

Introduction

CLAIMING THE AUTHORITY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Fifty years ago feminist biblical studies was not yet born. Today it is a growing, developing, and stimulating field of study.¹ I am often asked: With whom did you study feminist the*logy? And I unflinchingly answer: When I studied the*logy² in the 1960s, feminist the*logy and feminist studies in religion did not exist. Hence, we had to invent it. Since the history of feminist biblical studies still remains to be written,³ this collection of essays on feminist biblical hermeneutics seeks both to trace the emergence of feminist biblical studies and my participation in it. It does so not only in a chronological but also in a topological⁴ way that circles around the key *topoi* of feminist hermeneutics.

THE STORY AND SITE OF FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

I remember that in the late 1960s, when the so-called “second wave” of the wo/men’s⁵ movement first emerged on the scene, I devoured everything that was published on any wo/men’s or feminist topic. In the 1970s, I could still read anything that appeared in the area of feminist the*logy or feminist studies in religion. In the 1980s, I was no longer able to keep informed and to read everything that appeared in feminist critical studies, but I could still keep abreast of most of the publications in my own area of expertise, biblical studies. In the 1990s, I have had a difficult time to keep up and to read the literature appearing in my field of specialization, Christian (New) Testament Studies. In the first decade of this century, feminist biblical studies have been joined by other voices—such as queer studies, postcolonial studies, masculinity studies, or ideological biblical criticism—and it is impossible to read and integrate all these different approaches. This impossibility, however, is not a depressing fact but rather exhilarating, because it documents that feminist biblical studies has developed into a rich and variegated area of study.

Indeed, this enormous proliferation of critical feminist intellectual work in general and in biblical studies in particular is ground for celebration. Feminist hermeneutics has been established as a legitimate site of biblical hermeneutics. It brings a chorus of new voices to biblical hermeneutics. The variegated intellectual voices of feminist biblical studies have aptly been characterized with the metaphor of heteroglossia, “speaking in other, different

tongues.” This expression alludes to the biblical notion of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) as a gift of the Divine Spirit. Without question, in the last thirty years feminist biblical studies has been established as a new field of study with its own publications. It is taught in schools, colleges, and universities and is practiced by many scholars in different parts of the world.

However, to tell the story of the emerging field of feminist biblical studies as a success story obscures the fact that it is for the most part the success story of white Euro-American Christian scholarship. While Jewish feminist biblical scholarship has greatly increased in the 1990 and 2000s, Muslim feminist biblical scholarship is in its beginnings. While the presence and work of womanist/black feminist, Latina, and Asian feminist biblical scholars arrived on the scene of biblical studies in the 1980s and 1990s, only very few African American, Latina, or Asian wo/men scholars have graduate level positions in biblical studies. Celebrating the success story of feminist biblical interpretation must not overlook that articles and books by African, Latin American, Australian, Chinese, Korean, Indian, Native American, Maori, and other Indigenous feminist scholars around the globe are still scarce because only a very few wo/men of the Two-Thirds World have gained access to biblical academic studies and have the status and means to publish their work.

This dire situation is not due, however, to the racism and elitism of white feminist scholars, as is often alleged, but due to the fact that academic institutions have not changed their kyriarchal ethos and because global capitalism is built on the exploitation of wo/men. Hence, because of the societal, cultural, and religious structures of domination, very few wo/men of disadvantaged groups or countries achieve access to the*logical education and higher biblical studies.

Moreover, even in the white European and North American academy where one finds a good number of highly educated wo/men, feminist biblical interpretation is often still not widely recognized as an important field of study. If one, for instance, looks at and searches through introductions to the Bible or to specific areas of biblical studies, one very rarely will find even a mention of feminist biblical studies as a formal area of inquiry.⁶ Many collections of essays in the field still are published without any feminist contributions to the topic. Feminist scholars are still daily written out of history and our work is consigned to the margins. This is not due to the self-ghettoization of feminist biblical scholars as some have suggested. Rather it is due to the kyriarchal structures and ethos of the field.

Applicants often are still not selected for ministerial or doctoral programs if they express interest in a feminist studies approach. Scholars still have a difficult time to receive tenure or ecclesiastical approval if they have published in the area of feminist biblical studies or feminist the*logy. Students are still told not to write their dissertation on a feminist topic if they want to be serious scholars. Senior scholars are put down rather than honored because they have

done feminist work. In short, the marginalizing and silencing tendencies of kyriocentric academic and religious structures that have barred wo/men from higher education and the study of the*logy in the past are still in place, but they are now directed against feminists and not against wo/men who support the academic system of exclusion and subordination.

