
The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives

Carolyn Osiek

Department of Biblical Literature

Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, USA

Visiting Professor: Department of New Testament Studies (Sec A)

University of Pretoria

Abstract

Amid the varieties of feminist interpretive methods in biblical scholarship, this article suggests a general typology of approaches: rejection of the claims of biblical authority; acceptance of those claims with critique of oppressive interpretations; revisionism, which holds to the possibility of reconstructing the lost experience of women in the texts; reliance on symbol and image of the feminine to convey meaning; and finally, the liberation critique of oppressive structures. An appreciation and critique is offered for each alternative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature on feminist method is growing at such a pace that it has rather quickly become an extended field of inquiry in itself, of which the present volume is adequate testimony¹. It is not the purpose of this chapter to attempt a documented history of the feminist movement as it deals with biblical literature. For that reason whatever documentation is given is intended to be not exhaustive but representative. Rather, the intent of the present essay is to explore some of the ways in which feminists, in particular feminist biblical scholars, are meeting the challenge of adequately and sensitively interpreting biblical texts and the biblical tradition in the light of experience. Nor is it my intention to attribute superiority to anyone, but rather to 'objectively' describe and interpret each, bearing in mind of course the axiom of contemporary hermeneuticists that no interpretation is purely objective but is always conditioned by the presuppositions and prejudices of the interpreter.

With that in mind, it would probably be no waste of paper to briefly set out the presuppositions and prejudices that I consciously bring to the undertaking. The careful reader will no doubt detect others of which I am not aware. Thus the interpretive process goes on. First, I belong to a large institutional church with an amazing amount of diversity in its membership and a firmly entrenched patriarchal leadership. Although

that should not determine the direction of my critical scholarship, it inevitably affects my experience; and the two cannot be totally separated. Second, I take note that the very fact that we spend so much time and energy wrestling with biblical texts and traditions, the very fact that there is such a thing as 'biblical scholarship', means whether we care to acknowledge it or not that the Bible is more for us than a curious piece of history. It is part of our own *living* history, a power to be reckoned with in the communities of faith to which we belong or from which our students and friends come. Even those who assume a rejectionist stance toward the Bible admit by their position that there is not much middle ground; indifference to the Bible is a difficult path for the serious student of Christianity to tread.

Third, I judge as the result of my own investigation and reflection that it is unnecessary to throw out the baby with the bath water. The biblical tradition contains enough of lasting and universal value that it is worth salvaging, in spite of the tremendous problems entailed in the salvage operation. Fourth, issues such as authority, inerrancy, revelation, and inspiration must be handled with careful nuances, their theoretical frameworks constructed not in the abstract but in constant interplay with the lived experience of whole communities of faith. Finally, it is my conviction that the elusive entity that we call 'tradition' is the all-encompassing movement that contains within itself the biblical text and the factors leading to its production. It contains as well the reflective interpretation of that articulation in subsequent generations, including our own, as persons in concrete life situations bring the text to bear on their own experience and, no less important, their experience to bear on the text. In other words, tradition is not a boundary but an open road that connects us with the past and points us in the direction of the future.

A discussion of feminist alternatives in biblical interpretation cannot be undertaken in isolation from either recent currents in feminism or in biblical interpretation; hence a few summary remarks about both by way of establishing a context for what follows. Rosemary Ruether (1983:41-45, 216-232) has admirably summed up the three major directions in contemporary feminism as liberal, socialist/Marxist, and romantic/radical.

Liberal feminism takes the model of progress within a capitalist society and works for political reform, equal rights, and improved working conditions, with the assumption that the present social and economic system of Western countries is still redeemable and reformable. It thus carries within it the tendency to classism, to the identification of the rights of upper-middle-class white women with 'women's rights', to the neglect of the plight, interests, and needs of women who are caught in the economically oppressive web of the working classes, minorities, and the poor. Much of the accusation that has been leveled against the feminist movement by working and minority women has identified feminism with this 'liberal feminism', which seems to have little to offer them. It is an indictment of the middle-class feminists of recent years for their failure to see beyond their own horizons.

