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## Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible

Susanne Scholz

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“Feminism is the cause of more bad than good and people are justified in suppressing it.” “The Bible is irrelevant in our modern, secular world.” The above two statements are commonly held opinions. They make it difficult for people to be feminists and discourage them from taking the Bible seriously. To be both a feminist and a committed Bible reader, then, is to have two strikes against you. Yet from the first to the last page of *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible* Susanne Scholz strives to persuade us that we should be both. Before reading this book I was already in agreement with Susanne Scholz on the positive value of Feminist scholarship and as practicing Christian eager to learn more about Feminist interpretations of Old Testament writings. I am very grateful to her for the authoritative, clear and condensed glimpse that

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her book gives into the history and breadth of feminist scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. As an argument for the feminist cause I think she was successful. In her introduction and conclusion, however, Susanne Scholz seems to address the academic setting alone and evaluate the Bible only from an a-religious perspective. As such I feel she was unable to decisively answer the second challenge which she tries to address and falls short of making a convincing argument for why the Bible is important in the modern world.

*Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible* is a book with a personal dimension. Professor Shultz shares stories from her childhood and education which were important in leading her to study the Hebrew Bible from a feminist perspective. Along with her short biographies of other feminist scholars and her passionate discussion of the history and content of feminist research into the Old Testament, her personal approach makes it possible to relate to the topic subjectively as well as objectively. This is appropriate because the struggle of feminist scholarship is not just an academic one but a personal and political one as well. Particularly it is the theme of oppression and indifference suffered by feminist scholarship and scholars alike which resonates with other personal stories and attitudes I have encountered in the Church and University. I believe all people have a responsibility to passionately seek justice for women and resist attitudes which would dismiss or op-

press them or worse.

The main body of *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible* is divided into five parts. The first of these parts deals with the history of feminist scholarship into the Hebrew Bible. Beginning with women mystics in the Middle Ages, Susanne Scholz works her way to the present, listing and giving an outline of the work of those who have focused on women in the Old Testament. Not all of these scholars could be described as feminist. Many of those whose work is outlined in this chapter do not share an interest in promoting the status of women beyond the status quo. Likewise not all are Christian while some are downright hostile to religion. What they all have in common, however, is that their scholarship is focused on the stories of women found in the Bible's first covenant. This chapter shows that Susanne Scholz's research is neither restricted to feminism nor limited to one religious perspective. Her balanced and straightforward account of other people's treatment of women in the Hebrew Scriptures give us a very broad look at the range of ideas concerning these women.

The second chapter is dedicated to the stories of four women who have committed their lives to understanding the Hebrew writings of the Bible from a feminist perspective. Three of the women are Christian and one has a Jewish background but no longer practices her religion. Of the three

Christians two are Protestant and one is Catholic. The women represent different places and social locations as well. One lives in Europe, one in Israel, one in the United States and one in Latin America. These differences and others make for an impressive spectrum of perspectives. But all of them share two things in common: 1. They are passionate about righting injustices in the treatment of women. 2. Their personal identities are tied up with the scriptures in profound ways. Even the woman who rejects her Jewish faith as irredeemably patriarchal and misogynist confesses that her life is so closely related to the Jewish Canon that she cannot rid herself of it. All four women, therefore, approach these scriptures from feminist and religious perspectives. As such they are very compelling figures because they seem to have reconciled what many people hold as opposite. Perhaps it is the American scholar, Phyllis Trible, who more than the other four explains how this is possible and why it is necessary. Athalya Brenner's witness to the Bible as something that she cannot "shake off" even though "it hurts" is testimony to the fact that readings of the Bible that are both religious and feminist are even in some sense unavoidable.

