

*Engaging the Bible  
in a Gendered World*

An Introduction to Feminist Biblical  
Interpretation in Honor  
of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld

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# Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<b>Overview</b>	
1. The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman's Perspective <i>Kathleen M. O'Connor</i>	3
<b>Part One: Perspectives</b>	
2. Communication as Communion: Elements in a Hermeneutic of <i>Lo Cotidiano</i> <i>Ada María Isasi-Díaz</i>	27
3. Womanist Biblical Interpretation <i>Nyasha Junior</i>	37
4. Reading Ruth 3:1–5 from an Asian Woman's Perspective <i>Anna May Say Pa</i>	47
5. My Sister Sarah: On Being a Woman in the First World <i>Beth LaNeel Tanner</i>	60
6. Untying the Knot? Masculinity, Violence, and the Creation-Fall Story of Genesis 2–4 <i>Dennis T. Olson</i>	73
<b>Part Two: Texts</b>	
7. Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship, and Otherness <i>Eunny P. Lee</i>	89
8. Seeing the Older Woman: Naomi in High Definition <i>Jacqueline Lapsley</i>	102
9. Wisdom and the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible <i>Linda Day</i>	114

10. “I Am Black <i>and</i> Beautiful”: The Song, Cixous, and <i>Écriture Féminine</i> <i>F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp</i>	128
11. Job’s Wife <i>C. L. Seow</i>	141
<b>Part Three: Issues</b>	
12. Image and Imagination: Why Inclusive Language Matters <i>Christie Cozad Neuger</i>	153
13. Rupturing God-Language: The Metaphor of God as Midwife in Psalm 22 <i>L. Juliana M. Claassens</i>	166
14. Yahweh’s Significant Other <i>J. J. M. Roberts and Kathryn L. Roberts</i>	176
15. Women, Violence, and the Bible <i>Nancy R. Bowen</i>	186
16. The “Biblical View” of Marriage <i>Carolyn Pressler</i>	200
<b>Part Four: Intersections</b>	
17. Feminist Interpretation and Biblical Theology <i>Phyllis A. Bird</i>	215
18. Feminist Interpretation for the Laity <i>Freda A. Gardner</i>	227
19. What I Have Learned from My Sisters <i>Patrick D. Miller</i>	238
The Accomplishments of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld <i>Sarah Zhang</i>	253

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# *Introduction*

As its title implies, the purpose of this volume is twofold. First, we, the editors, have planned and prepared this work to honor a beloved colleague, the Reverend Doctor Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, on the occasion of her election to the presidency of the Society of Biblical Literature. At the same time that the essays honor Professor Sakenfeld, they have been selected and organized to introduce feminist approaches to biblical interpretation, and especially to the Older Testament,<sup>1</sup> to learners inside and outside of the classroom who may have had little previous exposure to biblical studies in general or feminist biblical scholarship in particular. We have sought to present essays that represent a range of cultural perspectives and methods, and that lift up texts and issues of importance to the discipline.

These two aims may seem strange bedfellows. Typically, the contributors to a *festschrift* (a volume of essays compiled to honor an esteemed scholar) represent the colleagues, students, and close friends of the honoree, while contributions for an introductory textbook are solicited from leaders in the various aspects of the academic field being explored. Moreover, authors of *festschrift* essays typically have a wide degree of freedom to choose the topics of their work, which often explores very narrowly focused and quite technical topics. In contrast, an introduction to a discipline requires essays that broadly cover representative aspects of the field and that are accessible to people who may not have previously studied the topic.

The nature of Professor Sakenfeld's career—and her character—makes such a combined aim not only possible but richly productive.

1. There is an ongoing discussion within biblical scholarship over what to call that part of the Bible shared by Jews and Christians. For many, the traditional Christian designation "Old Testament" suggests that the Pentateuch, Writings, and Prophets have been superseded by the Gospels, a view that in turn implies that the "new covenant" has rendered the first covenant, and therefore Judaism, null and void. Various efforts to address the implied supersessionism of the traditional terms have been proposed, including "First and Second Testaments," "Hebrew Scriptures and Greek Scriptures," "Older Testament and Newer Testament," or using "Old Testament" and "New Testament" when referring to the Bible within the context of the church and "Hebrew Scriptures/Hebrew Bible" and "Greek Scriptures" in academic or interfaith contexts. The reader will encounter varying terminology in this volume, depending on the choices of the various authors.