Socialist or Marxist feminism according to Ruether follows upon the Marxist assumption that full equality can be achieved only by the full integration of labor and ownership; thus only by the complete assimilation of women into the work force, which is at the same time in control of the means of production, can the exploitation of women cease. In the socialist experiences that have so far been tried, however, such has not been the case, because the patriarchal structure of the family has not given way to an egalitarian one commensurate with the political philosophy upon which the public sphere is based. Hence women in socialist societies find themselves under the double burden of making a full contribution in the work force while continuing to be the major source of domestic labor. The only apparent way out of this dilemma is to restructure completely the reproductive and preservative functions of human society in other ways than that of the traditional family, an extreme to which few societies are willing to go.

If liberal and socialist feminism assume that the way to equality is through full participation of women in the public sphere, in what has traditionally been the male world, romantic feminism does just the opposite. It exults in the differences between men and women, upholds the feminine way as innately superior, and glorifies the so-called feminine qualities of sensitivity, creativity, intuition, bodiliness, et cetera as the true female self that the predominant rational, hierarchical exploitative masculine society consistently tries to repress by patriarchal domination. The reformist branch of romantic feminism sees as its mission the transformation of the morally and aesthetically inferior masculine world through infusion of superior feminine values. The radical branch of romantic feminism proclaims the necessity of total withdrawal from the male world in a separatist stance that will be ultimately the only way to save women for themselves. In either case the resulting end product is simply a reversal of the domination and alienation that are seen to be the major problems within a patriarchal structure. The oppressed will become the oppressors, and no advance toward mutuality will be realized.

In Ruether's schema, a liberation-hermeneutical feminism would represent a fourth type of feminism, which attempts to incorporate the best elements of the other three: the concern for human development and societal egalitarianism of liberal feminism, the social critique and dedication to building a just society of socialist feminism, and the sensitivity to deeper human values of romantic feminism. A true liberation feminism would thus be able to transcend the limits of the other three types. Its focus on the experience of the oppressed would free it from the bourgeois complacency to which liberal feminism is prone. Its vision of a new society would abolish the patriarchalism which socialist feminism has not succeeded in eliminating. Finally, a true liberation feminism would struggle for the liberation not only of women but of all human persons

in a community of mutuality in which neither mode of being, 'masculine' or 'feminine', consistently dominates. It is this liberation hermeneutic which makes the strongest claim for biblical grounding, and, as we shall see below, this may be one of its most problematic aspects.

Because we are part of our recent history, because we are involved in the process of creating that history, and because any contemporary hermeneutic must be as deeply grounded in experience as it is in theory, these alternatives in the feminist movement at large provide the basic categories within which biblical feminists also operate, whether we are aware of it or not. While not fitting neatly within the same slots, feminist biblical interpretation raises very similar questions and faces many of the same dilemmas, as we shall see below. Contemporary critical feminism attempts to confront and address the problems inherent in all four of the approaches outlined above.

If critical feminism is at the point of breaking through an impasse into a new consciousness ready to try new alternatives, the same can be said of contemporary biblical method. After nearly a century of domination by the historical-critical method, its limits and inherent prejudices are becoming widely accepted. Although the method itself will continue to hold an important and fundamental place in biblical studies for the foreseeable future, it can no longer be *the* method, the criterion to which all interpretation must be submitted. Current biblical studies demonstrate a diversity of methods, some new, some of long duration with only minimal recognition: literary criticism, structuralism, social and sociological interpretation, and the various forms of spiritual and psychological interpretation are all adapted from other disciplines, thus giving evidence of the growing awareness that biblical interpretation cannot function in isolation from the social and intellectual world of the interpreter, a world that is too pluriform and complex to be served only within the limited boundaries of historical-critical exegesis. Just as the varieties of feminist critique challenge traditional patriarchy, so too the varieties of biblical method challenge traditional exegesis and demonstrate that its claim to be 'value-free' is simply false.