I have here frequently used the f-word “feminist,” although this expression is still in most of the world a negative word and in many audiences it calls forth an array of complex emotions, negative reactions, and harmful prejudices. Since the word also evokes a host of different understandings, I hasten to explain how I understand it. My preferred definition of feminism is expressed by a well-known bumper sticker that with tongue in cheek asserts, “feminism is the radical notion that wo/men are people.” This definition accentuates that feminism is a radical concept and at the same time ironically underscores that at the beginning of the twenty-first century feminism should be a common-sense notion. It asserts: wo/men are not ladies, wives, sex-objects, handmaids, seductresses, or beasts of burden, but wo/men are full decision-making citizens.

This definition of “feminism” alludes to the democratic assertion “We, the people” and positions feminism within radical democratic discourses, which argue for the rights of all the people who are wo/men. It evokes memories of struggles for equal citizenship and decision-making powers in society and religion.⁷ According to this political definition of feminism, men can advocate feminism just as wo/men can be antifeminist. Feminism is not just concerned about gender but also about race, class, heterosexism and imperialism. It is concerned about kyriarchal power relations of domination.

Hence, I have proposed early on to replace the category of “patriarchy” with the neologism *kyriarchy*, which is derived from the Greek words *kyrios* (lord/slavemaster/father/husband/elite/propertied/educated man) and *archein* (to rule, dominate).⁸ In classical antiquity, the rule of the *kyrios* to whom disenfranchised men and all wo/men were subordinated is best characterized as *kyriarchy*.

Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of interlocking⁹ multiplicative¹⁰ social and religious structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression. Kyriarchal relations of domination are built on elite male property rights as well as on the exploitation, dependency, inferiority, and obedience of wo/men who signify all those subordinated. Such kyriarchal relations are still today at work in the multiplicative intersectionality¹¹ of class, race, gender, ethnicity, empire, and other structures of discrimination. In short, kyriarchy is constituted as a sociocultural and religious system of dominations by intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression. The different sets of relations of domination shift historically and produce a different constellation of oppression in different times and cultures. The

structural positions of subordination that have been fashioned by kyriarchal relations stand in tension with those required by radical democracy.

Rather than identifying kyriarchy with the patriarchal and racial binary male over female, black over white, Western over colonized peoples, it is best to understand it in the classical sense of antiquity. Modern democracies are still structured as complex pyramidal political systems of superiority and inferiority, of dominance and subordination. As kyriarchal democracies, they are stratified by gender, race, class, religion, heterosexism, and age; these are *structural positions* that are assigned to us more or less by birth. However, how we live these structural kyriarchal positions is determined not simply by these structural positions, but also by the *subject positions* through which we live our structural kyriarchal positions. Whereas an essentialist approach assigns to people an “authentic” identity that is derived from our *structural position*, our *subject position* becomes coherent and compelling through political discourse, interpretive frameworks, and the development of theoretical horizons regarding domination.

Thus, a critical intersectional analytic does not understand kyriarchy as an essentialist ahistorical system. Instead, it articulates kyriarchy as a heuristic (derived from the Greek, meaning “to find”) concept, or as a diagnostic, analytic instrument that enables investigation into the multiplicative interdependence of hetero-normativity, gender, race, class, and imperial stratifications, as well as into their discursive inscriptions and ideological reproductions. Moreover, it highlights that people inhabit not only one but several *structural positions* of race, sex, gender, class, disability, and ethnicity. If one position becomes privileged, it constitutes a nodal point. While in any particular historical moment class may be the primary modality through which one experiences gender, colonialism, and race, in other circumstances gender may be the privileged position through which one experiences sexuality, race, colonialism, and class. Consequently, feminist biblical interpretation is best conceptualized in terms of wo/men’s struggles to free ourselves from kyriarchal domination and mind-sets, our struggles for survival, self-determination, and well-being, our struggles to become fully entitled and responsible citizens in society and religion.

THE ROOTS OF FEMINIST BIBLICAL STUDIES IN EMANCIPATORY STRUGGLES

Feminist studies in general and feminist biblical studies in particular, I argue, do not owe their existence and inspiration to the academy but to social movements for change. Most of the social movements for change in modernity have been inspired by the dream of radical democratic equality and equal human rights. Since the democratic idea promises equal participation and

equal rights to all but in actuality has restricted rights and equality to a small group of elite men, the subalterns, who have been deprived of their human rights and dignity, have struggled to transform their situations of oppression and exclusion. Such radical democratic struggles are not just a product of modernity, nor is their ethos and vision of radical equality a product restricted to the West.

These struggles for wo/men's self-determination, equal rights, decision-making power, human dignity and radical democratic equality provide the context of a critical feminist interpretation for liberation. They do so not only by articulating ever new sites of struggle but also by providing ever more sophisticated categories for the analysis of domination as well as by articulating visions of liberation. Since the Bible has been used in most of these struggles either for legitimating the status quo of the kyriarchal order of domination *or* for challenging dehumanization, feminist biblical interpretation is best articulated as an integral part of wo/men's struggles for authority and self-determination.

