important points. First, that all people are sinners in need of Christ's grace: the depths of this woman's sin reveal the depths of grace. And second, this interaction is evidence of Calvin's doctrine of election: "the Lord was showing us, as under a type, that He does not choose from worthiness those to whom He imparts the preaching of salvation."[5] If the woman is a portrait of a sinner in need of salvation, then Jesus' words in verse 16 ("call thy husband") are intended to bring conviction and repentance:

> Those who are quite careless, almost deadened, have to be wounded with a sense of sin. For Christ's gospel will seem like a fable to them until they are summoned to the judgment seat of God, and made to dread Him as a judge whom before they had despised. All who do not hesitate to rise against the Gospel of Christ with their scurrilous wit must be treated like this, so that they may feel they will not go unpunished.[6]

Though unreasonable to expect Calvin or his contemporaries to think about prostitution the way modern liberal feminists do, slut-shaming might indeed be the appropriate word to describe Calvin's approach.[7] Calvin deliberately shames the woman for her perceived sexual immorality. Tracing the history of interpretation into the modern period, Janeth Norfleet-Day

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Church History 65 (1996): 365-375.

[3] John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 94.

[4] Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John,* 90.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid, 94.

[7] Warren describes slut-shaming as: "a means of restricting women's sexual activity by using a woman's sexual history, reputation, or activity to discredit her… a social tool… used to mark its subject as 'deserving disrespect.'" (Warren, "Five Husbands," 55).

notes that while few scholars are as harsh as Calvin himself, both Calvin's assumptions about the Samaritan woman (that her marital history reveals sexual sin) and his judgment of her (antagonistic to Jesus and requiring conviction of sin), have long remained the dominant interpretation.[8] Raymond Brown, for example, describes the woman as "mincing and coy," mocking and deceptive, stating that Jesus needs to "uncover her evil deeds."[9] Don Carson describes her as sceptical, derisory, and truculent as Jesus "drives to the individual's greatest sin."[10] Köstenberger writes plainly: "the woman is a serial fornicator."[11]

2 Recuperating the Samaritan Woman

In recent decades however, this post-Reformation interpretative tradition has come under challenge, particularly by feminist commentators, in both literary readings and historical-critical work. Such scholars make the very simple point that the text itself simply does not give the reason for the woman's five husbands, and nowhere states or implies adultery. Gail O'Day has suggested the possibility that the woman was several times widowed, or under the laws of Levirate marriage.[12] Others note that divorce might not have been her own initiative.[13] Other feminist scholars who question the assumption of the woman's sin include Amy-Jill Levine, Sandra Schneiders, Janeth Norfleete Day, and Ruth Habermann.[14]

2.1 Historical-cultural Investigation

New Testament scholar Lynn Cohick has written in several places rebutting the characterisation of the Samaritan woman as immoral, based on an investigation into evidence regarding marriage and relationships in the first century Jewish and Greco-Roman world. She

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[8] See the detailed discussion of interpretation history in Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1-42 In Retrospect and Prospect* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 73.

[9] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 175, 177.

[10] Carson, *The Gospel According to* John*,* 221.

[11] Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 153.

[12] Gail R. O'Day, "Gospel of John," in *Women's Bible Commentary* 3rd ed*,* ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 521.

[13] Cohick notes that Jewish evidence suggests only men could initiate divorce, while Greco-Roman culture expected either party might. Though women themselves did not have direct access to legal courts, they could be represented by a male relative. Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 124.

[14] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 135-138; Schneiders,*The Revelatory Text*; Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well;* Ruth Habermann, "Gospel of John: Spaces for Women" in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

summarises:

> The point that the Samaritan woman was married five times should not necessarily strike the reader as indicating promiscuity – perhaps she was just very unlucky… The data from our period does not yield another example of someone having five spouses, but some people were married three times. While a few elite might divorce even twice to better climb the social ladder, there is no record of someone divorcing five times. There is also no testimony of someone being widowed five times, but unfortunately it was common to lose two spouses during one's lifetime. If the Samaritan woman fits this pattern, we might expect that she was widowed a few times and perhaps divorced, or was divorced a few times. Because neither situation necessarily casts a shadow over one's character, we cannot assume that her marriage history made her a social pariah… In sum, we can devise any number of scenarios to explain why the Samaritan woman had five husbands and is currently not married to the man she lives with.[15]

Several scholars also question whether the narrator, or Jesus himself, actually intends to shame the woman by bringing up her past. Nowhere does Jesus explicitly do so – he merely states facts.[16] The woman responds factually too. No repentance is asked for or offered, and the conversation moves on. Mary Rose D'Angelo concludes: "the text imputes neither sin nor shame to the woman."[17] This fact, combined with the lack of explanation offered by the narrator in this carefully composed discourse, suggests that the detail of the woman's relationships might not in fact be the focal point of her encounter with Jesus.[18] Cohick argues further that the Samaritan villagers' positive and receptive response to the woman's testimony speak against her situation being seen as excessively shameful or blameworthy.[19]

2.2 Symbolic Interpretation

In addition to studies of the historical, cultural, and social world of the first century aimed at better understanding the Samaritan woman's likely experience, there is also a long tradition of symbolic interpretation of the pericope. An allegorical reading dominated the patristic and medieval periods. Heracleon considered the five husbands to represent "false entanglement

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[15] Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 123-4, 128.
[16] Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 128; Gail R. O'Day and Susan Hylen, *John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 53; Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew,* 137.
[17] Mary Rose D'Angelo, "(Re)presentations of Women in the Gospels: John and Mark," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134.
[18] Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well,* 34. Norfleete Day notes several scholars who view the point of Jesus' question and his revelation of her past to be to reveal his supernatural knowledge, and identity as a prophet.
[19] Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 128.

with matter."[20] Origen and Augustine saw them as symbolic of the five senses. When Jesus tells her to go and call her husband, this "symbolizes the mind or understanding, the part of the human soul illumined by divine light."[21] Thus the conversation represents a process of spiritual enlightenment or illumination. The allegorical reading became less common from the late medieval period onward, replaced – as we have seen – by a more literal and condemnatory one at the Reformation.[22] However, new symbolic readings emerged in the mid 20th century, though they have not gained overwhelming support. E. C. Hoskyns and Joseph Cahill both suggest that the focus of the conversation is Samaritan religion. Here, the woman represents Samaria and her "five husbands" are a reference to five foreign gods.[23] This interpretation picks up the common Biblical association between adultery and idolatry. Thus the "marital history" *is* painted as negative, though it is exposure of Samaritan idolatrousness that is in view.[24] There is some dispute over whether the description of idolatrous worship in 2 Kings 17:28–33 – commonly cited as the relevant backdrop to the reference – involves five cults or seven. Other commentators thus support a less specific symbolic interpretation. Thomas Brodie, for example, suggests that even if we are unsure about the numbers or whether or not a specific intertext or historical reference is intended "there can be little doubt but that the woman's marital disorder is of a piece with the spiritual disorder of her people."[25] The husbands represent idolatrousness, generally. Thus the story is about the Samaritan mission, worship, conversion, and inclusion in the Christian community.[26]

In my view, these recent works provide a more accurate representation of the possible or even likely historical-cultural backdrop, and of the characterisation of the woman actually offered by the narrator. Highlighting aspects of the text's background and its literary art, these scholars have convincingly demonstrated that much interpretation since the Reformation that has focused on the woman's sexual history and her personal sin has exhibited sexist bias, making and repeating unfounded assumptions about the woman's character and the dynamics of her interaction with Jesus. Though they differ in significant respects, either type of reading better accounts for the nature of the overall discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman

[20] Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well,* 11.
[21] Farmer, *Changing Images,* 368.
[22] Though medieval interpreters also moved to a more literal interpretation, they still saw the function of Jesus' question as exposing his identity, not as exposing and convicting the woman. Farmer, *Changing Images,* 369.
[23] Said to be described in 2 Kings 17:24, 28-30.
[24] Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well,* 27-28, 33.
[25] Ibid*,* 33.
[26] Jonathan Bourgel, "John 4:4-42: Defining a Modus Vivendi Between Jews and the Samaritans," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 69, no.1 (2018).

(theological, religious, and engaged), they give sense to the interaction about husbands without reading too much in or making unsupported assumptions, and they each, in different ways, make better sense of the characterisation and the discourse within the overall context of John's Gospel, with its own literary design and purposes (later in the chapter I will return to this point, describing what I think is determinative here).

3 Warren's "Shameless" Samaritan Woman

Warren takes aim at these accounts as also participating in slut-shaming. By "rescuing" the Samaritan Woman from her unfair reputation, we merely affirm the judgement imposed on that behaviour. Warren states that attempts to "rehabilitate the Samaritan woman reinforce normative feminine sexuality as confined within the bounds of heterosexual marriage and participate in the shaming of alternative relationships implied by the Samaritan woman's history."[27] That is, this approach still slut-shames because it still understands "sluttiness" to be bad.[28] Our need to provide "alternative" readings just reveals that we are uncomfortable with her sexual behaviour. We have rescued the Samaritan woman from the charge of being an adulterer or prostitute, but in doing so have reinforced normative sexuality and condemned other women.