Others have previously undertaken the task of examining the various methods for approaching biblical material about women with a view to integrating it into a relevant contemporary hermeneutic. For example, Sakenfeld (1981) summarized the alternatives as the following: (1) focusing on texts that portray women in a positive way to counteract the devastatingly negative texts 'against' women; (2) rejecting the Bible altogether as not authoritative and/or useful; (3) looking more broadly to biblical texts that lend themselves to a liberation perspective; (4) taking a culturally comparative approach to analyze the intersection of the stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal culture. To these alternatives could be added a fifth: standing back from the specific focus on women as in (3) above, but concentrating on the broader issue of inclusive biblical anthropology, as explored in Adela Yarbro Collins (1978).

Essentially the five options listed above can be reduced to three: focus on women (1) and (4); situate women within a broader context (3) and (5); give up on the Bible altogether as hopeless (2). Teaching and research on women in the Bible in recent years has played on all five. In the following remarks I would like to suggest yet another way of examining the alternatives for feminist biblical hermeneutics, one that I believe is thematically more inclusive and deals with all options previously discussed. Some may question use of the word 'feminist' for some of these alternatives, but the term is to be taken here in its broadest sense, as concern for the promotion and dignity of women in all aspects of society, and in this context especially inasmuch as that promotion and dignity are conditioned by biblical interpretation. Some too may question the appropriateness of 'hermeneutic' as a classification in some cases. Again, I am taking the term in its broadest sense, as a principle of interpretation, while still confining it to interaction with biblical data. Others may consider that one or other of what are proposed here are hardly acceptable as alternatives or options, either within the range of what is life-giving to women or within the limits of possible responses that would remain true to theological premises or contemporary assumptions. I would argue that such judgments are subjective and that as long as a significant number of women in or on the margins of the Western Christian tradition find one or other of these alternatives to be their way of functioning meaningfully within their context — as indeed they do in every case — it is a valid alternative for those who would take it. Bear in mind once again that what follows is description, not advocacy. (These considerations are deliberately limited to the Christian experience in the West, since I do not claim sufficient knowledge of other religious traditions. I leave it to those who do to respond out of their own experience.)

The question proposed then is: 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? I suggest that there are five ways: rejectionist, loyalist, revisionist, sublimationist, and liberationist.

The rejectionist alternative is familiar enough in the recent past. It resembles Sakenfeld's second method, rejecting the Bible as not authoritative or useful, though some rejectionist writers go further, to the total rejection not only of the Bible but of the whole religious tradition it represents. Seen from this perspective, the entire Judeo-Christian tradition is hopelessly sinful, corrupt, and unredeemable. The long-discussed hermeneutical question whether patriarchy is a separable attribute in Judaism and Christianity, from which it could be purged, or whether patriarchalism is an inherent

characteristic inseparable from its nature is answered with the latter: because patriarchalism is an essential and corrupt component of Judaism-Christianity, the whole religious tradition must be rejected.

Beginnings of this position can be seen as early as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who refused to be present at a suffragist prayer meeting at which the opening hymn was 'Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah', on the principle that Jehovah had 'never taken any active part in the suffrage movement' (quoted by Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:7). Yet her great project of *The Woman's Bible* clearly shows that ninety years ago even she was not prepared to reject the whole of her religious tradition, perhaps because she saw too well that she would win more converts by remaining in the struggle.