If the Bible has been used against and for wo/men in our diverse struggles, then the goal of biblical interpretation cannot just be *to understand* biblical texts and traditions. Rather, its goal must be *to change* western idealist hermeneutical frameworks, individualist practices, and sociopolitical relations. Hence liberation the*logies of all colors take the experience and voices of the oppressed and marginalized, of those wo/men traditionally excluded from articulating the*logy and shaping communal life, as the starting point of biblical interpretation and the*logical reflection. In reclaiming the authority of wo/men as religious-the*logical subjects for shaping and determining biblical religions, the act of biblical interpretation becomes a moment in the global struggles for liberation.

Long before postmodern theories, liberation the*logies have not only recognized the perspectival and contextual nature of knowledge and interpretation but have also asserted that biblical interpretation and the*logy are—knowingly or not—always engaged for or against the oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historical world of exploitation. However, such a position does not assume the innocence and purity of the oppressed. Neither does it see them purely as victims but rather understands them as agents for change. Such a shift from a modern western malestream to a critical liberationist frame of reference engenders a fourfold change: a change of interpretive assumptions and goals, a change of methodology and epistemology, a change of individual and collective consciousness, and a change of social-ecclesial institutions and cultural-religious formations.

Consequently, a critical interpretation for liberation does not commence by beginning with the text and by placing the Bible at the center of its attention. Rather it begins with a reflection on wo/men's experience in the struggles for justice and our sociopolitical religious location. For such a reflection it utilizes

a critical systemic analysis of the structures of domination that shape our lives and are inscribed in biblical texts and interpretations. In reading biblical texts, a “feminist standpoint” must be taken that remains focused on wo/men who struggle at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid of domination and exploitation. This is necessary, because their struggles reveal both the fulcrum of dehumanizing oppression threatening every wo/man and the power of Divine Wisdom at work in our midst.

Christian identity that is shaped by the Bible must in ever new readings be deconstructed and reconstructed in terms of a global praxis for the liberation of all wo/men. Equally, cultural identity that is shaped by biblical discourses must be critically interrogated and transformed. Hence, one needs to reconceptualize the traditional spiritual practice of discerning the spirits as a critical hermeneutic-ethical-political practice. As interpreting subjects, biblical readers need to learn how to claim their spiritual authority to assess both the oppressive as well as the liberating imagination of particular biblical texts and their interpretations.

By deconstructing the rhetorics and politics of inequality and subordination that are inscribed in the Bible, we are able to generate new possibilities for the ever new articulation of radical democratic religious identities and emancipatory practices. In order to do so, a critical ethical-political interpretation does not subscribe to one single reading strategy and interpretive method but employs a variety of exegetical and interpretive methods for understanding the Bible as public discourse.

Feminists have used different rhetorical metaphors for naming such an emancipatory method and hermeneutical process; “Making visible,” “hearing into speech,” and “finding one’s voice,” are just a few. I myself have favored metaphors of movement such as “turning,” “dance,” “ocean waves,” or “struggle.” One could also think of biblical interpretation as cooking a stew, utilizing different herbs and spices that season the rice, meats, and carrots equally and when stirred together combine into a new and different flavor.

Whether one thinks of biblical interpretation as a “stew” or a “dance,” crucial “spices” or “moves” in a critical feminist emancipatory interpretation are experience and conscientization, a critical analytic of domination, suspicion rather than trust, assessment and evaluation in terms of a feminist scale of values, reconstruction or re-membling, (re)imagination and ritualization, and the goal of transformation and action for change. These strategies of a critical feminist emancipatory interpretation, however, are not to be construed simply as successive independent steps of inquiry or simply as discrete methodological rules or recipes. Rather they must be understood as interpretive moves or strategies of seasoning that interact with each other simultaneously in the process of reading a particular biblical or any other cultural text in light of the globalization of inequality.

These movements in the hermeneutical “dance” of liberation work on two different levels of interpretation: on the level of the language-systems, ideological frameworks, and sociopolitical-religious locations of contemporary readers in kyriarchal contexts of domination, on the one hand, and on the level of the linguistic and sociohistorical systems of biblical texts and their effective histories of interpretation, on the other. In such a critical feminist hermeneutical dance we continue to turn and to move, beginning at the end, circling back to the beginning. Like the tides of the ocean, Divine Wisdom-Sophia always moves and returns, but with a difference. If feminist biblical interpretation moves and changes in the direction of the divine it might glimpse a vision of Her all-embracing justice and enveloping well-being. As Karen Baker-Fletcher has seen Her ceaseless motion:

When I watch the wind tease and urge into dance the waves of the ocean, when I feel the moon’s pull on the waters and on the cycles of my own body, I often think of the deep powerful waters of the ocean dancing with the spirit of G*d . . . Creation is born out of a loving, creative dance between Spirit and the elements of the cosmos. We humans are *ādām* (which means “earth creature” in Hebrew), dependent on all the elements of water, earth, air, sun. Our own nativity and the birth of our children’s children is dependent on this power of life.¹²

If the Scriptures were seen to be like the “deep powerful waters of the ocean dancing with the Spirit of G*d,” feminist biblical interpretation could then be understood as articulating and participating in “the creative dance between the Spirit and the elements” of the biblical traditions. In the hermeneutical movements of the dance of critical feminist interpretation, biblical discourses could become Divine power and food for life again.