Kathie, as she is known to her colleagues and friends, is a rigorous scholar who is internationally known and respected, a committed woman of faith, and among the foremost feminist interpreters of the Bible for both the academy and the church. Not surprisingly, among her close colleagues, friends, and students are many leading feminist biblical scholars. A wide range of such persons is represented in those who have contributed essays to this volume, including present and past faculty colleagues (Miller, Gardner, J. Roberts, Seow, Olson, Neuger, Lapsley, Dobbs-Allsopp, Lee), past doctoral students (O'Connor, Anna May, Pressler, Day, Bowen, K. Roberts, Tanner, Claassens), present doctoral students (Junior, Zhang), and long-term colleagues in the field of feminist study (Bird, Isasi-Díaz). In this list are a few "firsts": Gardner was the first woman called to the faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary; O'Connor was the first woman to be awarded a Ph.D. in biblical studies from the institution. Some fall into more than one category, as students who later became faculty colleagues (Dobbs-Allsopp, Lapsley, Lee). Moreover, Kathie inspires the kind of affection and esteem that has led contributors to be willing to work within the tightly defined limits necessary for an introductory text. The generosity and flexibility of the authors of the essays in this collection have been essential to its compilation. Though not all carry out their primary research in the area of feminist study, the topics of their essays for this volume are directly relevant to and valuable for feminist probes of the Bible. Words cannot express our deep gratitude as editors for their efforts and our sheer delight in the creativity and wisdom of their insights.<sup>2</sup>

We can think of no more fitting type of work to honor Professor Sakenfeld than a textbook. Kathie is a superlative teacher. Unlike many other world-class scholars, she has always given as much of her talent and creative energy to her teaching as she has to her academic research. We speak firsthand of her abilities and her passions, for the two of us were once Kathie's students. Always humble and ready to listen, she is ever as eager to learn from others as she is to instruct them.<sup>3</sup> With this volume, we hope that Professor Sakenfeld's legacy will continue to inform, excite, and challenge future generations of students.

2. Phyllis Bird and Patrick Miller generously provided excellent advice during the planning stages of this project. We are immensely grateful for their conversation and ongoing support. We also express our gratitude to Pam Wynn, who served as our research assistant, and to Stephanie Egnotovich of Westminster John Knox Press, who enthusiastically shepherded this project.

3. See her comments in *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 1–5.

## FEMINIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: SKETCHING THE PARAMETERS

Feminist and related approaches to biblical interpretation have emerged within the past few decades; the field is growing exponentially and in multiple directions. Less a single method than a perspective or set of interrelated perspectives, feminist interpretation “has become quite complex in the best sense of the term, that is, rich and varied, not narrow and predictable in its outcomes” (Miller, 244).

This complexity, however, is in no way new but part of the history of the discipline. Historically speaking, women’s movements have never stood alone. Feminism is ultimately a democratic notion, concerned for the rights of all people, including women. Therefore, the struggle for women’s emancipation has regularly been connected to other struggles for emancipation: for the abolition of slavery, for religious freedom, for civil rights, for safe labor conditions, for world peace. The legacy of this interrelatedness and complexity carries through as well to the modern academic discipline of feminism. Today, feminist theology exists as part of a web of what might be loosely categorized as “liberation theologies,” including, for instance, Asian and Asian American theologies, African American and black theologies, postcolonialism, native theologies, ecological theology, and queer theology. All are together concerned with issues of oppression, justice, and equality. These movements are woven together, their participants and philosophies overlapping to the degree that it is impossible fully to separate them.

With regard to biblical studies in particular, the development of forms of biblical interpretation usually seen as closely related to and yet distinct from feminist biblical studies further complicates efforts to define the discipline. For example, womanist interpretation draws on African American women’s experience to analyze biblical texts in terms of race/ethnicity and class as well as gender. *Mujerista* theology takes as its goal and theological criterion the survival and liberation of Latinas in North America. Asian American feminist biblical interpretation likewise views the Bible through the lens of the concerns of women of Asian heritage, which represents a very broad and diverse range of cultures from Indian to Thai to Japanese. “Masculist” study shares the feminist commitment to mutuality between genders and examines, from an explicitly male point of view, the ways biblical narratives construct masculinity. Therefore, within this wide scope of perspectives, some scholars choose to use the term “feminism” to refer to all of these approaches; others

restrict the term to the work of European and Euro-American women. In this volume, we use the term in its broader sense, while seeking to acknowledge the specificity and integrity of differing perspectives.

So, then, what is “feminist biblical interpretation”?<sup>4</sup> In general, “feminist consciousness” can be seen as “an awareness of women’s subordination as unnatural, wrong, and largely determined by society rather than written into our bodies by biology alone” (O’Connor, 11). Thus, as our basic starting point for delineating feminist biblical interpretation, we can say that it brings a feminist consciousness to analyzing biblical texts. At the risk of reductionism, we may further identify this widely—and even wildly—diverse discipline by naming some key assumptions held by many, if not all, interpreters who call themselves “feminist.”

Biblical interpretation, like all forms of knowledge, is thoroughly contextual. That is, it is shaped by the social location (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.) and faith commitments of the interpreter. Simply put, what one sees in a text and how one construes its meaning depends on where one stands.

Such particularity and diversity is not innocent. The Bible is vested with tremendous authority not only in synagogues and churches, but also in cultures within which biblical religions play significant roles. Determining which biblical texts are chosen to be emphasized in hymns, liturgies, newspapers, and courthouse monuments; what types of interpretation are deemed valid and what types invalid; and what meanings are derived from these texts is ultimately a matter of power.