The primary proponent of the rejectionist alternative today is of course Mary Daly (1973, 1979), whose writings on the subject are well known. For Daly, the only acceptable hermeneutical principle is that of the remnant of women who leave the unsavable Judeo-Christian legacy perpetrated by men and together form a new post-Christian faith capable of conquering the evil of patriarchalism and transcending its negative power. Ultimately this direction leads to a new dualism, in which maleness symbolizes evil and femaleness good, a reversal of the ancient Platonic cosmic/symbolic hierarchy, but a hierarchy nevertheless². The rejectionist hermeneutic is the most extreme theological form of radical separatism. Carried out faithfully in the social, economic and political spheres, it would be not only very difficult but also very disruptive if successful. Even as a biblical hermeneutic, its implications are quite serious. It not only rejects what is proclaimed to be a major redemptive vehicle of Judaism and Christianity as non-redemptive; but it also rejects the possibility of conversion for its entire structure and its supporters. There is a kind of extreme apocalyptic finalism, rigid and unbending, which cannot yield to a dynamic of conversion. This indicates its major weakness: an almost total rootlessness from the historical past and from much of the historical and social present. Its only roots are in a hypothetical prehistoric past of idyllic goddess worship and a projected eschatological future in which evil (male) will be overcome by good (female).

The second hermeneutical alternative is the loyalist one, in most ways the opposite of the rejectionist. There the foundational premise is the essential validity and goodness of the biblical tradition as Word of God, which cannot be dismissed under any circumstance. The biblical witness as revelation has an independent status which need not be vindicated by human authority: the Bible is the ultimate expression of God's authority, not only descriptive but prescriptive, to which all human inquiry must submit. Yet the Bible, precisely as Word of God, cannot by nature be oppressive. If it is seen to be so, then the mistake lies with the interpreter and interpretive tradition, not

with the text. It is the interpreter who is sinful not the content; the medium which is found wanting, not the message. Biblical revelation is intended to foster the greatest human happiness for all, but such happiness may not always conform to the standards of contemporary culture. The Bible proclaims a message of true freedom and humanization, but according to a divine plan, not a human one. Men and women are intended to live in true happiness and mutual respect within that divine plan, not in oppressive patterns of domination and struggle against one another, which are sinful manifestations of the disorder of human nature without divine grace.

As long as one is dealing with general principles of religious anthropology and virtuous living, such premises pose little problem. But how are these hermeneutical principles to be reconciled with the blatant biblical message of female submission, especially in the household codes of the New Testament? Herein lies the problem. Two somewhat different kinds of responses are offered within this alternative. The first is to employ careful critical exegesis to counter one text with another in order to refute simplistic literalist interpretations of any one passage: for example, 1 Cor 14:34 with 11:5, 1 Tim 2:12 with Titus 2:3, et cetera. By building a carefully constructed argument step by step, totally based on thorough and sound exegesis of actual passages, this approach can demonstrate to the mind that is a priori open to expanding roles of women, but unyielding on the precise definition of biblical authority and revelation, that contrary to conclusions reached by a superficial reading of the texts, the Bible may not at all be condemning women to an inferior position. The problem has been with closed-minded interpreters, not with the text itself³. Thus the new exposition calls for conversion of social attitudes to the true biblical spirit of mutual respect.

The second form taken by the loyalist hermeneutic is to accept the traditional argument for order through hierarchy as a datum of revelation but one sorely in need of transformation from within because of its abuse by imperfect human instruments. Thus it is argued that the subordination theme applies only or chiefly to the family, not to society at large, and is totally misunderstood and abused when seen as dominance/submission. Rather the point is the necessary leadership of one and followership of the other as the only and divinely intended way to unity and harmony in society. Far from diminishing the dignity and freedom of women, such a structure adhered to with love promotes the true liberation of both women and men to fulfill their divinely intended destiny⁴.

Those who might tend to dismiss the loyalist hermeneutic too easily should recall that it is a carefully worked out biblical method, usually based on sound use of exegetical method, and that it is found useful by large numbers of intelligent American women as a means of explaining and interpreting their role within their biblical faith. It is an

acceptable way of using contemporary exegetical method within a conservative theological structure and is an excellent demonstration that it is not exegesis that will finally determine how one interprets biblical data, but experiential and theological premises. This fact indicates too the chief weaknesses of the loyalist method: it is particularly vulnerable to the temptation to stretch history and the literal meaning of texts, and it tends to be innocent of the political implications of the types of social interaction and relationships that it advocates on the basis of fidelity to the biblical text as divine revelation.