Such a complex interactive model of a critical interpretation for liberation challenges both the academy and the churches in order to transform them in the interest of all non-persons struggling in neocolonial situations for human dignity, justice, and well-being. It seeks to recast interpretation not in positivist but in rhetorical terms. It does not deny but recognizes that religious texts are rhetorical texts, produced in and by particular historical debates and struggles.

A critical feminist emancipatory interpretation insists on the hermeneutical priority of feminist struggles in order to be able not only to disentangle the ideological (religious-the*logical) practices and functions of biblical texts for inculcating and legitimating the kyriarchal order but also to identify their potential for fostering justice and liberation.

A critical interpretation for liberation that reads the Bible with a feminist lens in the context of wo/men struggling to change oppressive kyriarchal structures of religious, cultural, and societal texts and institutions, must be

distinguished from both a Christian “apologetic” biblical interpretation by women and dualistic academic gender studies. Popular and academic biblical readings *by women*, reading the Bible *as a woman and from the perspective of woman*, as well as biblical interpretation in terms of *gender* are not simply identical with a *critical feminist interpretation for liberation*, insofar as these modes of reading do not question the religious and cultural gender lens of interpretation and their goal is not change and transformation.

In short, a critical feminist interpretation for liberation does not derive its lenses from the modern individualistic understanding of religion and the Bible. Rather it seeks to shift attention to the politics of biblical studies and its sociopolitical contexts of struggle. Hence, it places wo/men as subjects and agents, as full decision-making citizens at the center of attention. To that end it favors not only a deconstructive but also a reconstructive approach to interpretation. It struggles to elucidate the ways in which religious doctrines, symbols, practices, and biblical texts function in the creation and maintenance of ideas about sex/gender, race, colonialism, class, and religion. It also examines how such social constructions have influenced and shaped theoretical frameworks, the*logical formulations, biblical interpretations, and our own self-understanding.

FEMINIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

Feminist biblical interpretation is thus best understood as a site of struggle over meaning rather than as a means to provide definite interpretations of biblical texts. A major site of struggle is the struggle over *the authority* to interpret the Bible. Not only wo/men but also feminists often have internalized that they do not have either the ecclesial or the academic authority of interpretation. Readers of biblical texts early on learn to develop strategies of textual valorization and validation rather than hermeneutical skills to critically interrogate and assess scriptural interpretations and texts along with their visions, values, and prescriptions. If the literary canonization of texts in general places a work outside of any further need to establish its merits, the canonization of Sacred Scriptures in particular brings even more sympathy and uncritical acceptance. Canonization compels readers to offer increasingly more ingenious interpretations, not only in order to establish “the truth of the text itself” or “a single sense” correct meaning of the text. It also does so in order to sustain affirmation of and submission to the authority of the Bible either as sacred scripture or as a cultural classic.

Many students have expressed the anxiety that they have experienced in challenging and evaluating biblical texts in feminist terms. A widespread fear exists that critical scrutiny of one’s religious tradition will automatically engender a form of cultural relativism that believes that all religions are equally

good and thereby weakens allegiance to one's own religious community. Such anxiety is even greater when one critically approaches the Bible. This unease is articulated in the following group reflection from one of my classes: "This led to a discussion of how we feel a sense of great uneasiness at the thought of denying scriptural authority altogether for biblical texts that preach violence. For those of us from faith traditions, it was particularly difficult for us to go against what has been deeply ingrained in us. As a group we seemed to have many problems with identifying a text as kyriarchal. But we had even more problems to reenvision the text. This seems to be an ongoing struggle for our group and its members—giving ourselves the authority to go beyond critiquing and actually rewriting the text, especially in the sense of reimagining it without 'historical facts' to support our ideas."¹³

Hence, some feminist scholars have rejected a critical feminist approach to biblical texts that demystifies biblical texts and readings that advocate power over and violence. They argue one should not reject such texts out of respect for the "meaning making" of conservative wo/men who derive self-worth and solace from reading kyriocentric biblical texts. This attempt to claim the reading of conservative wo/men as a feminist reading overlooks one of the key insights of a liberation hermeneutics. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire pointed out a long time ago that the oppressed have also internalized oppression and are divided in and among themselves. I quote him: "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom . . . must be pursued constantly and responsibly."¹⁴