We can note that many of these modern historical-critical, literary, and feminist approaches are offered by women interpreters. Several name their concern that the Samaritan woman has been unfairly negatively characterised as a motivator for their re-assessment of the story. Most are also concerned for the impact of this characterisation on the real lives of Christian women, and their roles in Christian worship, service, and theology. Warren suggests that this kind of re-casting of the story by women interpreters "may be an unconscious defensive mechanism (especially given the systemic rape culture in the discipline of Biblical studies) 'in which some women distance themselves from other women in efforts to protect their own social standing and to secure preferential treatment from those in power.'"[29] They participate, Warren argues, in just another form of "othering," upholding the binary of "good women" and "bad women," aligning themselves with the former and rescuing the Samaritan woman from the latter so that she can become the "proper" type of example disciple.

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[27] Warren, "Five Husbands," 60.

[28] Ibid, 56.

[29] Ibid, 60, citing Brian N. Sweeney, "Slut Shaming," in ed. Kevin L. Nadal, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender* (Sage Publications, 2017).

Finally, Warren argues that this kind of negative portrayal of the woman (and other women in the New Testament) has been used problematically by Christian New Testament interpreters to portray Jesus as generous and inclusive. She sees this interpretation of Jesus ("friend of women," "progressive," "feminist") as a fiction of his interpreters, not based in the Gospels themselves. Thus women characters (and others, including "the Jews") are instrumentalised by Christian interpreters in the service of Jesus' reputation.[30] Instead, she argues, the Gospels' presentation of Jesus' interactions with "sinners" (tax collectors, alleged prostitutes) are aimed not at their welcome, but to shame others. She writes: "as in the example of the tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes in the synoptic gospels, the Samaritan woman is used to shame Jesus's true interlocutors, and not as a symbol of inclusion for all. She is juxtaposed to the clueless disciples – even an adulterous Samaritan woman, 'the lowest of the low', understands more than they."[31]

Amy-Jill Levine, among others, has done significant and important work on anti-Jewish bias in New Testament interpretation in general, and feminist interpretation in particular.[32] Her *The Misunderstood Jew* describes the ways in which New Testament interpreters selectively draw from Jewish background texts to paint a negative portrait of Judaism over against which a positive and liberating portrait of Jesus is contrasted. Interpretations of John 4 are seen as especially liable.[33] But Warren's critique goes further, suggesting that interpretations which rescue the Samaritan woman in order to offer something positive for Christian women in the church, gain their inclusivity "at the expense of sex workers, Jews, and others used by the text to propagate a rhetorically powerful argument for following Jesus."[34]

So, revisionist interpretations participate in slut-shaming, are motivated by personal protectionism (albeit possibly unconscious), and reinforce hierarchies based on race, class, and religion. Warren concludes that we ought not seek alternative explanations for the woman's situation, we only need to remove our judgement of it and expose the slut-shaming done by Jesus, the narrator, and the interpretive tradition. What are we to make of this critique of feminist revisionist readings of the Samaritan woman?

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[30] Warren, "Five Husbands," 54.
[31] Ibid, 53-55.
[32] Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew,* 131.
[33] Ibid*,* 135.
[34] Warren, "Five Husbands," 54.

4 The Problem of Projection

First, as to their motivations, it is clear that Warren does not share the theological commitments of at least some of these women interpreters who are ultimately committed to historic Christian faith and sexual ethics, but still, I believe she misdiagnoses what these authors are doing. Though some might agree with a conservative or traditional Christian sexual ethic which would view adultery and de facto relationships as sinful, and prostitution as harmful, this need not necessitate "rescuing" the Samaritan woman from participation in these acts. Not all actions of all Biblical characters need be exemplary, even when they are offered as models in some respects. These revisionist interpretations are not driven by discomfort with female sexuality but by a desire to meet the text on its own terms. The primary concern is to interrogate how the text itself in its own context – be that primarily historical or literary – portrays the woman. The difference here is not ethical assumptions but hermeneutical assumptions.

Second, Warren's argument is that it is not only interpreters but also the narrator of the Gospel of John, and Jesus himself (or Jesus as characterised by the narrator) who present the woman's background and relationships as shameful. Yet, Warren also implicitly acknowledges that the text itself does not conclusively support this view. For example, noting that the woman herself does not appear to be "shamed" by Jesus, Warren attributes this to the woman's own shamelessness in the face of an attempt to shame her.[35] She also notes that the Samaritan community's reception of the woman does not indicate a marginalised status. But Warren interprets this as further proof of Jesus' rude and unkind behaviour, demonstrating that general societal attitudes were more tolerant than Jesus.'[36] So the narrative shows other possibilities but Warren does not accept these as the intended views of either Jesus or the narrator. To show that Jesus intends to shame the Samaritan woman, Warren argues that 1) the woman was indeed shamelessly sexually active and agential; 2) the conversation with Jesus has sexual overtones and innuendo throughout; 3) Jesus' question in v 16 is abrupt, rude, and sexualising; and 4) it is a reaction to her shamelessness intended to rebuke it and to distance Jesus from it.

Viewing the woman as a "shameless" sexual agent, Warren sees Jesus' question as a power play designed to shame her. Where does this view of the woman's life and attitude arise from? Warren – as much as Calvin or any other interpreter – fills in a story for the woman that goes beyond textual evidence. She practices a form of reader-response interpretation which overlays

[35] Warren, "Five Husbands," 61.
[36] Ibid, 62-63.

modern categories onto the characters and the situation. For the most part, Warren's account is motivated by the desire to wholly preserve the woman's sexual agency. Framing her with the construct of the *femme fatale* – "women who seek their own sexual pleasure rather than existing only to please men"[37] – Warren presents the Samaritan woman as confident, shameless, and independent:

> The Samaritan woman's response to Jesus's question about her marital status illustrates her refusal to be shamed… She 'leans in' to Jesus's attempt to humiliate her, responding plainly about her current and past relationships. I can almost imagine her exhaustion at having to field such questions (*again?*); I can almost hear the disappointment in her voice when what she thought was an intellectual conversation among equal sparring partners dissolves into yet another evaluation of her personal life.[38]

Warren takes it as given that the Samaritan woman has intentionally pursued multiple relationships, perhaps extra-marital relationships, and perhaps voluntarily entered into prostitution. She views her as "in control of [her] own sexual and marital choices and pleasures."[39] Having painted the woman this way, and Jesus as slut-shamer, Warren goes on to show how this harms real modern women by perpetuating rape-culture: it provides a framework in which gendered violence is depicted "as a consequence of [women's] own moral failure, or even as 'deserved.'"[40] Thus, to "prioritise the perspective and reputation of Jesus" is to promote rape culture in Biblical studies.[41]

But do we have good reason to view the Samaritan Woman in this way? I suggest that neither the textual nor historical evidence supports this construction of the woman's life and attitude. First, as we have noted, the text of John 4 itself offers no explanation for the woman's relationship history, and passes no comment on it. Based solely on verses 16 and 17 we have no reason to prefer this view to any other, as many scholars have shown. What of the historical and cultural situation? Warren rejects attempts to redescribe the woman's history in light of research into patterns of marriage and divorce. Neither does she make any attempt to show the likelihood of her own account, which at many points comes across as highly anachronistic. Warren repeatedly describes the Samaritan woman as a sex worker, and, as the modern slogan goes: "sex work is work." But does the sex work slogan fit? Removing the shame and stigma

[37] Warren, "Five Husbands," 60.
[38] Ibid, 61.
[39] Ibid, 64.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 65.

from the activity, could this have been a free and desired choice for the Samaritan woman, and a stable career of power and independence? Whatever we think of sex work in the modern West (and noting that this is a highly contested question within feminism), and even if we can find a "best case" positive version in our time (noting that much sex work worldwide should still be described as sex-trafficking or slavery), what was the situation in the ancient world?

While it is impossible to exclude the possibility altogether for a particular individual, historical evidence suggests that Warren's characterisation is unlikely. In the first century Greco-Roman world prostitution was widespread and legal, however, it was also commonly closely associated with slavery and with sexual violence.[42] Serena Witzke and T. McGinn have both argued against the use of the term "sex work" to describe ancient prostitution. They note how this injects associations based on the modern use of the term ("denoting a particular stance on the modern issue of decriminalized prostitution, as well as an insistence of the autonomy of the sex worker"[43]) which obscure the more difficult realities of ancient prostitution.[44] Witzke notes that while some prostitutes were freedwomen and men (rather than slaves), "it is impossible to know how autonomous even free sex labourers were – free women engaged in sex labor, but the 'voluntary' nature of that engagement is questionable."[45] McGinn concludes: prostitutes are considered "goods" rather than "workers," and the role "involved relationships characterized by sheer dependency."[46] While prostitutes in some cases might bring in a significant income, this money mostly went to pimps, masters, and landlords.[47]

Warren's account relies on a modern feminist construction of sex work (and we might note, still a contested one within feminism) which results in a portrait of the Samaritan woman that is anachronistic and untenable.[48] Indeed, if she was a prostitute, Jesus' reference to her five

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[42] T. A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*: *A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004); Allison Glazebrook, "A Hierarchy of Violence? Sex Slaves, *Parthenoi*, and Rape in Menander's *Epitrepontes*," *Helios* 42, no.1 (Spring 2015): 81-101.