Chapter three is about methodology. Like the word methodology itself I found the chapter a little mind boggling. Perhaps this is where my lack of scholarly knowledge is most telling. Susanne Scholz develops what she calls a hermeneutical

triangle the three points of which are historical criticism, literary criticism and cultural criticism. I know enough about Bible studies to be aware of a number of other kinds of criticism such as form criticism, canonical criticism, post-colonial criticism, reader-response criticism etc. I could not understand why she chose to deal with only three of these. I also think that she should have spent some time discussing feminist criticism itself since not all of the scholarship she explores in her book can be called feminist. Of the three methodologies in her triangle it was the cultural methodology, more than the other two, that I found hard to understand. Perhaps this is because cultural criticism itself is full of little methodologies such as art, film, sociological, economic, and Marxist criticisms. Historical and literary criticisms are limited to written documents. Cultural criticism seems less defined. This does not make it less valuable. On the contrary, perhaps such vague and indefinable categories simply invite us to out of our limited perspectives to talk with others who we never talked with before. I'm all for inviting more perspectives to the table.

Chapter four deals with a specific topic or theme in Feminist Biblical commentary: sexual violence. This chapter is about what Phyllis Trible calls "Texts of Terror." It is in holding up the realities of these stories with unflinching honesty that I feel feminist biblical commentary makes it's most

valuable contribution to the religious communities who use the Bible. This chapter is basic, straightforward Bible commentary drawing both upon an expert understanding of the Hebrew language and a deep sensitivity to women's contemporary life contexts. It's not pretty. It's not easy to read. It does not make me feel great about being Christian. But it does put forward a challenge worthy of our great calling to follow Jesus into a broken world. It does confront us with the honest reality of the Biblical texts and of our lives. Not a reality with easy answers but rather one made up of complex and at times tragic human relationships.

One example of such powerful, feminist commentary which I read here for the first time and which I found particularly powerful was the discussion of Reuben's sexual intercourse with Bilha, who was both his father's concubine, his dead step-mother's former slave. The English translation of the Bible suggests that Reuben's act of "sleeping with" Bilhah may have been consensual or based upon sexual attraction or love. However, the Hebrew grammar describing Reuben's act is found in other stories of rape in the Bible such as in the stories of Dinah and Tamar. In this respect the Korean translation of the act as "범했다" is more faithful but perhaps still too soft. Susanne Scholz provides a compelling explanation for why Reuben's sexual intercourse with Bilhah should not be interpreted as an act of love but rather as

an act of revenge. Reuben is angry at his father Jacob, because Jacob neglected his own mother, Leah, in favor of Bilhah's owner and Jacob's favourite wife, Rachel. The evidence points to rape! Without honest feminist scholarship into the Old Testament I would never have known that Reuben sexually violated this woman.

Another interpretation forces us to look straight into certain Biblical images which are already only all too clear in both English and Korean translations. I have always been disturbed by Ezekiel's language in chapter 23 and similar passages found elsewhere in the writings of the prophets which describe Jerusalem as a woman who is being punished by God. Susanne Scholz retranslates the passages to make their meaning even more graphic and clear. She further leads us through the logic of the passages helping us to see that what is actually being said in passages such as Jeremiah 13:22 and 26 is that God, himself, is raping Jerusalem as a way to punish her for her unfaithfulness. Disturbing to say the least! Yet if we cannot be honest about what is in our own Holy Book what can we be honest about? Yes, it seems that even our Bible stands in need of repentance and forgiveness if not God, Godself. Here indeed is a challenge to our faith, calling us to embrace the brokenness of the world, ourselves and our very Bible through the crucified Christ. Dare we accept it? Dare we ignore it?