Since both the oppressed and their oppressors are, according to Freire, "manifestations of dehumanization,"¹⁵ the methodological starting point of a critical emancipatory hermeneutics cannot be simply the "common sense" experience and the interpretation done by wo/men. Rather such a starting point must be systemically analyzed and reflected experience. Since wo/men also have internalized worldviews of domination and are shaped by kyriarchal "common sense" mind-sets and values, the hermeneutical starting point of a critical feminist interpretation is not simply the experience of wo/men. Rather it is wo/men's experience of injustice that has been critically explored with a hermeneutics of suspicion in the process of "conscientization."

Insofar as biblical interpretations of conservative women do not start with a critical consciousness and a critical feminist analysis of kyriarchal sociopolitical and ecclesial-religious subordination and second class citizenship, they tend to construe respect and dignity for women in terms of their internalized cultural ideological frameworks of femininity and true womanhood or in terms of the dominant ideology of the "white Lady." Consequently such conservative readings cannot but keep the ideological structures of wo/men's self-alienation in place and internalize them further.

By continuing to insist that such readings are not feminist or liberationist and by disagreeing with their often antifeminist interpretations, one does not deny agency and respect to individual women. Rather, because of respect for them, one needs to insist on a reading strategy that interrupts rather than reinforces their religious self-alienation. Focus on the theory and practice of wo/men's struggles for transforming kyriarchal relations of domination and subordination remains a normative principle for a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation.

However, I agree with one point of this argument for conservative wo/men's reading very strongly. I have argued for quite some time that biblical interpretation must shift its attention from the kyriocentric text to the ways wo/men read authoritative texts. Hence, we need to develop strategies of reading that allow wo/men to become conscious of the ways our readings and self-understandings are determined and shaped by kyriarchal institutions and interests. As long as Scripture is used not only against women struggling for emancipation and in support of kyriarchy¹⁶ but also for shaping women's self-understandings and lives, we need to encourage wo/men to engage kyriocentric biblical and other texts critically, to reclaim our spiritual authority for adjudicating what we read, and to value the process of biblical readings as a process of conscientization.

Closely connected with the struggle for wo/men's authority of interpretation is *the struggle over scriptural authority*. At least since the last century feminists have intensified the crisis of biblical authority brought about by scientific biblical criticism insofar as they have pointed out that the Bible has not only been written by human hand but by elite men. It is not only the product of kyriarchal past cultures but also has been used to instill the dehumanizing violence of such cultures as "word of G*d." Particularly Protestant the*logical interpretation, with its emphasis on *sola scriptura*, faces this problem of how to articulate the authority of Scripture. As Mary Ann Tolbert has pointed out: "For Protestants, the central and unavoidable problematic posed by the role of scripture is its *authority*, but exactly what that authority entails varies from denomination to denomination and indeed is often a hotly contested issue within denominations. . . . Scripture, then, for Protestants becomes the primary medium of communication with G*d."¹⁷

If for Protestants the Bible is "not primarily a source of knowledge about" G*d¹⁸ but "rather a source for *experiencing*, hearing, G*d or G*d-in-Jesus in each present moment in life,"¹⁹ then the question of criteria for judging the truth claims of such experiences becomes especially pressing. Yet this question is not just a problem for Protestantism.

Although traditional Roman Catholic the*logy has insisted that the teaching authority of the hierarchy defines biblical norms and criteria, such an assertion does not provide a way out of the problem because the teaching authority of the hierarchy remains bound to the norms of Scripture. Hence,

both Protestant and Catholic the*logical hermeneutics had to develop a different approach to the hermeneutical problem raised by the insight into the historicity and linguisticity of Scripture.²⁰ Approaches to the question of biblical authority vary not only in terms of confessional dogmatism but also in terms of sociopolitical interests.

A CRITICAL FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

Different hermeneutical approaches have been developed by Christian feminist the*logians to address this problem. If one takes Jewish and Muslim feminist hermeneutics into account, the whole debate becomes even more complex and variegated. Like feminist studies in general, so also feminist biblical hermeneutics does not have a homogeneous perspective but advocates a variety of sometimes conflicting approaches.

The *hermeneutics of loyalty* argues that only biblical interpretations—not biblical texts—promote wo/men’s discrimination.

The *hermeneutics of scientific interpretation* claims to be able to say with certainty which biblical texts are true and which are not if the proper methods are used.

The *hermeneutics of rejection* argues that the Bible is completely and thoroughly sexist and patriarchal. Hence feminists must reject it as totally oppressive.