Thus, as Sakenfeld writes, “Biblical interpretation is a political act, an act with consequences for the church and the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Feminist interpretation is engaged. Eschewing the myth of disinterested, objective scholarship, feminists seek justice for all people and are “especially concerned for the fate of women—all women—in the midst of ‘all people.’”<sup>6</sup>

4. The descriptions offered by various contributors to this volume demonstrate the lack of a single definition of the phrase. For example, Miller understands “feminist interpretation” as “a particular critical method, in some ways much richer and more complex than other critical methods,” which entails “reading the Bible in a way that is attentive to the place of women in the text and the world of the text, what is said about them and by them, what is done to them and what they cannot do” (Miller, 247–48, 238–39). In contrast, Tanner observes that “from the very beginning, feminist criticism was not a strict method but a way of looking at the Bible. It was an endeavor that struggled with the text to provide a view from the perspective of women, but at the same time that considers any scholar’s view to be one of many” (Tanner, 69–70).

5. “Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” *Theology Today* 46 (1989): 164.

6. Sakenfeld, “Feminist Perspectives on the Bible and Theology: An Introduction to Selected Issues and Literature,” *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 5.

## SITUATING THIS VOLUME

Given the rich complexity of the discipline and its emphasis on the contextual nature of all acts of interpretation, it is important to situate this volume within the larger field of feminist biblical scholarship. Feminist interpretation may be analyzed and categorized according to numerous factors, including the social location of the interpreter; the methodology that the interpreter employs; the interpreter's assessment of the patriarchal use of the Bible and understanding of its authority in light of the way the Bible has been used against women; and whether and how the interpreter relates gender justice to racial, economic, and sexual justice.<sup>7</sup>

## Social Location

The social locations of the contributors to this volume differ. We are baby boomers, retirees, and graduate students; straight and lesbian; Asian, African, Euro-American, African American, Latina, and Asian American; we are women and men. Nonetheless, there are key aspects of our social locations that contribute to the particular shape of this volume and its relationship to other feminist and related voices. Many of the characteristics of the volume can be traced to the social location of Katharine Sakenfeld, who has taught at Princeton Theological Seminary for the entirety of her career but who has also engaged extensively in study and dialogue with biblical interpreters worldwide, and who consistently seeks to find ways for silenced voices to gain a hearing in the academy and in the church.

Like Kathie, the contributors to this volume are Christian, and predominantly Protestant.<sup>8</sup> All of us have studied or taught at Protestant

7. Scholars have mapped feminist biblical interpretation in numerous ways. For an analysis of three hermeneutical approaches by early feminist biblical interpretation, see Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 55–64; for a typology based on exegetical approaches, see her "Feminist Biblical Interpretation." Carolyn Osiek ("The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* [ed. Adela Yarbro Collins; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985], 93–105) considers the interplay of interpreters' understanding of gender, biblical authority or lack of authority, and goals to identify five types of feminist biblical interpretation. In the present volume, O'Connor uses Sakenfeld's outline of hermeneutical approaches to sketch the history of the discipline, then discusses some of the recent movements in the burgeoning field of feminist biblical studies that she finds most useful.

8. It is both unfortunate and telling that the adjective "Christian" has come for many people to connote a rather narrow, conservative slice of the broad spectrum of church members and has too often been used dogmatically to describe that small group of Christians over and against others who also confess Christ as the way in which God has encountered them. Reclaiming the term as descriptive of all who belong to the broad and varied communities of faith in Jesus the Christ is an important and ongoing task. We use it to claim our particular faith stance and invite persons of other beliefs into dialogue, not to define ourselves over and against others who are also Christian.

seminaries (most often, Princeton); almost all are active in local religious congregations. This volume belongs to the academy. The contributors are educated biblical scholars and committed teachers, and some of the essays are written primarily for an academic audience. This volume also belongs to the church. A significant number of the articles are shaped by an explicit faith perspective and written from and for the church.

Such commitment is inevitably particular. The fact that this volume represents the work of Christian scholars means that important voices—Jewish, Muslim, or postbiblical—are not included. Jewish feminist scholar Judith Plaskow, among others, has justly criticized Christian feminists for writing as if our perspectives are universal rather than particular.<sup>9</sup> We acknowledge the particular faith tradition out of which this volume has been written and express our appreciation of and desire for dialogue with feminist biblical scholars from other traditions. The reader is encouraged to explore the writings of Jewish and Muslim feminists as well as postbiblical feminist scholars.<sup>10</sup>

The contributors to this volume are both women and men. The choice to invite men to contribute to a book that introduces feminist interpretation is neither inevitable nor uncontroversial. Some feminist scholars define the discipline as biblical interpretation that uses as its primary interpretive lens the experience of women (either individually or in the communal struggle for liberation). By this definition, only women can be feminists. We, however, prefer a broader understanding of what can constitute “feminist” thought. We have intentionally included men in this volume not only because Kathie’s closest colleagues include people of both sexes, but primarily because from the earliest days of feminist biblical studies there have been men interpreting Scriptures with an awareness of their privileged location and a conscious commitment to gender justice. Whether one calls them “feminist,” “pro-feminist,” “masculist,” or “ally,” some male scholars have been involved in early and

9. Absolutizing their perspectives is only one of the salient critiques that Plaskow makes of Christian feminist theologians. See her “Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (1991): 99–108; also Amy-Jill Levine, “The Disease of Postcolonial New Testament Studies and the Hermeneutics of Healing,” in “Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Interpretation,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (2004): 91–132.

