



Reading Glasses: Feminist Criticism

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings.”
Cheris Kramerae, *A Feminist Dictionary* (1991)

Feminist biblical criticism, like feminism itself, comes in many types of packaging, each of which when opened reveals different ideas about the Bible, its authority, and its relevance. To interpret the Bible from any feminist lens, one must ask certain questions: what does the text say – or not say – about women; what do the characters – both male and female, human and divine – say about women; do these answers portray women as fully human (as the above quote advocates) or as subordinate to men; if the latter (which is more common), what is the appropriate response? This last question is the one that distinguishes the various feminist approaches to biblical interpretation.

Before describing the lenses that feminist interpreters might apply, it is necessary to define the varieties of feminism itself. At its most basic, feminism is both an intellectual and action-based commitment to promote justice and equal rights for women and the end of sexism in all forms. The political wing of feminism in the United States attempts to reduce male domination and remove barriers to women’s participation in the work force with equal pay. Another variety of feminism focuses more on issues of class, while the more radical forms of feminism consider male power and male dominated culture as the primary source of the oppression of every woman. The so-called patriarchal family, which regards women as subordinate, is especially problematic.

Similar to the way most feminists can agree that feminism is a political stance whose advocates work actively to liberate women from oppression, most feminist biblical critics share a few common assumptions. They concur that the Bible and its texts are androcentric, i.e., male centered, and that they reflect a patriarchal worldview, i.e., one in which males are dominant. As a result, readers must approach any text with a fair degree of suspicion about whose interests were – and continue to be – served. In addition to acknowledging these biases, feminist biblical critics also recognize the biases that underlie any and all interpretations of these texts. No interpretation is completely objective or value-neutral; all reflect the life experiences, presuppositions, and prejudices of the interpreter and continue to shape the values of those who read and interpret them. Their main points of difference concern how they deal with the Bible's own inherent biases and how they evaluate the Bible's authority.

Contemporary feminist biblical criticism can trace its roots to the 1895 publication of *The Woman's Bible* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton who, along with her collaborators, condemned the Bible's use as a weapon that legitimated the oppression of women. However, feminist biblical critics were relatively silent until the 1970s, when scholars such as Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Ruether, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza began to challenge the exclusivity of "malestream" biblical scholarship. Since then, feminist interpreters have adopted at least three different lenses for reading the Bible, including those that I will term rejectionist, loyalist, and revisionist.

Rejectionists consider the Bible, the religions based on it, and the traditions that developed from it sinful and corrupt. For example, Christian interpreters who ascribe the "fall of man" to the actions of a woman hungry for knowledge (Gen 2-3) make it difficult for rejectionists to embrace this and other texts that seemingly endorse this blame game. Their options are to either reject the Bible's authority and divine status or to reject the Bible itself. The former acknowledge that the Bible is a historical and cultural product that offers a window to ancient voices, voices that

offer insight into women's roles. Some rejectionists attempt to dig into the texts to discover these muted voices and to bring them out of the margins for analysis and critique. These readers would see in the Garden of Eden, for example, a woman (later named Eve) who was responsible for bringing knowledge, not sin, into the world. She took the lead and was punished for her assertiveness. Thus, a rejectionist reading might criticize the words and deeds of the other characters in the story and condemn the problems that have plagued women ever since. As such, these readers take advantage of the biblical text; they critique it while showing a very different way to interpret the woman's actions.

Those adhering to a loyalist point of view declare the essential goodness of the Bible and biblical tradition. As the Word of God, the Bible attests to God's ultimate authority and thus cannot be oppressive. If seen to be so, the problem lies with its fallible interpreters and the limited knowledge their interpretations reflect. Loyalists are determined to find and focus on what they see as the Bible's underlying message of love and human freedom so that its texts can continue to be central to their life and identity. Loyalists might claim that a hungry husband, not just a curious wife, committed the "original sin" – an act that led to their subsequent gender roles and male dominance. Furthermore, loyalists might point out that God continued to love and provide for this couple, despite their disobedience.

Feminist biblical scholars with a revisionist hermeneutic adopt a stance midway between rejectionists and loyalists. Revisionists fault the many different social and historical circumstances associated with the writing, reading, and interpretation of the Bible for corrupting its inherent goodness. A careful reading of the Garden Story, revisionists might argue, reveals that there is no mention of "sin" in the story at all. Only after later interpreters defined "sin" as disobedience to God was the story declared to describe the "original sin." Texts and interpretations like this, which have reinforced the abusive and oppressive patriarchal conditions that hinder women from being equal participants in society, belong in the past.

Readers today should acknowledge the oppression of the past, understand its limitations, and reinterpret the Bible in ways that could transform society in the present and future.

The approaches above might help to rescue some of the biblical stories from their original sexism. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, for feminists to redeem biblical laws that describe menstruation as a condition of impurity (Lev 15:19) or that prohibit women from teaching or speaking in churches (1 Tim 2:11-12). The only real option for feminists who refuse to reject the Bible completely is to use the Bible's own methods for revising outdated laws. The prophets Jeremiah (31:30) and Ezekiel (18:2) both declared the idea that the sins of the fathers would be passed down to future generations (Exo 34:7; Deut 5:9) obsolete. And Jesus reinterpreted the laws of Torah (Matt 5:21-48) to make them relevant for his community. Thus the Bible itself shows that laws and customs should be continually scrutinized and updated to correspond to different times, places, and customs. This, along with a feminist lens that requires a reader to ask questions about gender equality, allows all but the most rejectionist readers to keep their Bibles open.

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