The *hermeneutics of desire* in turn reinvents the Bible rather than abandoning it. It uses it as a language to express its own visions of well-being and happiness.

The *hermeneutics of revision* understands the patriarchal word of the Bible as a wrapping or covering that contains the word of G*d as a non-patriarchal kernel, core, or essence. Feminist biblical interpretation has thus the task of separating the core from the human patriarchal wrappings.

The *cultural hermeneutic approach* in turn reads the Bible not as religious text but as a cultural classic that has greatly shaped and influenced Western cultures.

The *hermeneutics of the Divine Feminine* searches the Bible for traces of matriarchal religions and G*ddess traditions.

The *hermeneutics of liberation* seeks to assess the oppressive or liberating functions of biblical texts in the lives and struggles of wo/men.

A *critical emancipatory hermeneutics* finally calls for transformative and engaged biblical readers who may or may not be professional interpreters or Christian believers.

CHANGING HORIZONS

This collection of essays seeks to trace in a prismatic way the development of a critical emancipatory hermeneutics. The notion of hermeneutics derives from the Greek word *hermeneuein* and means “to interpret, exegete, explain, or translate.” It owes its name to Hermes, the messenger of the g^ods, who has the task to mediate the announcements, declarations, and messages of the Gods to mere mortals. His proclamation, however, is not a mere communication and mediation but always also an explication of divine commands in such a way that he translates them into human language so that they can be comprehended and obeyed.

According to Gadamer, hermeneutics—like Hermes—has the task of translating meaning from one “world” into another.²¹ Like Hermes, the messenger of the Gods, hermeneutics not only communicates knowledge but also instructs, directs, and enjoins. Hermeneutics thus has affinities to manticism and prophecy. It conveys revelation and interprets signs and oracles. It is a matter of practical understanding, which involves the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*—practical judgment and adjudication—which is not secured by an a priori method but only in the process of understanding.

Since a critical feminist interpretation is primarily interested in the emancipatory interests of knowledge production, I have argued in *Transforming Vision*²² that “hermeneutics,” as it is traditionally understood, seems to be a misnomer for the method used to pursue such emancipatory interests. Relying on a critical theory of language and the insights of liberation movements, I have sought to develop a feminist hermeneutics as a critical feminist *metic* of liberation and transformation. Such a critical hermeneutical theory attempts to articulate interpretation both as a complex process of reading and reconstruction and as a cultural-religious praxis of resistance and transformation. It moves from the traditional understanding of “hermeneutic” to a form of interpretation that can best be described as *metic*.

It is not the myth of Hermes but the myth of Metis and Athena that articulates the task of a critical feminist hermeneutic and rhetoric. Athena, the patron Goddess of the classic Athenian city-state, was not only the patron of the arts and technological and scientific knowledge, but also was a war Goddess. According to Hesiod, she came fully grown and armored from the head of her father Zeus. However, she only appears to be motherless. Her real mother is the Goddess Metis, the “most wise woman among Gods and humans.”²³

According to the myth, Zeus, the father of the Gods, was in competition with Metis. He duped her when she was pregnant with Athena because he feared that Metis would bear a child who would surpass him in wisdom and power. Hence he changed Metis into a fly. But this was not enough! Zeus swallowed the fly Metis wholesale in order to have her always with him and to

benefit from her wise counsel. This mythical story of Metis and Zeus reveals not only the father of the Gods' fear that the child of Wisdom would surpass him in knowledge, but it also lays open the conditions under which wo/men in kyriarchal cultures and religions are able to exercise wisdom and to produce knowledge.

Read with a hermeneutics of suspicion, the myth of Metis and Athena shows that kyriarchal systems of knowledge and power objectify wo/men and swallow them up in order to co-opt their wisdom and knowledge for their own interests of domination. Wo/men's or gender studies remains, therefore, an ambiguous notion since it has wo/men or gender, rather than structures of domination, as objects of its research. Critical emancipatory feminist studies, in contrast, seek to empower wo/men by encouraging them to recognize and change such knowledge and structures of marginalization and oppression.

Since for the hermeneutic theory of Gadamer as well as for a critical feminist emancipatory hermeneutics, the notion of "horizon" is central, this collection of essays on a critical feminist interpretation is titled "*Changing Horizons*." To quote Gadamer:

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of "situation" by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence an essential part of the concept of situation is the concept of "*horizon*." The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point . . . A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. On the other hand, "to have an horizon" means not being limited to what is nearby, but being able to see beyond it. . . . [W]orking out of the hermeneutical situation means the achievement of the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.²⁴

The well-known "hermeneutical circle" means that understanding can only take place if we situate a phenomenon in a larger context, that is, the parts of some larger reality can only be grasped in terms of the whole. In this "to and fro" of the hermeneutical circle or spiral, we can fuse or broaden our horizon with that which we seek to understand. However, whereas Gadamer understands the hermeneutical event as a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), a critical emancipatory hermeneutic seeks to deconstruct the kyriarchal horizon of biblical texts and our own in order to change both horizons, since the dominant cultural and religious horizon of the past and the present has been exclusive of wo/men as subjects of knowledge and understanding. Gadamer is correct that people, both wo/men and men, are embedded in the history and culture that has shaped them. Feminists agree but point out that cultural and religious history has been distorted insofar as

wo/men were excluded from the articulation and the production of knowledge in society and religion. Hence, a critical feminist hermeneutics intends to change this kyriarchal horizon and our own that is defined by it.