[43] Witzke, "Harlots, Tarts, and Hussies?," 9-10

[44] Serena S. Witzke, "Harlots, Tarts, and Hussies? A Problem of Terminology for Sex Labor in Roman Comedy," *Helios* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 7-27; McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution,* 74.

[45] Witzke, "Harlots, Tarts, and Hussies?," 10. Also McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution,* 75, who writes: her "choice of profession was very likely to have been forced on her."

[46] McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution,* 73-74.

[47] Ibid, 52-53.

[48] For feminist critiques of prostitution see Sheila Jeffries, *The Idea of Prostitution* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 1997); Janice G. Raymond, *Not a Choice, Not a Job: Exposing the Myths about Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013); Kajsa Ekis Ekman, *Being and Being Bought: Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self* translated by Susan Martin Cheadle (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2013); Julie Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisnant, eds., *Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2004). On upholding women's agency within a critique of sex work see Rhea Jean, "Prostitution and the Concept of Agency," in Herjeet Marway and

husbands seems even more odd. Perhaps an ironic comment meant to highlight that the relationships were actually illicit? But then, why is the current man distinguished as "not your husband"? And if Jesus is describing paid sexual encounters, has the woman only had six clients? I conclude that to view the Samaritan woman as a sex worker is an over-reading which makes the same mistake as the centuries of sexist interpretation that many have worked hard to overturn.

One final point on Warren's argument, before we turn to an alternate reading. Assuming Warren's alternative possibility that the Samaritan woman, though not a prostitute, is a free sexual agent who has chosen and pursued all her relationships out of her own desires, does it follow that no commentary on her situation is allowable at all? There is surely a difference between being five times widowed or divorced, and having engaged in five deliberate marriage-ending extra-marital affairs. Warren rejects views which frame "feminine sexuality as confined within the bounds of heterosexual marriage,"[49] and those which view "non-normative sexual encounters" or "alternative relationships" with suspicion.[50] But she rejects not just harsh, misogynistic portraits of the woman, but also orthodox Christian sexual ethics entirely, along with any ethical assessment whatsoever. If the woman had indeed been unfaithful to five marriage partners is any kind of commentary allowed? Might she have hurt her partners, her children, and her family? Warren assumes that because the Samaritan woman *should be* free to choose her own sexual path without judgement, *she has in fact* done so. And that, having done so, her free choices are immune to judgement or to consequences. This reads back modern sensibilities far too strongly, both in her reconstruction and her assessment of the events, and forecloses the possibility of any reflection on her situation. But the Samaritan woman is not on tinder, on dates, or in short-term flings. To have been married five times – whether because of divorce, widowhood, or adultery – is an unusual situation for the time and culture (indeed even for our time and culture), likely highly disruptive, and for various reasons (not just social judgement) a challenging situation.

For Warren, a reading that maintains any critique at all of certain social conditions or

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Heather Widdows, eds., *Women and Violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For an overview of the debate see Karni Kissil and Maureen Davey, "The Prostitution Debate in Feminism: Current Trends, Policy and Clinical Issues Facing an Invisible Population," *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 22(1) (2010): 1-21; Maggie O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). For an alternate perspective see for example Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2018); Victoria Bateman, "How Decriminalisation Reduces Harm Within and Beyond Sex Work: Sex Work Abolitionism as the "Cult of Female Modesty" in Feminist Form, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 18 (2021):819-836.

[49] Warren, "Five Husbands," 60.

[50] Ibid, 56, 60.

experiences as damaging for women privileges Christian sexual ethics and is held still to participate in slut shaming.[51] This position allows no critique whatsoever of "freely chosen" sexual behaviour. But neither does it allow the possibility of liberation or healing from distressing or disappointing circumstances, perhaps not freely chosen. Neither does it acknowledge that that which we choose can wound us. Modern liberal feminism's elevation of choice has been a valuable project. But it also propagates an individualist approach which can fail to account for systemic political and socio-cultural factors which radically limit women's freedom, as a class.[52] Not all things we choose are good for us. Most of our choices are more constrained than we would like. And a choice does not automatically become "feminist" just because a woman makes it. In a patriarchal world, feminist analysis must operate at the social, systemic and structural level, not just the individual level if women are truly to have free and real "choice." The characterisation of the Samaritan Woman as "the Happy Hooker" is a modern fiction which involves a contested set of assumptions about what liberated sexuality for women really means. Analyses of the societal harms of legalised prostitution show that this portrait also has its own risks, and may itself contribute to rape-culture and far worse.[53]

5 A Narrative-Theological Symbolic Reading of John 4:4–42

Though it has not taken hold in a majority of modern commentary, I am increasingly convinced that the representative or symbolic interpretation of the woman's relationships is the better one. In what follows I will not provide a detailed exegesis of the pericope itself, rather outline the textual evidence that I believe points to a symbolic reading as the likely communicative intention of the implied author. A symbolic reading of the woman's "five husbands" and current "man" is indicated by a narrative-theological approach to the text, noting four literary considerations beginning with wider context, and narrowing in to details of the pericope itself. First, the overall purpose, genre, and themes of the Gospel of John; second, John's evident literary craft and intentionality; third, the structure and themes of the "Cana to Cana" section of which 4:4–42 is a part; and finally (fourth), the features of the pericope as they relate to this wider context and to their Old Testament intertexts and background. We will cover each briefly in turn.

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[51] Warren, "Five Husbands," 54.

[52] Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler, eds., *Freedom Fallacy: The Limits of Liberal Feminism* (Ballarat, Vic: Connor Court Publishing, 2015), x-xii.

[53] Ekman, *Being and Being Bought,* Kindle ed. Loc 2215 of 5394.

5.1 John's Purpose and Theme

John's narrative telling of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is bookended in 1:1–18 and John 20:30–31 by summary theological statements which express the author's own beliefs about the identity of Jesus and purposes is penning the Gospel. The question of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of God is thus the driving theme of the entire Gospel. Mark Stibbe has argued that "narrative Christology" might provide an apt description not only of the Gospel's content, but also its genre.[54] Stibbe paraphrases 20:31 as follows: "every detail of this narrative has been selected and expressed in such a way that you might accept its fundamental Christological belief, that Jesus is the Christ."[55] Thus the Gospel is always a theological narrative. To read John is to see it saying something theological (whether you believe those theological claims or not). The whole Gospel, therefore, operates as illocutionary act with desired rhetorical force or purpose. 20:31 makes clear that the implied author's purposes are embedded in the construction of the text.

5.2 John's literary craft

Governed by the purpose statement of 20:31, scholars have demonstrated the Gospel to be highly intentional in its crafting, with sophisticated literary features and structures. The finely crafted nature of the narration can be seen in the structure, the themes, the characterisation, the discourse, and in the use of numbers, irony, double entendre, narrative conflict, symbolism, *inclusio*, chiasm, intertextuality, and more. All of these narrative strategies are consistently employed towards John's Christological purpose: "If John raises and develops a theme, it is because it says something about Jesus. If John uses double entendre, dualism, irony or symbolism, it is again to direct the reader to a significance about Jesus of Nazareth that he wants the enlightened reader to perceive."[56] Joseph Cahill describes John 4:4–42 as a "masterpiece of narrative design," particularly noting its connection to Old Testament narratives."[57] Interpretation must pay attention to this narrative craft and Old Testament background as the pericope works towards the Gospel's Christological purposes.

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[54] Mark W. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992),17.
[55] Stibbe, *John as Storyteller,* 17.
[56] Ibid, 22.
[57] Joseph P. Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," *Religious Studies Bulletin* 2 (1982): 41.

5.3 Immediate Context – Cana to Cana

The section of John from 2:1–4:54 has been identified as an *inclusio* bounded by two miracles at Cana, focused on the inbreaking of the new order and on faith responses to Jesus.[58] Each story explores the theme of the "replacement of the old order of worship with a new order centred on Jesus and his work."[59] Jesus replaces the Jewish water of purification with the new wine of the kingdom; the Temple in Jerusalem with the new temple of his body; physical birth with birth from above/water/spirit; and temple/mountain worship with worship in spirit and truth.

In between the two miracles or sign stories (the first among Jews, the second among Gentiles) (2:1–11; 4:46–54) the story of the Samaritan woman is clearly linked with and contrasted with that of Nicodemus (John 3:1–15).[60] Both stories treat common themes, and particularly the symbol of water. But Nicodemus, the named teacher, Pharisee, and ruler, comes to Jesus at night, and remains metaphorically as well as literally "in the dark." The woman encounters Jesus at midday, recognises his identity and brings others to faith in him.[61]

Cana to Cana begins with a wedding, it includes the identification of Jesus as the bridegroom (3:29), and 4:4–42 is commonly identified as a betrothal type-scene.[62] The Cana wedding story offers the setting of the eschatological wedding and Messianic banquet. 3:23–30 introduces us to the bridegroom. As we approach chapter 4 the reader might well be asking "who is the bride?" Schneiders writes, "now, the new Bridegroom who assumes the role of Yahweh, bridegroom of ancient Israel, comes to claim Samaria as an integral part of the New

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[58] Stibbe, *John,* 42-43; Brown, *The Gospel According to John,* 95-96; F. J. Moloney, "From Cana to Cana (John 2:1-4:54) and the Evangelist's Concept of Correct (and Incorrect) Faith," *Salesianum* 40 (1978); C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968)*,* 297; R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary,* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 118.