If the rejectionist hermeneutic holds the biblical tradition as unconvertible and the loyalist hermeneutic holds it as not in need of conversion, the third alternative, a revisionist hermeneutic, represents a midpoint between the two. The foundational premise of this hermeneutic is that the patriarchal mold in which the Judeo-Christian tradition has been cast is historically but not theologically determined. Because of social and historical factors the tradition has been male-dominated, androcentric, and discriminatory, but these characteristics are separable from and thus not intrinsic to it. The tradition is capable of being reformed, the perspective revised — and that is precisely the religious challenge addressed to the contemporary feminist.

The method is research into women's history to reveal neglected sources of information in the tradition. In this approach, which combines Sakenfeld's (1) and (4), the historical sources are reexamined and reinterpreted to show how much we really do know about women and their contributions to the formation of history. For example, the role of women in the Jewish scriptures and the Talmud is interpreted against the backdrop of whatever information is available from archaeological and artistic sources; the role of women in the New Testament and early church is interpreted from the portrayal of women in the gospels, the Pauline mission, the apocryphal acts, the martyrdom literature, et cetera. The historical sense of 'reading between the lines' is employed to portray the positive role of women in ancient sources. Meanwhile, the chauvinist-misogynist texts are explained by a combination of exegetical method and interpretation of the influence of cultural context. This approach has produced a long list of books in the last ten years on the role of women in Judaism and early Christianity and the ministry of women in the early church, so numerous that it is unnecessary to give examples. It has also produced a few fine literary studies that have reexamined familiar texts with the tools of literary criticism to reveal the androcentric one-sidedness of traditional interpretation⁵.

The revisionist alternative adopts the position that the tradition is worth saving, and it has thus become the starting point for many feminist religious thinkers with liberal theologies of revelation who are not willing to abandon the tradition entirely as do the

rejectionists. It takes the tactic of highlighting the importance of women in our religious history, of portraying their dignity within patriarchy. It moves ultimately — but not fast enough or firmly enough for some — toward the rehabilitation of the tradition through reform. It proclaims in a moderate voice that the situation cannot long remain the same, but that real change is imperative. Its major weakness is that it attacks more the symptoms than the cause of the illness. It musters no direct frontal attack on the system that has caused the suppression of the very evidence which it painstakingly reconstructs. Its subsequent lack of political strategy undermines its efforts in the short run, though for those with historical patience and vision it probably produces some long-lasting results.

The fourth alternative hermeneutic, the sublimationist, includes some aspects of Ruether's classification of 'romantic' feminism, in varying degrees of separatism. Its basic premise is the otherness of the feminine as manifested especially in feminine imagery and symbolism in human culture. As Other, the feminine operates by its own principles and rules, which are totally distinct from those of the male realm. In some versions the feminine is innately superior to the masculine, and therefore any thought of equality or egalitarianism is unthinkable; in other versions the two poles are so different that no comparisons can be made, and social equality is simply a non-issue. The life giving and nurturing qualities of woman are of a totally different order than the initiative and constructive qualities of man, and any substantial crossing over in sex roles is against nature.

In biblical studies the sublimationist hermeneutic takes the form of the search for and glorification of the eternal feminine in biblical symbolism. Israel as virgin and bride of God, the church as bride of Christ and mother of the faithful, Mary as virgin-mother who symbolizes Israel, the church, and the feminine mystique — these are the symbols upon which the sublimationist hermeneutic focus us. More recently, feminine imagery for God and Christ has been an important drawing point: the Christ-Sophia and maternal imagery applied to Christ in patristic and Christian apocryphal literature, and the feminine symbolism for the Holy Spirit, which recurs elusively but persistently in Christian literature and iconography⁶.