CONCEPTUALIZING “CHANGING HORIZONS”

Since the term *hermeneutics* covers both the *theory* and the *art* of interpretation,²⁵ I have divided the book into a first part that addresses theory and a second part that attempts to display my practices of the art of interpretation. Central to both sections is not only the question “what will the text do to us if we submit to its world of vision?” but also how to 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?

The first part of the book seeks to trace the theoretical development of such a critical feminist emancipatory hermeneutics chronologically through my contributions to it, whereas the second part explores the practices of interpreting early Christian canonical texts that are displayed in my essays. While I have tried to edit out repetitions, it is impossible to avoid overlaps of both parts in such a collection of essays, as well as overlaps in the arguments of different chapters. Positively understood, such overlaps and repetitions, I hope, will help the reader to see the multifaceted prism of a critical feminist hermeneutics for liberation and well-being.

The chapters in the first part of the book advance chronologically to indicate the development of a critical feminist interpretation of liberation. However, the first part moves not only chronologically but also topologically. It seeks to document the theoretical struggles for articulating my theoretical approach. To enable readers to follow these struggles, I did not change the use of terms such as “patriarchy,” “God,” “theology,” or “women” in the earlier chapters of this part to my present way of indicating hermeneutical problems through my lettering. However, a chronological-topological review also shows that a critical feminist interpretation and the*logy was from its very beginnings not only concerned with gender—as is often alleged—but also with the multiplicative structures of domination, sex, gender, race, class, or imperialism.

While I used the term “patriarchy” until the late 1980s to name the pyramid of dominations, I did not understand *patriarchy* in dualistic terms as domination of men over wo/men but rather in intersectional terms, although the term *intersectionality* was introduced only in the 1990s.²⁶ As far as I recall, I presented this pyramidal understanding of *patriarchy* for the first time at a conference on *Women and Religion in Hawaii* in 1978. However, many hearers and readers continued to understand *patriarchy* in dualistic terms. Hence, in order to make my pyramidal understanding of *patriarchy* clearer, I coined the

term *kyriarchy*, which seeks to name the multiplicative interstructuring and intersectionality of dominations, and began to use it in the late 1980s.

Black American feminists, as well as Two-Thirds World feminists, have problematized the interpretation of wo/men's oppression solely in terms of gender or racial dualism. On the one hand, they have pointed out that wo/men are oppressed not only by heterosexism, but also by racism, classism, and colonialism. On the other hand, they have rejected an essentializing definition of gender and patriarchy that holds that all men are oppressors and all wo/men are their victims. The same critique of dualistic essentializing constructions applies to race, class, and postcolonial theories.

Instead, critical intersectional theorists have argued consistently that wo/men of subordinated races, nations, and classes are often more oppressed by elite white wo/men than by the men of their own class, race, culture, or religion. As a result of this contradiction in wo/men's lives, the interconnection between the exclusion of wo/men and all other "subordinates" from citizenship has not been given sufficient attention. The same is true for its ideological justifications in the form of reified "natural" sexual/racial/class/cultural differences.

Consequently, intersectional theorists usually conceptualize such social and ideological structures of domination as *hierarchical*, in order to map and make visible the complex interstructuring of the conflicting status positions of different wo/men. However, I believe that the label *hierarchy* for such a pyramidal system is also a misnomer, since the term only targets one specific, religiously sanctioned form of domination. Hence, it is necessary to replace the categories of *patriarchy* or *hierarchy* with the neologism *kyriarchy* to characterize the sociopolitical structures of domination that determine wo/men's second- or third-class citizenship.

The second part of the book seeks to display the art and practice of a critical feminist hermeneutics by seeking to make conscious *kyriarchal* structures of domination inscribed in Scripture in the process of interpretation. To interpret early Christian text with a critical feminist lens means to make conscious such kyriarchal inscriptions and to point to alternative visions and possibilities also inscribed in Scriptures. Hence, I analyze particular Christian (New) Testament texts that shape not only wo/men's religious but also our cultural self-understandings. I also seek to show how the practices of a critical feminist hermeneutics are embedded and shaped by their contexts and the questions raised in different sociopolitical-religious locations. Most of these chapters have their origins in lectures and conferences. By exploring how my arguments work in different socioreligious locations, I seek to document how a critical feminist hermeneutics is articulated in interaction with general and scholarly audiences from different parts of the globe. While a critical gender approach²⁷ is primarily situated in the academy, a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation has its roots in and seeks to contribute to the struggles of wo/men

for the*logical and intellectual authority and self-determination by using the tools of the academy to foster conscientization and a change of horizons.