10. For instance, see Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990); Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds., *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valerie H. Ziegler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Putnam, 1996); Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women’s Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the Fifty-four Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000); Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Carter Heyward, *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice* (ed. Ellen C. Davis; New York: Pilgrim, 1989).

ongoing efforts to make language more inclusive, support women's ordination, and recover and highlight neglected stories about women. Moreover, younger feminists are increasingly defining their goal as a transformed community of women and men, a goal that also underlies several of these essays.

We must name one more aspect of the social location of the contributors to this volume. That is, most of us study and teach the Older Testament. Isasi-Díaz is an ethicist who has written extensively on stories from both the Newer and the Older Testament; Gardner is a religious educator; Neuger's discipline is pastoral care. The rest of us, however, work in the discipline of Older Testament studies. The essays in this volume raise issues of importance to interpretation of both parts of the canon and can well serve to introduce feminist biblical interpretation generally. Moreover, one author (Isasi-Díaz) interprets a Newer Testament pericope (the transfiguration). Nonetheless, the volume is slanted toward the Hebrew Scriptures. This focus reflects in part the career of Katharine Sakenfeld, an Older Testament scholar. But it also responds to what we have seen as a gap in the literature. Although there are several edited volumes of feminist interpretation of the Newer Testament, of the Bible as a whole, or of the Torah, we are not aware of any other introduction to feminist interpretation of the Older Testament.<sup>11</sup>

### Exegetical Method

In her article "Feminist Biblical Interpretation," Sakenfeld describes three major exegetical methods typically used by feminist biblical scholars. A formal literary approach "focuses on the narrative as it is received as text, with interpretive constraints provided by the perceived literary design and by grammatical and syntactical elements." A "culturally cued literary reading" "is also within the literary realm, but it concentrates much more on reading the text as a product of its own culture." The third method is historical; it "seeks to use data from other

11. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Harold C. Washington, Susan Lochrie Graham, and Pamela Thimmes, eds., *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible* (Biblical Seminar 65; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1, *A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Luise Schrottroff, Silvia Schroer, and Marie-Theres Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective* (trans. Martin and Barbara Rumscheidt; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). The sole collection concentrating on the Older Testament is Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York/London: Routledge, 1999), but as its subtitle implies, its focus is not introductory. All of these works include intriguing and illuminating articles, however, and the reader is encouraged to consult them.

ancient Semitic cultures, as well as comparative sociological models and material remains found by archaeologists, in order to begin to reconstruct a clearer and more reliable picture of women's life in ancient Israel."<sup>12</sup> In the years since Sakenfeld developed her typology in 1989, the number of disciplines employed by feminist biblical scholars has "exploded," including anthropology, sociology, folklore studies, critical theory, legal history, and biology (see O'Connor, 19–23). Feminist interpreters place biblical texts in dialogue with stories and histories drawn from world literature and world religions, with every possible form of artistic representation, and with accounts of women's daily lives. Given the explosive proliferation of methods in biblical studies generally and in feminist biblical scholarship in particular, it is not possible for one volume to represent the ever-growing range of methods found in the discipline. Literary approaches, however, continue to predominate, and are most fully represented in this volume. Perhaps reflecting Kathie's preference for culturally cued literary readings, most of the essays here also incorporate the insights of historical criticism along with close attention to literary features of the text. In addition, social scientific (Olson), historical (Roberts, Pressler), and storytelling (Bowen) methods are also represented.<sup>13</sup>

### Hermeneutical Framework: Patriarchy and Authority

How feminists define the problem of patriarchy in biblical interpretation and how they view the authority of the Bible comprise yet other, interrelated factors by which their interpretation may be mapped. Two overriding questions need to be asked by any feminist encountering the Bible: Is the Bible redemptive for women? Is the Bible redeemable for women?<sup>14</sup> On the one end of the spectrum, some believe that the Bible is irredeemably patriarchal. Scholars who hold this position may study the Scriptures in order to critique texts that wield authority within soci-

12. Sakenfeld, "Feminist Biblical Interpretation," 161–62.

13. A further area of primary feminist concern has been investigation of the everyday lives of ancient Israelite women. The reader is encouraged to examine reconstructions of women's lives in ancient Israel, Palestine, and Hellenistic cultures. Two now-classic studies are Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); see also Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

14. Carolyn Osiek, "Reading the Bible as Women," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Keck et al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:183; see also see Phyllis A. Bird, "Biblical Authority in the Light of Feminist Critique," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 248–65.