[59] Stibbe, *John,* 49.

[60] Noted contrasts include Jerusalem/Samaria; night/day; city/countryside; man/woman; Jew/Samaritan; named/unnamed; teacher/average person; and finally misunderstanding/understanding; lack of faith/faith. See Stibbe, *John,* 62; Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 187; Dorothy A. Lee, "The Story of the Woman at the Well: A Symbolic Reading," *Australian Biblical Review* 41 (1993), 38.

[61] Lee, "The Story of the Woman at the Well, 38; Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew,* 138. See Carson in contrast, who notes the differences in status between the two characters but does not point out the difference in faith-response. His conclusion is simply: "and both needed Jesus." Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* 216.

[62] The betrothal type-scene is first described by Robert Alter (1981) in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, offering Gen 24:10-61, Gen 29:1-20 and Ex 2:15b-21 as paradigm examples of the type. Recognition of the type-scene was readily adopted by Johannine scholars writing on 4:4-42. See Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV."; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) for some of the earliest uses.

Israel."[63]

5.4 Literary features of 4:4–42

With this context established we are ready to see John 4:4–42 in a different light. The literary features of the Gospel as a whole, and the immediate section (Cana to Cana) have highlighted significant governing themes and features highly relevant to our text: the revealing of the identity of Jesus as Messiah; consistent use of double entendre and symbolic reference; the nature of right worship of Yahweh in the new covenant; and a backdrop of betrothal and wedding imagery. With these concerns in mind we now turn to the pericope itself.

Jesus begins his conversation with the Samaritan woman by asking for a drink at a well (4:7). This request is readily recognised as a device by which Jesus begins a conversation with two layers of meaning. The familiar Johannine techniques of misunderstanding, double entendre, and symbol are present here. When Jesus speaks of "living water" (ὕδωρ ζῶν, v 10), the woman quite reasonably understands him to mean flowing water: "living," or running water as in a stream, as opposed to the still water of the well.[64] John's readers already know more, but the woman's response is neither especially dense nor hostile. Besides, her misunderstanding opens the door to the question of Jesus' identity: "are you greater than our father Jacob?" she asks (v 12).[65] Jesus' identity is revealed as he reveals the second layer of meaning of ὕδωρ ζῶν. Jesus is speaking now not of physical water for physical thirst, but of a spiritual reality, "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (v 14, cf. 3:5). Unlike Nicodemus, whose response to Jesus' revelation is disbelief (3:9), the Samaritan woman responds with faith, desiring what Jesus offers.

It is at this point that Jesus tells the woman "Go and call your husband" (v 16). The topic of the woman's relationship history fills just 3 verses of the 19 that describe their conversation. The discourse then moves immediately on to a question about right worship and Jesus' declaration that "true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth" (v 23). Many who have seen the Samaritan woman's primary characterisation as sinner in need of forgiveness view this exchange as entirely literal, and intended to arouse conviction of sin.

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[63] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 187.

[64] Lee, "The Story of the Woman at the Well," 39; and see D. C. Allison, "The Living Water (John 4:10-14; 6:35c; 7:37-39)," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 30 (1986): 144-146, 151-152; Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* 218.

[65] On the role of misunderstanding in John, and specifically in John 4, see Lee "The Story of the Woman at the Well," 36-37. Lee writes: "Misunderstanding is the main device which John uses to move from the literal to the symbolic meaning."

They have therefore interpreted the woman's question in vv 19–20 as an evasive tactic. But within the wider conversation these few verses about husbands – if interpreted literally – do seem something of a non-sequitur.[66] We might also consider the highly unusual situation described here. From the evidence we have, five husbands is a high number, even considering likely rates of death and divorce.[67]

Both these interpretative challenges disappear if we view 16–18 as of a piece with the ongoing theological themes, and operating at two levels, moving from the literal/physical to the spiritual meaning. Just as the reader understands the move from the physical symbol to the spiritual reality, so both the Jews and Samaritans must move from worship centred around the physical geographical location, to worship in spirit and truth. This interpretation is supported by several of the exegetical comments made above: nowhere in the text does Jesus or the narrator actually pass judgement on the woman, she does not repent or ask forgiveness, and the townspeople readily accept her witness. The focus of the story is the growing understanding of Jesus' identity and the resulting impact on the Samaritan-Jewish dispute about worship. Thompson notes the movement of the gospel from Israel (1:17, 41) to the world (4:42), found also in microcosm in this conversation: "Jesus (a Jew) reveals his status as Messiah to the woman (a Samaritan), whose people come to acclaim his as the Saviour of the world. Everything in John moves from Israel to the world."[68] The important element of the woman's characterisation then, is not her extreme personal sinfulness, but that she is a Samaritan. Schneiders and Stibbe both view the Samaritan woman as what Raymond Collins has called a "representative figure," or "symbolic character."[69] The story's focus is to call the Samaritans to true worship of God, "apart from any temple, whether on Mount Zion or Mount Gerizim."[70] The woman represents the Samaritans who come to faith in Jesus. Her story shows their inclusion in the new covenant community.

But the woman does not just represent Samaritan faith. As a representative character she also models the journey of discipleship for all.[71] The woman's growing understanding, recognition of Jesus, and faith response characterised by witness embodies in human form the Gospel's very purpose.[72] Two features of the story parallel Jesus' calling of the first disciples

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[66] Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," 44.
[67] Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians,* 123.
[68] Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 96.
[69] Stibbe, *John,* 66; Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 188.
[70] Thompson, *John: A Commentary,* 95.
[71] Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 7; Stibbe, *John,* 66-67.
[72] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 192-193.

in John 1:35–51. Jesus' supernatural knowledge of the woman parallels his knowledge of Nathanael (John 1:47–49); and the woman's "Come and see" (4:29) echoes Philip's in 1:46.[73] We have already noted the contrast with Nicodemus. And within the pericope the woman's actions are juxtaposed with those of Jesus' disciples: "the male disciples go to the town but they do not bring anyone back to Jesus. Theirs is a fruitless harvest. The one woman in the story makes the same journey but brings many people to Jesus, and they confess Jesus as the Saviour of the world. Hers is an undeniably fruitful harvest."[74] In 17:20 Jesus prays for those "who will believe in me through their word" (διὰ τοῦ λόγου) and in 4:39 many of the Samaritans believe διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς γυναικὸς μαρτυρούσης.[75] When the Samaritan townspeople come out to Jesus they invite him to "remain" (μένω), a word which in John denotes full faith and permanent relationship.[76] Thus the Samaritan woman is presented as not only a disciple, but also an apostle. Her story parallels and the exceeds that of Jesus' male disciples.[77]

In summary, the unusual nature of what is described (if literal), the lack of focus it receives, and its position in between two parts of a symbolic theological conversation aimed at the revelation of Jesus' identity as Messiah, leads me to consider the symbolic interpretation of vv 16–19 highly likely.[78] Two further considerations lend strength to this approach. First, the Old Testament background to the living water imagery; and second, the betrothal type-scene, and the ways in which John's narrative subverts the type.

5.5 Old Testament Background to the image of Living Water

"Living water" as an image for the Spirit given by Jesus recurs again in John 7:38–39.[79] It

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[73] O'Day, "Gospel of John," 552; Stibbe, *John,* 67.

[74] Stibbe, *John,* 65.

[75] Contra Angela Parker, who argues that the Samaritan woman's voice is erased even by her own community as they "move on" from her testimony, to believe on the basis of meeting Jesus himself. Angela N. Parker, "And the word became… gossip?" Unhinging the Samaritan woman in the age of #MeToo," *Review and Expositor* 117, no. 2 (2020): 260.

[76] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 193; Stibbe, *John,* 69.

[77] Culpepper, *John,* 137.

[78] It is possible of course that the husbands are both real and symbolic. That this woman in particular met Jesus at the well for just this purpose. If so, it remains true that the focus of the story is not her sin or repentance, but the coming to faith of the Samaritans. See Paul Duke, whose analysis using the type scene is not intended to suggest that that the events themselves did not truly transpire. (Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel,* 103). As Eslinger writes: "The type-scene in John 4 functions exclusively on the level of communication between the author and the reader; the characters are not addressed by it. The type-scene is a device that the author uses to guide the reader's perception of what is happening in the story." Lyle Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, The Reader, and Reader-Response Criticism," *Literature and Theology* 1, no. 2 (1987): 169.