NOTES

¹Part of this material has appeared in “Claiming the Authority of Biblical Interpretation,” *Revista Alternativas* 15 (2008): 15–32.

²Carol Christ has argued that *theology* should be replaced with *thealogy* in feminist discourses because theology proclaims the masculine whereas thealogy expresses the feminine notion of G*d. To avoid such a gendered definition of the divine, I am writing G*d and the*logy with an * so that readers have to think twice and have to decide how to understand G*d.

³I am in the process of editing a collection of essays called *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, which will appear in the series *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, published in four languages. This collection indicates how much work needs to be done on the history of feminist biblical studies.

⁴Topological is derived from the Greek word *topos*, meaning “place,” from *tópos koinós*, common place; *pl. topoi*; in Latin, *locus* (from *locus communis*). The technical term *topos* is variously translated as “topic,” “line of argument,” or “commonplace.” I understand it here in terms of “line of argument.”

⁵In order to lift into consciousness the linguistic violence of so-called generic male-centered language, I write the term wo/men with a slash in order to use the term “wo/men” and not “men” in an inclusive way. I suggest that whenever you read “wo/men,” you need to understand it in the generic sense. Wo/man includes man, she includes he, and female includes male. Feminist studies of language have elaborated that Western, kyriocentric—that is, master-, lord-, father-, male-centered language systems—understand language as both generic and as gender specific. Wo/men always must think at least twice, if not three times, and adjudicate whether we are meant or not by so-called generic terms such as “men, humans, Americans, or professors.” To use “wo/men” as an inclusive generic term invites male readers to learn how to think twice and to experience what it means not to be addressed explicitly. Since wo/men always must arbitrate whether we are meant or not, I consider it a good spiritual exercise for men to acquire the same sophistication and to learn how to engage in the same hermeneutical process of thinking twice and of asking whether they are meant when I speak of wo/men. Since, according to Wittgenstein, the limits of our language are the limits of our world, such a change of language patterns is a very important step toward the realization of a new feminist consciousness.

⁶See, however, the excellent review article by Hal Taussig, “The End of Christian Origins? Where to Turn at the Intersection of Subjectivity and Historical Craft?” *Review of Biblical Literature* 13 (2011): 1–46.

⁷See my book *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

⁸For the first development of this concept, see my book *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 103–32.

⁹Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

¹⁰See Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14 (1988): 42–72.

¹¹See my introduction to Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

¹²Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 27.

¹³Group Reflection, Womanist Theology Group (Fall Semester, 1999).

¹⁴Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 31.

¹⁵Freire, 33.

¹⁶Elizabeth Cady Stanton, ed., *The Woman's Bible*. 2 vols. (1884/1888), Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion (1984).

¹⁷Mary Ann Tolbert, "Protestant Feminists and the Bible," in Alice Bach, ed., *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 11.

¹⁸To the consternation of previous copyeditors, I have again changed my writing of G-d, which I advocated in *But She Said* and *Discipleship of Equals*, since such a spelling recalls for many Jewish feminists a fundamentalist orthodox mind-set. My new way of spelling G*d seeks to indicate that G*d is "in a religious sense unnamable" and belongs to the "realm of the ineffable." God is not G*d's "proper name." See Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 32.

¹⁹Tolbert, 12.

²⁰For a discussion of diverse hermeneutical discourses and a critique of the method of correlation, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Crisis of Hermeneutics and Christian Theology," in *Theology at the End of Modernity*, ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991), 128–30; see also his earlier article "The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception," *Interpretation* 44, no. 4 (1990): 353–68.

²¹See Richard Bernstein, "What Is the Difference That Makes a Difference? Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty," in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 343–76.

²²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 55–78.

²³See my article, "Der 'Athenakomplex' in der the*logischen Frauenforschung," in *Für Gerechtigkeit streiten: Theologie im Alltag einer bedrohten Welt*, ed. Dorothee Sölle (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1994), 103–11.

²⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 302.

²⁵Bjorn Ramberg and Kristin Gjerdal, "Hermeneutics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

²⁶See Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," in Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk, eds., *The Public Nature of Private Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 93–118; see Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology, and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2010), and Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar, and Linda Supik, eds., *Fokus Intersektionalität: Bewegungen und Verortungen eines vielschichtigen Konzeptes* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010) for an overview of the discussion.

²⁷See Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds., *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007).