ety or as a matter of academic interest, but reject any claims that the Newer or Older Testaments are authoritative. On the other end of the spectrum, some feminist Christians cherish the Bible as the unalloyed Word of God. These interpreters maintain that all biblical texts, properly understood, are salvific for women and men, and the ways the Bible has been used against women represent distorted interpretation. Within these two poles, a wide range of positions and approaches is found. The scholars who have contributed to this volume embrace the historical-critical understanding that all biblical texts are the products of the particular cultures that shaped them and the feminist awareness that those cultures were patriarchal. The biblical texts themselves encode—and thus support—patriarchy. Most of the contributors do not directly address the question of biblical authority. Those who do find in the Bible liberating as well as oppressive dynamics (Anna May, Bowen), turn to it as a memory of and inspiration for struggle (Isasi-Díaz), or acknowledge that the word of God is always spoken to and through human beings whose cultural perspectives and assumptions leave their marks on the texts (Miller, Pressler, Lapsley).

Because they experience the Bible as both patriarchal and liberating, many of the contributors to this volume engage in a twofold hermeneutic or interpretive approach, a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and a “hermeneutics of retrieval.” A hermeneutics of suspicion expects that the Bible serves the interests of those who authored, edited, and canonized it: that is, males. The first task of feminist interpretation, therefore, is “questioning the text, identifying its patriarchy and oppression of women, resisting its power to effect such ways of being and acting in the contemporary culture and the church. . . . The hermeneutic of retrieval cannot come before the problems of the text have been identified” (Miller, 248).

A “hermeneutics of retrieval” seeks to identify “resistant voices and narrative strategies that complicate patriarchy” (O’Connor, 21). Such an enterprise lifts up texts that relate women’s agency, that represent the deity with feminine images or attributes, that can be used to reconstruct women’s history, and in general, texts that refuse to accept the inevitability of suffering or powerlessness. There are a variety of possible strategies to retrieve a meaningful word from the biblical texts.<sup>15</sup> One such approach involves investigating the significance of female characters and God imagery (Day). Early feminists especially sought to

15. Our discussion of ways in which contributors have sought to retrieve a word for themselves is indebted to Carol Lakey Hess’s enumeration of “strategies for dealing with difficult texts” in her *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women’s Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 195–206.

identify stories about women and divine imagery that had been largely ignored throughout the centuries-long history of biblical interpretation. Yet the difficulty remains that there are too few positive stories about women in the Bible; moreover, most of them express men's views of women rather than women's views of their own lives. A solution is to consider how characters and phrases not highlighted in the texts themselves can still prove to be quite significant (Claassens, Seow).

A further feminist strategy for reclaiming biblical texts has been to identify in them female voices (Dobbs-Allsopp). This does not necessarily mean that the texts were authored by women, but instead that a woman's point of view can be at least partially discerned in them.<sup>16</sup> Setting biblical texts in conversation with one another has been yet another way in which interpreters committed to gender justice respond to biblical patriarchy, to let "Scripture interpret Scripture" (Olson, Lapsley). Viewing a difficult text in the light of texts that present more egalitarian and positive ideas can often prove affirming. Similarly, feminists have long identified liberating principles or dynamics in the Bible with which to critique sexism in both the biblical texts and in contemporary society (Pressler).

### Gender Injustice in Relationship to Other Types of Injustice

One additional way of situating the volume is to ask how broadly or narrowly the contributors define the goal of feminist biblical interpretation. How does the goal of gender justice relate to racial, economic, and/or sexual justice in their analyses? At least in its early form, European and Euro-American women, who were typically middle- and upper-middle-class, spoke about our experience as if it were somehow representative of the experience of all women (Junior, 40–41). White feminists' early exclusive focus on gender was harshly criticized by womanist, *mujerista*, and Asian American feminists, who insisted that race/ethnicity, class, and gender (and today we would also add sexual orientation, age, nationality, and physical abilities) intersect, mutually defining what each means.<sup>17</sup> Some of the essays in this book focus

16. See Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

17. One might ask, if feminist commitment to justice extends beyond gender to include freedom from all forms of oppression, why is feminism necessary at all? Why not fold gender concerns into more general liberationist approaches to biblical interpretation? In our view, as a practical matter there need to be some people for whom gender justice is the primary (though not exclusive) focus, others who concentrate their efforts on racial justice work, and so forth. Generic discussions of "human liberation" too often serve to remove the focus from challenging the status quo.

primarily on gender, while others reflect an awareness of the interlocking nature of structures of dominance and a commitment to resist these multiple forms of oppression. For example, the concerns of gender can rarely fully be separated from the concerns of ethnicity when appraising biblical texts (Lee), nor from the concerns of social status (Tanner); cultural expectations can affect whether we see female biblical characters as positive or negative examples (Anna May); or the Bible can be used to critique modern cultural norms for other oppressed minority populations as well as women (Pressler).