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the cutting edge of feminist scholarship in the form of post-colonial criticism. This latest scholarly approach to the Bible offers challenges to the Bible equal to those of the previous chapter. Post-colonial studies challenge readers to see the imperialist history of the Bible and the ways it has served to justify colonial domination and exploitation throughout the world. What would the Bible stories look like to those who are being conquered and colonized? How would the inhabitants of Palestine in the time of Joshua regard the faith of the Hebrews? How would the people of Jericho regard Rahab and her betrayal of her fellow citizens? Post-colonialist criticism allows Christians to turn the tables on themselves. It invites and affirms a plethora of perspectives on the texts and helps us to regard the stories from all possible angles. The perspective of those who experienced colonialism and who continue to experience neo-colonialism and global economic and racial injustice is that which stands as the authority behind these re-interpretations of the texts. Simply put, post-colonial interpretations don't allow religious people to feel self righteous. They demand that we respect those outside our Biblical community as people of value in their own right. Susanne Scholz gives a quick but thorough introduction of the major contributors to this new way of reading the Bible and explains how they have challenged western feminist scholarship as well.

This book is the result of a lot of hard academic work. But it is not a passionless, arms-length account of a particular field of scholarship. The author personally identifies with both the Hebrew Scriptures and the feminist movement out of which she interprets them. She states, “To me, the ‘feminist track’ illuminated one of the most important injustices in the world and in theological studies: gender discrimination, bias and oppression.”(page 3) Stories throughout the book relate how women scholars still face unfair obstacles in finding work or speaking their mind. These stories ring true in my experience. I have heard stories here in Korea about women threatened with the loss of their job as Church ministers if they are found to belong to a feminist organization. Others are told they will not be hired if they have feminist sympathies. One professor friend related to me that sexism in Korea makes life really difficult for her. Feminist thought is not dangerous. Rather it is the oppression of women and stifling of freedom of thought that is dangerous. Susanne Scholz does not need to convince me of this. But what I did not see in her book was a strong argument for how the study of the Hebrew Bible is of special importance in dealing with this issue, particularly in a society that is, as she says, “post-biblical” or “secular.”

Susanne Scholz has given Christians a powerful introduction that condenses the great contributions of feminist

scholarship to the understanding of the Hebrew Bible. The only thing that is missing, I feel, is a clear statement about her own stance in regards to the Bible as a religious document. Though she offers a great deal of personal information about herself the most she can say about the value of the Bible is that it is an academic document which helps us understand ourselves and our world. She tries to appeal to secular people by saying it is not faith but the desire to understand which in the requirement for reading the Bible(page 1). I am all for having non-Christians reading the Bible but I don't see why the Bible detached from religion should have more relevance than the countless other great works of literature in our world. Shakespeare's plays, for example, do not matter to me the same way that my sacred scriptures do. If there is a character in Shakespeare's work that is misogynist, that is one thing. But if God, Godself is portrayed as a rapist in my Bible that will really get my attention and cause me to wrestle with the issue. If a secular person cannot see the kind of powerful, personal relationship that I or someone else can have with the Bible then I am inclined to think they will never have any reason to care that much about Moses or Miriam, and perhaps less reason to care about the oppression and violation of women, too. For this reason I feel that Susanne Scholz's failure to clearly state her own personal, religious relationship to the Bible and to the Christian faith

for the sake of relating to non-religious people is a mistake. It is also the reason why I feel the book fails to strongly show how feminism is not something that endangers religious institutions but rather something that renews them. Unfortunately, I see nothing in her personal account to show why the Bible is something that really matters in her own present day context. The women she profiles in chapter two do not shy away from this task. I do not understand why Susanne Scholz would.

I have heard Suzanne Scholz preach an inspiring and passionate sermon on Isaiah chapter 6 to a group of mostly young Christians. Reading her book I can't help but think she is holding back something important about herself which would help to make the Biblical literature she loves truly relevant to our contemporary context. Nevertheless I am very grateful for this fine book. It deepened my understanding and appreciation of feminist biblical interpretation and broadened my knowledge of historical and contemporary scholarship. Above all I am grateful because it is a book that is not afraid to show that it cares, and I think it cares for things that are really worth caring about. As such it will help me to be a good Christian and a better leader in the Church just as it will certainly help anyone to understand the world and to better themselves as human beings.