This alternative can identify with much of the mystical tradition of Judaism and Christianity and with a certain amount of traditional Mariology, inasmuch as it can feel at home with erotic imagery in language of prayer and divine union. It is also closely associated with one type of Jungianism, which uses biblical symbols as archetypal assertions of the stability and rightness of distinctive feminine and masculine modes of being. Its response to the problems of patriarchy and androcentrism is not to join battle but by a kind of philosophical idealism to transcend the conflict by ascribing greater importance to the world of symbols, and to assert that the way to true freedom will be found only by following their lead.

The sublimationist hermeneutic can provide a helpful way of biblical interpretation for those who are adept at handling symbolism and for whom romantic feminism provides the key to understanding self and world. Its chief weaknesses are its tendencies to exclusivism and separatism from the social-political dimension and its inclination toward dogmatism on the question of female and social roles.

The fifth form of feminist biblical hermeneutics is the most recent and the one now attracting the most attention. Liberationist feminism, pioneered earlier by Letty Russell and others and now being developed principally by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether⁷, takes its starting point from the broader perspective of liberation theology. Its basic premise is a radical reinterpretation of biblical eschatology: the reign of God with its redemption is proclaimed as the task and mission of the believer in the world of the present as well as the hope of full realization in God's future. This beginning of its realization for women means liberation from patriarchal domination so that all human persons can be for each other partners and equals in the common task. The oppression of women is part of the larger pattern of dominance-submission which includes political, economic, and social as well as theological dimensions: 'We cannot split a spiritual, antisocial redemption from the human self as a social being, embedded in socio-political and ecological systems'; rather, 'socio-economic humanization is indeed the outward manifestation of redemption' (Ruether 1983:215-216).

As a biblical hermeneutic, liberationist feminism proclaims that the central message of the Bible is human liberation, that this is in fact the meaning of salvation. It therefore attempts to 'come clean' with bold honesty on the question of exegesis and advocacy. Rather than try to maintain that biblical interpretation can be done objectively and in a value-free framework as the historical-critical school and more recently structuralist and sociological interpreters would claim, liberationist biblical theologians, denying that possibility for any theology or hermeneutic, will openly admit that theirs is an advocacy theology, already committed to certain causes and assumptions before it begins — as are, in fact, any of the other four hermeneutical alternatives discussed above as well.

Ruether finds the core of the biblical message of liberation in the prophetic tradition. The preaching of conversion from unjust social and economic practices is the call to create a just society free from any kind of oppression. Thus the hermeneutical dynamic springs from biblical texts that do not deal specifically with women, and which in fact can be quite androcentric and patriarchal at times. Freed from their own historical and cultural contexts, however, the texts inspire a message of human liberation through the working of justice which today addresses us authoritatively within our own contemporary awareness of oppression.

Fiorenza turns her attention more directly to those texts of the New Testament which transcend androcentric-patriarchal structures to express a new vision of redeemed humanity. For both authors, as for all liberationist feminists, it is not just a question of reinterpreting texts within a patriarchal framework, but of actually approaching them within an alternate vision of salvation and new creation, which will not stop at biblical interpretation but will lead inexorably to transformation of the social order through both individual and communal, structural conversion. Thus the liberationist alternative does not reject the tradition as unredeemable, but demands a total restructuring of its expression.

For the liberationist, the hermeneutical principle upon which to construct a theology of revelation is quite specific. Stated negatively, 'whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine ... or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption'. Stated positively, 'what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine ... the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community' (Ruether 1983:19); 'biblical revelation and truth are given only in those texts and interpretive models that transcend critically their patriarchal frameworks and allow for a vision of Christian women as historical and theological subjects and actors' (Schlüssler Fiorenza 1983:30).