### THE ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

The essays that form this volume are divided into four main parts. An overview of feminist biblical interpretation is followed by essays that highlight varying perspectives from which to view the Bible (part 1), interpretations of pertinent texts (part 2), selected issues that have been of particular importance to feminist biblical scholarship (part 3), and intersections of feminist biblical interpretation with other disciplines (part 4). As is often the case, these divisions are somewhat arbitrary. As discussed earlier, an essential tenet of feminist thought is that all interpretations are contextual; every interpreter brings a particular perspective to the texts. Therefore, the reader will note that essays that concentrate on specific biblical texts also raise numerous issues of importance to feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and masculist interpretation. In similar fashion, none of the particular issues addressed can be isolated from the specific biblical texts that render such concerns significant for feminist interpreters, be they either beneficial or problematic. Readers will also clearly see how the social locations and experiential perspectives of the authors in the final section (the academy, the church) influence what they choose to place in conversation with feminist interpretation. Nonetheless, these four categories introduce the reader to what we see as major foci and directions in the academic field of feminist biblical interpretation.

An overview essay by Kathleen O'Connor introduces the field of feminist biblical interpretation, and it should be read first. Locating the origins and impetus of feminist biblical scholarship firmly in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, she sets out the history of the discipline, identifies its primary approaches, and maps avenues for its future growth. O'Connor views these issues through the lens of the

story of the impoverished widow (2 Kgs 4:1–7) and weaves into her essay reflections of her own experience of feminism as both life-giving and challenging.

### Perspectives

One of the basic assumptions of feminist biblical interpretation is that every reading of a biblical text is shaped by the interpreter's perspective(s), including an individual's social location and life experiences. A collection of essays concentrating on a range of perspectives follows the introductory overview, which we hope will give the reader a sense of the rich and varied conversation that is currently a part of feminist hermeneutics.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes from a *mujerista* perspective, emphasizing the importance of communication and friendship in the daily lived experiences of Latinas. Turning to the Bible, she lifts up the key role of speech and conversation partners in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Nyasha Junior describes and problematizes womanist biblical interpretation. Tracing its origins to African American women's critique of Euro-American feminism, she identifies key aspects of womanist scholarship. Junior observes, however, that relatively few African American women have entered the field of biblical studies, and she cautions us against imposing the designation "womanist" on all African American female scholars. Anna May Say Pa writes from the perspective of Asian feminism. After highlighting important aspects of the story of Ruth, she questions the adequacy of Ruth as a role model for Asian women. Beth LaNeel Tanner points out that, rather than its assumed universality, the early feminist movement was in actuality monolithic and exclusionary, representing a perspective that was primarily North American or European, Caucasian, and Christian. She creatively engages in conversation with the biblical character Sarah to explore ways in which both of their stories reflect their vulnerability and powerlessness as women—and how their privileged economic and ethnic status implicates them both. Finally, Dennis Olson writes from the particularity of a self-conscious male interpreter as he examines the dynamics of the first family in Gen 2–4. The social-scientific research on masculinities he utilizes represents a second wave in gender studies; after female scholars began to articulate the uniqueness of a woman's perspective, some men began to consider what components constitute a male, or masculinist, perspective.

## Texts

Though all parts of the biblical canon have been subject to feminist inquiry, certain portions have received greater attention than others. These have been passages that include female characters or images of God or that provide evidence helpful for reconstructing women's lives in ancient Israel and Palestine. Many of these important texts are taken up in essays in other parts of the volume: for instance, the narratives about the women surrounding David (Miller), Hagar and Sarah (Tanner), Tamar (Bowen), and the numerous instances of feminine imagery for God (Claassens). To render this textbook more complete, we have solicited essays that concentrate on a few texts that have been of especial and perennial interest to feminist scholarship over the years.

The book of Ruth is one such text. Many feminist scholars have lifted up the relationship between Naomi and Ruth as a rare biblical example of women's friendships and of female agents working out their own survival; moreover, some lesbian interpreters have embraced the book as a story of women whose primary commitment is to one another. Yet other feminist interpreters find problematic the story's insistence on cultural assimilation and its emphasis on obedience to one's elders. In addition to Anna May's assessment of Ruth as a potential role model for Asian women, in this volume Eunny P. Lee and Jacqueline Lapsley provide multiple interpretations of the story. Lee examines the ways in which Ruth negotiates ethnic differences and kinship ties, raising the concern of how we relate to those who are "other." Lapsley reflects on the history of interpretation of the book, asking why attention has focused on the more docile younger woman rather than on the older Naomi, whose protests about her losses parallel those of Job. These three essays on the book of Ruth, we believe, present the reader with an opportunity to see the diversity of feminist scholars' methods and conclusions in action.<sup>18</sup>

Two characters of intense interest to feminists are the subject of Linda Day's essay: Eve and Woman Wisdom (*Hokmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek). Tradition has been harsh on Eve. Created after Adam and thus supposedly his inferior, the first to eat the forbidden fruit and thus held responsible for sin, Eve has long been used to legitimize the subjugation of women.<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Trible's groundbreaking book *God and the*

18. Their inclusion also reflects Katharine Sakenfeld's long-standing research interest in the book of Ruth.

19. See, for instance, Kvam, Schearing, and Ziegler, *Eve and Adam*.

*Rhetoric of Sexuality* has become an influential feminist reinterpretation of Gen 2–3, demonstrating how aspects of the creation story are at least as plausibly interpreted as depicting the woman Eve's equality to the man.<sup>20</sup> Reading Olson's analysis of the construction of masculinities in Gen 2–4 in conjunction with Day's treatment of the same stories allows the reader to note the commonalities and differences between a feminist and a masculist approach.