[79] See also John 3:5; 19:34.

is a repeated image in the Gospel of John, but John's author did not invent the significance himself.[80] Keener summarises:

> In Biblical tradition, God himself (Jer 2:13; 17:13) appears as living waters, and Wisdom as a fountain of life (Prov 18:4). 'Living waters' would flow from Jerusalem in the end time (Zech 14:8), and it would be natural for John and his tradition to connect this passage midrashically with Ezek 47, where this river brings life (Ezek 47:9). This water would also purify from sin (Zech 13:1; cf. John 3:5).[81]

Thus Jesus' identifying himself as the source of living water is part of his self-revelation as Messiah, and Son of God. Many scholars include Jeremiah 2:13 in their discussion of this theme, but few have fully examined the connection.[82] Jeremiah 2–3 provides a coherent thread for the entire conversation, not just the reference to living water, as it uses the metaphor of living water in connection to Israel and Judah's idol worship (2:11), which is imaged not only as drinking from "broken cisterns" (2:13) or foreign waters (2:18), but also as adultery and prostitution (2:20ff; 3:1ff). In Jeremiah's oracles of judgement against Judah (southern Kingdom), he makes repeated reference to the earlier idolatry and unfaithfulness of Israel (northern Kingdom), from whom the Samaritans were said to be descended.[83]

Jeremiah claims that Judah's faithlessness now exceeds even that of Israel (Jer 3:11), and so Yahweh calls both Kingdoms to repentance, and the oracle of judgement against Judah is at the same time a call for Israel to return (Jer 3:12–14). So the prophet Jeremiah calls for Israel's repentance (turning away from idolatry/adultery) and promises that the Lord will restore them to Zion (Jerusalem).

> At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. In those days the people of Judah will join the people of Israel, and

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[80] See also Revelation 7:17; 21:6; 22:1. Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* 218-219.

[81] Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 604-605.

[82] Some who note it as one connection include Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* 218-219; Thompson, *John,* 100. Carson, for example, notes the symbolic reference of "living water," citing Jer 2:13. He points out the many OT allusions throughout the pericope and the eschatological dimensions of the conversation. He denies, however, any attempt to render vv16-19 in symbolic terms. Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* 232-233. Interestingly, Lyle Eslinger is the only scholar noted so far to connect "living water" in Jer 2:13 to the sexual imagery later in the chapter. However, Eslinger's perspective on the significance of this link is far removed from my own. I was initially prompted to think harder about the connection to Jeremiah by a blog post on John 4 by Nathan Campbell, https://st-eutychus.com/2023/the-samaritan-woman/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR1sx8pu0C_-V_soVbmNMMwL2P0wOs9uWDK4WSgmeRqwdLdU9Jbm2zxDerg_aem_ASSrGA3D1cxHZLdDROJk6705j2hXhUW3TJOcd_YJ9y2ye2_SNnQSI7uGMQXBVaPV9ELv-wnKMJACcL0V19t7sfJ0

[83] Magnar Kartveit, *The Origin of the Samaritans* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 351ff. Kartveit's findings question the accepted history somewhat, but recognises this view as operative.

> together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your ancestors as an inheritance. (Jer 3:17–18)

Against this backdrop, it seems likely that talk of the woman's husbands is not an abrupt change of subject to her sexual ethics, but a continuation of the symbolic discourse about true worship of Yahweh. So Stibbe: "the marital symbolism and betrothal echoes are figurative devices… John 4 is an ironic betrothal scene in which infidelity is false worship and marriage true worship."[84] Remember that Jesus is in Samaria because the Pharisees are growing displeased with him (John 4:1–3); that the episode ends with the Jewish disciples misunderstanding (4:31), and with a Samaritan harvest (4:39–42); and that the whole episode is deliberately contrasted with the misunderstanding of Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher. The Jews here are like Judah in Jeremiah, shamed in comparison to those they would call idolaters. But the Samaritans believed themselves the true descendants of Israel, and that proper worship was practiced at Mount Gerizim. The woman's question in verse 19 is therefore not evasion of the subject of her personal life, but is entirely on topic. Jesus draws on the prophetic promise of Jeremiah but circumvents the Jewish-Samaritan conflict over geographical locations because Jeremiah's prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus himself. Keener writes:

> Jewish teachers anticipated the living waters to spring from Jerusalem, Samaritans expected such waters closer to home. 'The new reality brought by Jesus transcends both expectations: the eschatological river of life flows neither from Mount Gerizim nor from Mount Zion, but is to be found in Christ himself.'[85]

5.6 What does John really do with the Type Scene?

Our final consideration brings us back to the betrothal type-scene. Specifically, though many commentators mention the type-scene as backdrop, there is not clear agreement on the way in which John's author uses or adapts the scene, and to what purposes. I want to ask: If John borrows the Old Testament pattern, what is he doing with it, and what does he mean by it?

Köstenberger suggests that the Old Testament precedent adds an element of risk to Jesus' encounter at the well.[86] Others take this further, seeing the encounter as flirtatious and sexually

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[84] Stibbe, *John as Storyteller,* 48.

[85] Keener,*The Gospel of John,* 604-5, here quoting Charles Scobie, "North and South: Tension and Reconciliation in Biblical History," in *Biblical Studies: Essays in Honor of William Barclay,* ed. J.R. McKay and J.F. Miller (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 98.

[86] Köstenberger, *John,* 148.

charged. Usually it is the woman said to be active in this regard, but many see Jesus engaging too, at least up to a point.[87] Calum Carmichael thinks the woman is intent on marriage.[88] John Bligh argues it is this intent which leads her to lie about her relationship.[89] Lyle Eslinger sees the woman as brazenly suggestive,[90] the double entendres of the passage having sexual, not spiritual overtones.[91] The abrupt change of topic occurring at v 19 then, is the result of Jesus effectively "calling out" the woman's flirtation and rejecting it.[92] In Eslinger's version there is no betrothal, neither physical nor spiritual. Instead the type-scene highlights the final non-betrothal, reinforcing the "gap" between Jesus and others. We have expected something carnal, but Jesus refuses to enter in. Thus the type-scene is a narrative device designed to provoke a certain kind of experience in the reader – that they might feel for themselves the "communication gap," the misunderstandings which are narrated throughout the Gospel.[93]

Many commentators have noted the incongruity between the type and the actual events narrated by the author of John's Gospel, and thus described John's use of the type as ironic. The events stand out because they do not fit the pattern: Jesus does not seek a wife, the maiden is not eligible, and no betrothal occurs.[94] Paul D. Duke considers the story an example of the ironic type of mistaken identity.[95] For Gail O'Day the initial irony is that the woman is a Samaritan, highlighting that Jesus has success among the Samaritans but not among his own people. A further layer is that her concern over the impropriety of Jesus' initial request reveals her fundamental misunderstanding of who stands before her and what is truly occurring. The narrative builds towards the Samaritan townspeople's declaration: "this is truly the saviour of the world." The story is not about a man meeting a woman at a well, but about a Jew becoming a universal saviour.[96]

Cahill suggests that the type-scene is re-written as a fugue. Betrothal is only one part of the contrapuntal narrative in which the real theme is true worship. The writer "suppresses" the

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[87] Eslinger: "Had she not been making sexual advances, had Jesus not understood them, and had the reader not understood both the woman and Jesus, his command to go call her husband would make no sense here. Jesus tells her to get her husband exactly when she expected to commit adultery against the man." Eslinger, *"*The Wooing of the Woman at the Well," 178.

[88] Calum M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 332-346.

[89] John Bligh, "Jesus in Samaria," *Heythrop Journal* 3 (1962): 329-46.

[90] Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well," 177.

[91] Ibid, 170. Eslinger suggests that in Proverbs 5:15-18, to drink water from a well or cistern "obviously refers to sexual relations," and that living water in Jer 2:13 has "sexual connotations."

[92] Ibid, 171-172.

[93] Ibid, 173.

[94] Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel,* 136.

[95] Duke, *Irony in the Fourth* Gospel, 100.

[96] Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 89.

principal theme, and thus "a totally new message appears under a ritualized convention."[97] The conflict between expectation and actual events is the strategy by which we come to see more of Jesus' identity and his work. Similarly, Mark Stibbe has argued that John's scene fits the betrothal type very well, but that the device is intended figuratively.[98]

What are we to make of this range of interpretations? The type-scene can be seen to be used in one of two ways, focusing our attention on one of two topics. One way of reading focuses attention on the woman herself, and highlights further her flirtatious and scandalous behaviour and her unsuitability as a marriage partner. In these readings the use of the type-scene is rendered as comedic and ironic, with the Samaritan woman as the butt of the joke. Verses 16–18 make sense in the scene, though perhaps its other elements feel more out of place. And the reading remains primarily at the "literal" or physical/material level. Alternatively the type-scene is unpacked as a device intended to instantly surpass itself. The type-scene gives us the basic setting of boy-meets-girl at a well, but the focus is never on a developing romantic relationship. The scene is introduced only to be upset, drawing our attention elsewhere. Here too, there is irony, but of a more fundamental nature. It is not that the woman blunders, misunderstanding Jesus' identity and intentions. But the type-scene itself is a device which points to a greater reality.

In the context of the developing marriage imagery of the Cana to Cana narrative, it is this second rendering which fits John's purposes best. If Jesus is the bridegroom, we well ask, "who is the bride?" But Jesus is not a literal bridegroom embarking on a human marriage. Jesus-as-bridegroom is Jesus-as-Yahweh. The bride is Yahweh's New covenant partner, the New Israel: those born from above (1:12), who worship in spirit and truth (4:24), and who receive the Word become flesh (1:12–14). Now we see that in John's Gospel this type-scene is put to symbolic use. There is no romantic or sexual relationship developing between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The irony of the scene does not lie in the fact that she is not a maiden, or that the two characters do not end up betrothed. The betrothal in this scene is a figurative one. The irony of the narrative is that neither Jesus nor the woman is remotely interested in marriage of the usual kind. The entire scene itself is a symbol, a metaphor. Samaritan inclusion in the new covenant and the new Israel is shown by the use of this extended metaphor which results in the entire Samaritan village receiving Jesus.