The liberationist hermeneutic holds much promise for creating a new direction in religious feminism. Its principal weakness lies in its almost partisan position on revelation as discussed above. Such a restrictive basis for a theology of revelation can hardly stand up under heavy scrutiny of theological tradition. It seems to equate 'revelatory' with 'authoritative' in an almost simplistic way, then to reject as non-revelatory whatever does not fit according to its own narrow criterion. Moreover, in its historical approach to biblical literature, this narrow criterion of revelation leads the liberationist method to eulogize the prophets, Jesus, and sometimes Paul while writing off other, particularly later New Testament writers, who do not meet the liberation criterion, thus forming a new 'canon within the canon' on very slim foundations. If the liberationist hermeneutic is to exercise the influence for which it has the potential, this weakness must be addressed.

We have surveyed five alternative responses to the question of feminist biblical hermeneutics. They arise from five different sets of women's experiences and assumptions about the Bible. I believe that they are truly alternatives, that is, within the limits imposed upon us by our experience and human conditioning, we really are free to choose our own hermeneutical direction. The category of conversion directed by liberationist feminists to perpetrators of androcentric patriarchy applies to feminists as well, especially to those who by race and class are caught in the double web of being both oppressed and oppressor.

In biblical times, patriarchy and androcentrism were seen not as sinful but as necessary for maintaining order. With consciousness now raised, the primary hermeneutical task is a redefinition of order in human society, a hermeneutic already applied in the case of slavery and currently being applied on the issue of the necessity of deterrence for the preservation of peace. There is no reason to treat the evil of patriarchy any less seriously.

End Notes

¹ This article first appeared in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Adela Y Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* is granted permission to reprint this article. The author, Professor Carolyn Osiek, visited during August-September 1997 the University of Pretoria as CSD research fellow of Professor Andries van Aarde. The contents of the article was discussed during a postgraduate seminar.

² See Rosemary Radford Ruether's (1983:230, 284 note 16) brilliant description of Mary Daly's theology as neo-Gnosticism, 'now built on the dualism of a transcendent spirit world of femaleness over against the deceitful anti-cosmos of masculinity'.

³ Examples of this kind of hermeneutic are Richard and Joyce Boldrey (1976) and Evelyn and Frank Stagg (1978).

⁴ An example of this approach is Susan T Foh (1979).

⁵ The outstanding example is Phyllis Trible (1978). See also George H Tavard (1973).

⁶ A recent example of this approach which is restrained, well-researched, and does not escape into sentimentality is Joan C Engelsman (1979). Also helpful is Part One of Leonard Swidler (1979:21-73), *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*. Not to be missed is the fourteenth-century Bavarian church fresco portraying the Trinity as an old man, a woman, and a young man, on the cover of Swidler's book.

⁷ Besides numerous articles by these and other authors, see especially Letty M Russell (1974); E Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:26-40); Rosemary R Ruether (1975, 1983).

Works consulted

- Boldrey, Richard & Joyce 1976. *Chauvinist or Feminist? Paul's View of Women*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Collins, A Y 1978. An Inclusive Biblical Anthropology. *Theology Today* 34, 358-369.
- Daly, M 1973. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon.

- Daly, M 1979. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon.
- Engelsman, J C 1979. *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Foh, S T 1979. *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Ruether, R 1975. *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. New York: Seabury.
- 1983. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon.
- Russell, L M 1974. *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Sakenfeld, K D 1981. Response to Rosemary Radford Ruether's 'Christology and Feminism: Can a Male Savior Help Women?', unpublished paper for the AAR Feminist Hermeneutic Project, Liberation Theology Working Group, April 1981, as summarized in Letty M Russell, 'In Search of a Critical Feminist Paradigm for Biblical Interpretation'.
- Schüssler Fiorenz, E 1983. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad.
- Stagg, Evelyn & Frank 1978. *Woman in the World of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Swidler, L 1979. *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Tavard, G H 1973. *Woman in Christian Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Trible, P 1978. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress. (Overtures to Biblical Theology.)