The paucity of female metaphors for God in the Bible has generated much interest in one prevalent image: "Woman Wisdom," which is promulgated in the biblical books of Proverbs and Wisdom of Solomon. A complex and elusive metaphor, Woman Wisdom functions on several levels of meaning, mediating between God and humankind, "calling humanity to herself and through herself to God . . . She is the wisdom of God; she is the name Israel gave to the One God."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, some scholars find this female wisdom tradition continuing into the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus. Day articulates the strong connection between the attributes of wisdom and female characters in the biblical literature.

The Song of Songs has been the focus of many feminist interpreters, who often extol its joyous celebration of romantic, even frankly erotic, love that is based on mutuality rather than subordination and dominance, or find in it the presence and even predominance of a female voice. Renita J. Weems has made a compelling case that the lovers in the Song face social opposition; theirs is a resistant love.<sup>22</sup> Athalya Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, in a study of the gender of the discourse of texts (and not necessarily of their authors), has identified the Song as a "female" text.<sup>23</sup> Other scholars caution readers, however, that the Song is not free of patriarchal ideology; it may reflect men's desire more than it expresses the actual voices of women.<sup>24</sup> F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, in his essay, employs the theories of Algerian Jewish feminist

20. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

21. Carolyn Pressler, "Faithful Yet Free: God Talk and the Old Testament," *Theological Markings* 2, no. 2 (1994): 11–15. The description of Woman Wisdom draws on the work of Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Message of Biblical Spirituality 5; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 82–85.

22. Renita J. Weems, "The Song of Songs," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Keck et al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 5:361–434.

23. Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*.

24. See David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in *Interested Parties: The Ideologies of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 205; Gender, Culture, Theory 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 94–121; J. Cheryl Exum, "Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 24–35.

philosopher Hélène Cixous to open up intriguing new interpretive pathways into this often-studied book. He argues that the woman's playful spirit, affirmative view on life, and self-assertiveness reflect the text as a "feminine writing."

Most of the female characters in the Bible are bit players, given few actions and even fewer lines. We readers have to fill in the gaps in our attempt to understand them. C. L. Seow takes up one of these minor characters, the unnamed wife of Job. Even with its predominant interest in a male character, Carol A. Newsom has demonstrated that the book of Job does offer feminists some positive resources. It elevates experience—even over and against tradition—as a theological resource and offers a model of faith that refuses to be passive in the face of unjust suffering.<sup>25</sup> Seow's choice to compare two paintings to the biblical text reflects the emerging trajectory of visual imagery in biblical interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Not dissimilarly from Lapsley's articulation of the distortion in traditional interpretation of Naomi, he demonstrates how distortions have prevented scholars from recognizing that these paintings actually depict the wife of Job quite positively.

## Issues

This section begins with essays about gender-inclusive language and female imagery for God, topics that have generated great passion in both feminists and their opponents. Feminist scholars join others in arguing that the language and images we humans choose to use not only reflect but also construct our reality. As Miller maintains in his essay, speech that uses male terms generically conveys the idea that women are subsumed within, and therefore subordinate to, men. Similarly, the use of exclusively or predominantly male language for God in theology and worship implicitly suggests that the deity more closely resembles men than women. Both forms of gender-exclusive language have been at the forefront of feminist scholarship since its earliest days (see O'Connor's comments). In this section, Christie Cozad Neuger

25. "Job," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 138–44.

26. See, for instance, J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 215; Gender, Culture, Theory 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Margarita Stocker, *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1998).

discusses the political, social, ecclesiological, and pastoral importance of inclusive language and imagery. Neuger, a pioneer in feminist approaches to pastoral care, has researched extensively the role that image and theological imagination play in psychological and spiritual health. She shows how exclusively male theological language becomes a form of idolatry, equating the Creator with a creature, and how it legitimates male dominance in faith communities and in society. L. Juliana M. Claassens investigates the depictions of God as mother and midwife in Psalm 22. Using the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Claassens shows that the female metaphors—precisely because they “rupture” traditional God language—are uniquely able to open up new meanings and new possibilities for healing.

Biblical images of Yahweh are not the only divine images of concern, however. Feminist biblical interpreters, historians, and archaeologists have long been at work to determine the goddesses worshiped by persons in the ancient Near East, and even possibly in ancient Israel.<sup>27</sup> The biblical text contains hints of allegiance to goddesses, and the question is to what degree such worship complemented or competed with worship of Yahweh. J. J. M. and Kathryn L. Roberts enter into this discussion, as they consider the possibility of ancient Israelite belief in the goddess Asherah, fueled in part by archaeological discoveries of inscriptions referring to “Yahweh and his Asherah.” They conclude that by the time the biblical materials were written, Asherah, originally a Canaanite goddess, had been absorbed into Israel’s God under the influence of militant Yahwism. The Roberts’ conclusions may disappoint feminists who seek more permanent signs of the goddess. Yet their argument demonstrates that ancient Israel at one time did honor a feminine expression of their God, Yahweh’s Asherah, thus suggesting a female dimension of the biblical deity akin, perhaps, to Woman Wisdom or to Shekinah, the female personification of God in later Jewish tradition.