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[97] Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," 47.

[98] Stibbe, *John,* 68-69. Unlike other commentators, Stibbe views the fact that the woman is currently unmarried as a positive for the pattern. While others see her current, presumably illicit, relationship as suggestive of her unsuitability, Stibbe argues "the fact that the Samaritan woman is unmarried… indicates her availability for symbolic betrothal."

6 Five Husbands: Real, Symbol, or Both?

At last we return to the woman's five husbands. Warren has argued that the use of the type-scene sets the woman up to be shamed by Jesus, just as she has been shamed by interpreters. I have argued the opposite: that the developing marriage imagery of the Cana to Cana narrative, culminating in the "betrothal" scene drives toward a symbolic interpretation of the woman's relationship history, and to viewing the woman as representative of Samaritan inclusion and discipleship. This interpretation removes some of the difficulties over the unusual nature of the woman's alleged situation. And importantly, that it provides a coherent account of the entire narrative. One in which verses 16–19 are not awkward or out of place, but integral. Schneiders concludes: "in summary, the entire dialogue between Jesus and the woman is the 'wooing' of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the New Israel by Jesus, the New Bridegroom. It has nothing to do with the woman's private moral life but with the covenant life of the community."[99]

Warren's analysis represents a feminist critical approach to the text which utilises a hermeneutic of suspicion. Warren is suspicious of the text and its interpretation, even of feminist interpretation which seeks to rescue the woman, or promote an "inclusive" Jesus, as ultimately using women to "think with."[100] She views both the narrator and Jesus as hostile to the woman's sexual agency and background, but ultimately the woman is simply a means to another end, Jesus' real concern being to make a point to other Jewish men. Does the symbolic approach outlined above still fall afoul of Warren's concerns? I do not believe so. A symbolic interpretation of the husbands within the context of the developing marriage metaphor in the Gospel of John is not an attempt to "rescue" the woman's reputation by providing "innocent" reasons for her marital history, it is a fundamentally different way of viewing the text. One that – I have argued – is more consistent with the text's own internal dynamics. Warren's discussion considers the pericope entirely on its own, with no reference to the wider context of John's Gospel, to genre, or to narrative and literary features. It assumes a straightforwardly "literal" (and at times anachronistic) reading which fails to do justice to the literary art of the Gospel of John.

Warren is right to criticise interpreters so blinded by their own assumptions about the woman's sexual sin that they fail to take the narrative on its own terms. But in the end we might

[99] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 191.
[100] Warren, "Five Husbands," 54.

think she herself has done something all too similar – unhelpfully reinforcing the focus on the woman's sexuality as her primary feature. In order to denounce historical (and contemporary) slut-shaming, Warren's account accepts that the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is about her sexual history, even if this topic is treated for other purposes. But by accepting this starting point, Warren cuts off from the outset other ways of seeing the woman and her role. Though she majors on the woman's sexual agency, Warren minimises the woman's agency in other areas of life. Warren is not interested in the woman's engagement in the theological discussion, she minimises her positive portrayal as one who recognises and understands Jesus, and minimises her agency as a witness to her town. Does Warren herself instrumentalise the woman, casting her in a certain light so as to better speak to a contemporary conversation? Despite her warnings about the racial and class dimensions of revisionist readings, her own interpretation fails to account adequately for the social and cultural locatedness of the story, obscuring the real issues of race and class that are operative in the text.

Ultimately, perhaps Warren's account is not suspicious enough. Schneiders' own feminist-critical symbolic analysis that we have interacted with above goes further: questioning not just the history of interpretation and its negative judgements of the woman's sexual life, but also the focus on her sexuality in the first place. But Schneiders' mode of reading also enables her to go beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion. Seeking the liberating potential of the text as a place of meeting with the divine, Schneiders advances a model of feminist-critical interpretation that does not terminate in suspicion, but goes on to "retrieval."[101] It is precisely her willingness to meet John's text "on its own terms" that opens up the world of the text as pointing to something over and above an obsession with female sexuality, and which illuminates the profound significance of the story.

6.1 Lingering Issues

While the symbolic reading that I have argued towards resolves some of the textual issues and avoids the overt sexism of the post-Reformation interpretative tradition, it is not without its own difficulties. Positively, this interpretation avoids the denigration of the Samaritan woman for her behaviour, and avoids her shaming – by interpreters or by Jesus. Instead she is characterised as intellectually curious, and holding her own in conversation with Jesus. Though it takes the course of the conversation for her to come to a full understanding of Jesus' identity, she recognises Jesus' use of the metaphor immediately, as well as its connection to her own

[101] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 183.

religious background and faith. But there are perhaps some downsides to this approach? First, the danger that reading the woman primarily as symbol cuts off the positive value of her individual example; and second, that the symbolic reading upholds and perpetuates the sexism of the symbol itself. We turn to these concerns now.

Woman as symbol?

First, by adopting a symbolic reading of the passage it might be said that we contribute to the marginalisation of women in Scripture, and to the erasure of their roles in the early Christian communities. This has two related elements. First, we make the woman's life "not really the point of the story." Which, whether she is a literary fiction or a real-life character who encounters Jesus, still amounts to instrumentalisation. Philip, Nathanael and Nicodemus are all still seen as real people who truly encountered Jesus, even as they are drawn in certain ways for John's literary purposes. But here we are in danger of seeing the Samaritan woman's real life and real experience as of only "symbolic" significance. F. Scott Spencer regards the symbolic reading as insufficiently feminist-critical because it "strips the woman of her individual identity and dynamic role in the story."[102] Relatedly, though we avoid a negative portrayal of the woman, perhaps we also lose the potential for a positive example, or even just for female representation at all.

This worry can be addressed if we maintain – contra Schneiders – that the event as narrated by the author of John's Gospel is indeed based on a real encounter, even as it is "stylised" in the telling. That her story functions to demonstrate Samaritan repentance and inclusion in the wider narrative of Jesus' Messiahship need not undermine her presentation as an engaged, astute, responsive, and active individual, and as one who acts as a disciple.[103] This is the first story in John which portrays women in a more favourable light than men, but it is not the last. Other women presented as faithful disciples include Martha and Mary (11:1–44; 12:1–8), the women at the cross (19:25–27), and Mary Magdalene (20:1–3, 11-18).[104] The symbolic reading does not require that the entire story be un-real, just that the purpose of the conversation about husbands is greater than the literal. But our second challenge is more pressing.

[102] F. Scott Spencer, Feminist Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation,* ed., Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 310.
[103] Spencer, Feminist Criticism," 314.
[104] Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 3.

Problems with the Marriage Metaphor – Porno-prophets and violence against women

The marital metaphor for Yahweh's covenant with Israel on which this symbolic reading relies has been strongly and consistently critiqued by feminist interpreters as fundamentally sexist and disparaging of women. In this metaphor – used repeatedly throughout a number of Old Testament prophetic books – Yahweh is represented by the faithful husband, and Israel/Jerusalem/Judah by the serially unfaithful wife whose waywardness is described in graphic terms and under harsh judgement.[105] Ezekiel's language is particularly explicit and has been strongly critiqued by commentators such as Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes. These authors have stated that they would prefer such texts not be in Jewish and Christian holy books, and that, ethically, they should be rejected as Scripture.[106] Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes have argued that this imagery is propagandistic and pornographic, utilising the sexually violent portrayals for political purposes – not only with regard to the religious life of Israel, but also aimed at controlling relations between men and women in Israel.[107] Brenner concludes, because "the metaphor's ideology cuts both ways, accepting the metaphor entails endorsing patriarchy in both divine and human realms."[108]

The arguments that these portions are properly understood as pornographic are unconvincing.[109] Neither is it likely that they are intended as such, nor that they are intended to address women on the topic of sexuality or to describe or define proper sexual behaviour for women in Israel.[110] The texts are clear that the imagery of adultery is always actually about idolatry, with the primary addressees most likely being the men of Israel.[111] Furthermore,

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[105] Hosea 1-3; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Jeremiah 2-5.

[106] Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and "Sexuality" in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 172.

[107] Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge,* 7; Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23," in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible,* ed. Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 173-175.

[108] Athalya Brenner, "On Prophetic Propaganda and the Politics of 'Love': The Case of Jeremiah," in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 264.

[109] See Corrine L. Patton, "'Should Our Sister Be Treated Like a Whore?': A Response to Feminist Critiques of Ezekiel 23," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives,* ed., M. S. Odell and J. T. Strong (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000); Andrew Sloane, "Aberrant Textuality: The Case of Ezekiel the (Porno) Prophet," in *Tamar's Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics,* ed., Andrew Sloane (Eugene, OR: Pickwick: 2012).