Another issue that has been the focus of much feminist discussion is the Bible’s portrayal of violence against women.<sup>28</sup> The biblical tradition is far from a “safe space” for women. Rather, it abounds with stories of physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women, laws that sanc-

27. See, for instance, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992).

28. See, for instance, Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 163; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

tion such actions, and even prophecies that present God as acting in such ways. Moreover, patriarchal silencing and distorted depictions of women can be considered to constitute violence by the biblical texts. Nancy R. Bowen charts the numerous intersections of women, violence, and the Bible. She concludes by identifying strategies, including the reconceiving and retelling of stories (midrash), that feminists have used to counter the potential harm of such texts.<sup>29</sup>

Women's roles within the family and within marriage, as well as stories that depict relationships among mothers, daughters, sisters, and other family members, have obvious significance for interpreters committed to gender justice. Carolyn Pressler takes up a specific aspect of that larger issue, that is, the multiple views of marriage found in the Older and Newer Testaments. Her argument challenges the myth, beloved of conservative Christians, that the Bible contains a single, monolithic attitude toward marriage, and she concludes that the various patterns it does contain are shaped by cultures whose needs were vastly different from those of twenty-first-century North America. In that her argument has implications for the debate around same-sex marriage, Pressler also touches on the issues of sexual orientation.

We have been able to include only a sampling of the myriad issues that feminist biblical interpreters address. Some of the essays in other parts of the volume attend to other frequently addressed topics. For instance, as is inevitable in a discussion of either the Song of Songs or Cixous's work, sexuality and embodiment weave their way into Dobbs-Allsopp's essay. Sexual exploitation and trafficking form a menacing background to the essays by Anna May, Bowen, and Tanner. Lapsley's discussion of Naomi touches on the problem of ageism in biblical interpretation, a justice issue that deserves more exploration than feminists have yet undertaken. Tanner, Bowen, and Isasi-Díaz model how telling and retelling women's stories can create new understandings. Most prominently, numerous essays highlight the theme of community. The Latina community is central to Isasi-Díaz's method and goal. Olson, Miller, Anna May, and others envision a transformed community of women and men in mutual, egalitarian relationship. O'Connor and Bird lift up sisterhood as a key aspect of feminism in general and feminist biblical interpretation in particular. All of these issues, plus many

29. Missing from Bowen's otherwise comprehensive discussion of violence is any reference to possible biblical resources for women who have been victims of violence. For such a discussion, see Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 96–107.

more, demonstrate the richness of the maturing discipline of feminist interpretation.

### Intersections

The final section of the book explores what might well be described as feminist interpretation facing outward, the intersection of feminist biblical interpretation and other disciplines. Our hope is that the topics selected will provide the reader with some sense of both the possibilities and the difficulties that feminist interpreters face as they seek to influence the academy and the church. They represent places of current and continuing conversations between feminism and other entities that bring their own contexts and criteria. Phyllis A. Bird, an early and highly respected feminist biblical scholar, investigates the intersection of feminist biblical interpretation with biblical theology, another sub-discipline of biblical studies. After considering the origins and issues of biblical theology, she documents the lack of women engaged in the field and explores the reasons that feminist scholars have chosen not to engage this discipline.

Freda A. Gardner's focus on education reminds us that feminism was never envisioned as self-serving, a conversation among only academics, but has always had as one of its purposes to help the general population, the persons in the pews. She writes from the perspective of a religious educator about the challenges of introducing feminist interpretation to the laity. Utilizing the work of Parker Palmer, Gardner reminds educators that introducing ideas that challenge the learners' worldviews requires openness, boundaries, and hospitality, and that the challenge is especially great when teaching about the Bible.

The final essay, by Patrick D. Miller, should be read as a counterpart to the very first essay, that of O'Connor. Both represent the experiences of senior scholars—female and male—speaking from the vantage point of watching the discipline of biblical studies change over the past few decades. Miller writes that though feminism does not constitute the center of his work, he considers how “the ways into the text arising out of feminist interpretation belong to any serious effort to read and interpret Scripture” (247). Miller's reflections on what he has “learned from his sisters” serve as an overview of the contributions of feminist biblical interpretation to biblical studies and to the church, a contribution not yet fully embraced but of enormous transformative potential. Vital to

this ongoing work is his insistence that the interpretive community becomes valid and complete only when women and men work together in mutual respect.

We, as the volume's editors, envision no possible greater purpose for this book than to facilitate its female and male readers to come into conversation and community with one another around the concerns raised throughout its pages.