[110] Brenner acknowledges this, but does not consider the author's intention decisive for her reading. Athalya Brenner, "Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections" in *The Prophets: A Sheffield Reader*, ed., P. R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 77. Katherine Davis, "The Metaphor of Sexual and Physical Violence as a Speech Act in Ezekiel 16," *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence* 2 (2023):21-33. Davis rejects the arguments of Katheryn Darr and others that the text invites mimicry in attitude or action. See Katheryn Darr, "Ezekiel's Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts," *JSOT* 55 (1992): 97–117.

[111] Firth, "Desert Spring, Dead Dog Waterhole," 126. Howard Ellberg-Schwartz has argued that "ancient Jewish men learned to read themselves as 'women' in relation to the lover of the Song of Songs." Howard Ellberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

though the language in these texts is often shocking and unsettling, this is its purpose. The descriptions of sexual acts and violations are intended to cause sorrow, not arousal, even amongst the male audience.[112] Patton notes that "the metaphor of the punishment, the sexual violence that Shields and Weems find so offensive, also works only in a culture in which men are also horrified by the image. This is not a text that portrays sexual violence against women as a good thing. The metaphor would not work if the male audience were not shocked.[113] Sloane concludes:

> Thus the violence of the texts reflects not standard patterns of behavior in Israel, but the violent realities of war and exile, and is meant to generate a horror in the readers corresponding to the horror of exile. Hence pornoprophetic interpretations misread the metaphor in seeing it as justifying this as appropriate (sexual) violence in Israel's social world, rather than reflecting the historical realities of judgment on Israel's sinful violation of that world.[114]

We can also note in these chapters the presence of what Ricoeur calls "mutual contamination" of metaphor.[115] Israel is imaged as the wayward bride, but also as child, with God as Father (Jer 3:19), and as a man who seeks out prostitutes (Jer 5:7–8).[116] Further, the sign of repentance called for in Jeremiah 4:4 is the male image of circumcision –Yahweh calls for circumcision of the heart. van Dijk-Hemmes has asked why faithless Israel is always portrayed by the image of an adulterous wife, and not by the image of a rapist,[117] but Israel is portrayed with male adultery as well as female, and sexual violence is portrayed as evil in these texts (see Ezek 23).

The Marriage Metaphor in the New Testament

What happens to the marriage metaphor in the New Testament? In her own discussion of the problematic nature of this underlying motif, Sandra Schneiders notes that the interaction in John 4 does not reflect the explicit or violent nature of these background texts. Jesus does not

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[112] See arguments in Daniel Smith-Christopher, "Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib: Rereading Ezekiel 16:37–39 in the Context of Imperial Conquest," in *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with Tiered Reality,* eds., S.L. Cook and C.L. Patton (Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 146; Corrine L. Patton, "'Should Our Sister Be Treated Like a Whore?" See also discussion in Andrew Sloane, "Aberrant Textuality."

[113] Patton, "Should Our Sister Be Treated Like a Whore," 228, 233.

[114] Sloane, "Aberrant Textuality, 209-210.

[115] Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77.

[116] Firth, "Desert Spring, Dead Dog Waterhole," 124-125.

[117] Van Dijk-Hemmes, "The imagination of power and the power of imagination. An intertextual analysis of two Biblical love songs: the Song of Songs and Hosea 2," *JSOT* 44 (1989): 85.

make much of it, and neither does he condemn the woman.[118] This is consistent with the use of the metaphor in other New Testament texts which, with the exception of portions of Revelation, are fairly understated. The ascription of Jesus as bridegroom is present in all the Synoptics, along with the Gospel of John.[119] The church is presented as the bride of Christ/the Lamb,[120] and the eschatological vision is imaged as a wedding supper (Rev 19:7; 21:2; 21:9; 22:17).[121] In these ascriptions the use of the metaphor is positive, the bride is beautifully dressed and ready for her husband. Christ's bride includes Jew, Gentile, and Samaritan, virgins and the married, obedient Jews and "godless pagans," men and women.[122] Jerome writes that all "will hear Jesus sing to them verses from the Song of Songs: "you are all fair, my love; There is no flaw in you" (4:7).[123] All that said, in the New Testament as a whole, the image of God as Father becomes more prominent than that of husband. Christians are children of God, adopted heirs, and brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, Revelation 17–19 continues to image evil and rebellion as an adulterous woman, with Babylon represented as "the great prostitute" (Rev 17:1, 8). This woman is to be punished, shamed, and humiliated, and finally destroyed, after which there is great rejoicing. She is clearly contrasted with the bride who is "clothed in the righteous acts of God's holy people" (Rev 19:8). Thus the imagery remains, only now it is not Israel but her enemies who are portrayed this way. Thus, ultimately, I agree that the unease lingers. Though we have not denounced the character of the Samaritan woman herself, and while the text does not make use of unnecessarily sexualised or harsh language, we have still offered an interpretation which relies on and contributes to sexist portrayals of men and women, potentially reinforcing problematic conceptions of women in religious life. Our use of the metaphor legitimates it, reinforcing (if implicitly) a fundamental asymmetry.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined Meredith Warren's feminist-critical reading of the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4:4–42. Warren argued that attempts to recuperate the

[118] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 195.
[119] Matt 9:15; 25:1-13; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35.
[120] 2 Cor 11:2.
[121] Note that Rev 22:17 also connects with the imagery of living water.
[122] Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis," *Church History* 77.1 (2008): 14-17.
[123] Jerome, *epp* 54 3, 108, 129; cited in Clark, "Celibate Bridegroom," 16.

woman's reputation by providing "safe" explanations for her marital history still participate in slut-shaming by perpetuating judgement about women's sexual activity and delineating "good women" from "bad." I have argued that Warren's reading is anachronistic, reductionistic, and insufficiently attentive to the text's historical and literary features. In contrast I have offered a feminist-critical reparative interpretation arising from the text's own narrative and theological cues. I suggest that the Samaritan woman operates as a representative character – not less than an individual, but one whose story represents a larger theme. In this case the woman represents the inclusion of Samaritans in Jesus' mission, and as the people of God, image as YHWH's bride. This reading is based on John's overall purpose, literary clues such as developing themes, plot, characterisation, and setting, as well as Old Testament intertexts.

Warren's reading asserts that women must be free to choose as they like, and that those choices ought not to be judged. But it offers little to those whose choices are constrained, whose circumstances are beyond their control, or who might consider their own choices to not have been good ones. More fundamentally though, Warren's reading continues to make the woman's sexuality the focus of the story, ignoring the profound theological dimensions of the encounter. Warren's message is that women should be free to be shameless sexual agents, but she misses the opportunity to offer women the possibility of being defined by something other than their sexuality. The reading I have offered need not deny the women's relationship history but neither does it limit her characterisation to this one element. It receives the Samaritan woman as an intelligent theological interlocutor, with genuine interest in questions about religion and true worship. She grows to recognise Jesus' true identity and her understanding and discipleship are positively contrasted with the Pharisee Nicodemus and with Jesus' own disciples. Once again I have sought to show how the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion can be limiting, and reparative reading can be liberating.

Conclusion

Springs of Living Water:

Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics After Post-Critique

Here is a tragic irony: all this knowledge and so little to nurture the soul.[1]

The turn to post-critique in literary studies was motivated by a growing recognition of the limits of remaining always in the critical mode. In this project I have attempted to demonstrate that the increasingly exclusive dominance of the hermeneutics of suspicion in feminist Biblical criticism has similarly resulted in limits to the accessibility, reach, and usability of the field. Suspicion has edged out other ways of seeing and of doing feminist work, but illegitimately so. The hermeneutics of suspicion is an essential component of feminist critical work on the Bible, but it cannot lay claim to exclusivity. This is a statement of fact – feminists do read in different ways; a pragmatic consideration – suspicion "knows some things well and others poorly;"[2] and an epistemological claim – feminists who read "with faith" are no more biased than those who do not: both bring a set of presuppositions which govern and limit interpretation, either of which are ultimately unprovable. This is the first step in my argument: that feminist hermeneutics cannot properly exclude theological interpretation and has suffered from doing so.

One response might be that, of course, there are other ways of viewing and reading the Bible, but unless they adequately grapple with the Bible's patriarchy, androcentrism, and oppression of women, they are not truly feminist readings. Thus, the second piece of my argument was to demonstrate that to view the Bible as Christian Scripture and as the Word of God is neither a repudiation of the Bible's creatureliness, nor a divinisation of it. Positively, I have shown that to read Scripture as God's Word is to read it for God's speaking which, while mediated by human discourse is not reducible to it. Patriarchy is a feature of the Biblical texts,

[1] Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 1.
[2] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 130.

but it is not their message or purpose. This is not to say, however, that the Bible's patriarchy is accidental. Reading theologically we have encountered a stronger claim: that the Bible itself explains its own androcentrism as the judgement for and result of human sin. This discovery empowers a theological feminist hermeneutic which approaches the Bible with both suspicion and trust, recognising that its vision of and movement towards redemption is told as the story of God's gracious action within a broken world.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical model suggests that if feminist interpreters of the Bible are to truly understand and appropriate what it offers they must be willing to receive its narrative and symbolic world. But Ricoeur also offers this crucial insight: that symbols need not be – indeed cannot be – received uncritically.[3] Symbols provoke reflection and prompt critical thinking, requiring us to "tear down the idols" of our naive understanding in order to arrive at a clearer vision of the truth. In this way, feminist critical interaction with Biblical texts, traditions, and symbols is an essential part of the process of interpretation. That is, feminist criticism is part of the process of discerning what our symbols and narratives "aim at." This understanding of Scripture, and God's revelation in and through it, invites readers into a dynamic and active process of interpretation which involves imaginatively "entering in" to Scripture's worlds as well as exercising our full critical faculties: "revelation is addressed not so much to a will called upon to submit as to an imagination called upon to 'open itself.'"[4] In place of models of reading which suggest uncritical acceptance, I have described the feminist "second naiveté" as a hermeneutics of faith and persistence modelled on Luke's persistent widow. Opening ourselves imaginatively to this parable as "language event" has given us the promise of God's justice. But it has also invited us into the pursuit of justice – a quest which is to be applied no less to our reading of the Scriptures than to our lives in the world.

Part two of this work has demonstrated the potential of post-critique in feminist interpretation. It has shown that theological readings indeed offer resources for women's liberation, and can be addressed to major feminist pastoral concerns such as violence, abuse, and trauma. It has also shown, however, that such readings cannot and need not "solve" all feminist "problems" with Scripture. This is what makes feminist reparative reading a "second naiveté" and not a first. Here I want to conclude with some final reflections on this point, that is, the persistent ambivalence of feminist interpretation. Natalie Carnes suggests that the ambivalence of feminist engagement with the world, theology, and with Scripture registers the

[3] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* 395.
[4] Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986): 209.

need for "the commitment to staying present to a patriarchal world without surrendering to the misogyny that sustains it." For, she writes, "what other world do we have?"[5] This observation is a crucial one, and a theological one. In a world impacted by sin, there is no world free from patriarchy. So, to paraphrase Carnes, the question of how to interpret the patriarchy and androcentrism of Scripture is a specified version of the question of how to live. Further, if we accept Trible's reading of Gen 2–3, "the commitment to staying present to a patriarchal world without surrendering to the misogyny that sustains it" is both a description of the redemptive work of God in the world, and of the call to Christians to similarly live redemptively within it. To interpret Scripture with faith and persistence in search of God's goodness and justice for women is an aspect of Christian discipleship.

Feminist theologian Janet Martin Soskice has grappled with this ambivalence throughout her career, and faces the challenge head-on:

> Can a feminist be at home in a religion where 'father' is a central divine title both in foundational texts and in the subsequent history to which these have given rise? Does she not risk ingesting symbolic poison whenever Scripture is read? Is the fatherhood language central to this religion, and if central, does it bind Christianity fast to an unacceptable patriarchal religion which the feminist must reject? The question, can a feminist call God 'Father'?, thus resolves into two others which are: can the 'Father' language be eradicated from text and tradition? And can a feminist live within Christianity if it cannot be eradicated?[6]

Feminists who do not wish to give up Christian faith seek a path in which male imagery and language might be received without accepting the attendant "male idol of patriarchal religion."[7] For Soskice the answer lies in the nature of language about God. In particular, the nature of metaphor and the possibility of human language for God at all. Human language for God is not univocal, or equivocal, but analogical, and it is thus simultaneously both productive and limited. Anthropomorphisms such as father, spouse or lover are necessarily metaphorical. As they call up associative networks, carry affect, and so on, the metaphors truly help us understand something about God.[8] But at the same time, the metaphors do too much: they "overflow" with "surplus meaning" – with associations that are not intended and are ultimately limiting.[9] Calling God Father teaches us something about our relationship to God, but if pushed too far it becomes absurd. Soskice argues that anthropomorphism is unavoidable in

[5] Carnes, *Attunement,* xiii.
[6] Soskice, *The Kindness of God,* 67.
[7] Ibid, 73.
[8] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language,* 51.
[9] Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom," 6-7.

Christianity, "a religion whose God is a God of calling and address. It is people who speak, and a 'speaking god' will be spoken of personally."[10] What the relational anthropomorphic titles do then, at least in part, is express God's kinship with humankind. The intimacy of these relations means that they are fraught with risk, for the very same reason that they are so powerful. Therefore, we must always remember what the metaphors aim for and what they do not. Ultimately, Soskice concludes that "the principal reason why the Biblical writings are so dependent on gendered imagery… is not because its writers were so very interested in sex, or even hierarchy and subordination, but because they were interested in kinship."[11] She too advocates a hermeneutics of retrieval, or "reparative reading" of the Christian tradition, a sympathetic reading which, while not blind to the risks and misuses of the patriarchal language of the tradition, seeks what is nourishing and fruitful in them. Indeed, she sees this as their primary intended force.

One of the reasons for Soskice's willingness to engage these metaphors positively is Ricoeur's notion of "mutual contamination." Biblical metaphor is not stable or fixed, it is paradoxical, mixed, and developing. God is both father and spouse. Jesus is a celibate bridegroom. God is mother as well as father. No one image captures or contains God, and no one image stands still.[12] This instability is especially pronounced as we move to the New Testament where familiar symbols are persistently disrupted.

> Leviticus prohibits the eating of blood, yet the central Christian rite involves drinking blood. In Leviticus childbirth is defiling, yet John's gospel describes God as giving birth to the chosen. In Levitical terms a corpse radiates impurity, especially for priests, but in Christianity the central icon of holiness, the Great High Priest, is a dead man on a cross… In the New Testament, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, symbolic orders are constantly challenged, broken open, renewed.[13]

It is the particularity and embodiment of the person of Jesus, the personal, loving nature of God, and the fact that Yahweh is a God who reveals and speaks even as he cannot be fully seen or known, that drive the Biblical authors to metaphorical language which simultaneously reveals and conceals. Despite its risks, kinship language opens possibilities for goodness: love, connection, promise, faithfulness, birth, growth, and change. And so Soskice concludes, "the idea that the Biblical books, or parts of them, are too intrinsically sexist to be sustaining for

[10] Soskice, *The Kindness of God,* 78.
[11] Ibid, 4.
[12] Ibid, 77.
[13] Ibid, 98-99.

modern readers betrays a strangely wooden literary theory."[14]

Sandra Schneiders' approach is similar. For her, the feminist "problem" of Scripture merely reflects the general challenge of meeting the divine in the human: the challenge of all our language, imagery, and telling about God. It is only through one that we know the other, such that we both see and do not see: we see as through a glass darkly. Schneiders interprets the Bible as sacred Scripture, within the community of faith, so as to encounter the living God. But she is also ever-cognisant that the Bible is a human text that "manifests all the traits of such an artefact and must be dealt with accordingly."[15] For Schneiders this means pursuit of a feminist-critical interpretation that incorporates a hermeneutic of suspicion, but that does not end there. She agrees with Soskice that to terminate in suspicion must be to give up Christian faith altogether. Instead, interpretation must move through the confrontation with the problems of the text, to a hermeneutics of retrieval, in order to find the text's liberating potential.[16] Anne Carr concludes:

> An adequate feminist interpretation is dialectical: it is suspicious as it unmasks the illusory or ideological aspects of symbols that denigrate the humanity of women, and it is restorative as it attempts to retrieve the genuinely transcendent meaning of symbols as affirming the authentic selfhood and self-transcendence of women. Ricoeur argues that the two moments of negation and affirmation are not extrinsic to one another; 'they constitute the over-determination of symbols,' their 'surplus of meaning,' and each requires the other.[17]

These accounts remind us that we must read the Bible with proper regard for what it is. This is a point on which John Webster is insistent; only then can we know how to read it, or even why we read it at all. I have not in this project developed a full account of Scripture, but have emphasised one of Webster's major contributions: the need for a non-competitive understanding of the relationship between the divine and the human in Scripture. I have argued that in order to repudiate the patriarchy of the Bible's worlds, the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion too readily accepts a "competitive" view of the human and divine in Scripture, precluding from the outset any possibility of God's speaking. This is usually a presupposition of the hermeneutics of suspicion, not a position established by it. Subsequently, readings which look only for human activity – to uncover and reject patriarchal interests and aims – are then used to demonstrate the Bible's hostility towards women, its inability to reveal knowledge of

[14] Soskice, The Kindness of God, 4.
[15] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* xviii.
[16] Ibid, 183.
[17] Carr, *Transforming Grace,* 102.

God, and to reject the Bible's vision of God as incompatible with feminism. What I have here tried to show is that a more nuanced (non-competitive) account of Scripture enables the interpreter to approach the Bible with both the feminist critique of patriarchy and with the desire and willingness to hear and to encounter God.

So, are the church's Scriptures bitter waters for women, or can they be a life-giving stream? In John 4, for the Samaritan woman to receive Christ's offer of living water was to recognise and respond to the symbolic meaning of Jesus' human discourse and to recognise his identity as Word-made-flesh. The revelation of God in this story is an encounter with the self-presentation of the Triune God; it is the self-revelation of God in Christ, by the Spirit. So too in Scripture. Feminist interpretation which seeks living water might take its cues from the three women studied in chapters 4 to 6. Can we – with the Samaritan woman – recognise a surplus of meaning in the narrative and symbolic worlds of the Bible? Can we – with Mary Magdalene – be open to the possibility of the living Christ's real presence? Can we – with the widow – persist and not give up?

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