

Interpreting Patriarchal Traditions

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures originated in a patriarchal society and perpetuated the androcentric (male-centered) traditions of their culture. Today, feminist analyses have uncovered the detrimental effects of these traditions on women's self-understanding and role in society and in the churches. Christians, both women and men, consequently face a grave dilemma. On the one hand they seek to remain faithful to the life-giving truth of the biblical revelation and on the other hand they seek to free themselves from all patriarchal traditions and sexist concepts that hinder their human and Christian liberation. The interpretation and understanding of the androcentric traditions of the Bible are therefore major theological tasks for all Christians today. This task cannot be accomplished by putting down the feminist critique as "unscholarly," "somewhat uninformed," or "excessive," but only by taking seriously the fact that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures share in the concepts and ideologies of their patriarchal culture and age.

In order to accomplish this task we have to take into account the methods of historical-critical scholarship, the results of the discussion of methods of interpretation, and the insights of feminist analysis.¹ Historical-critical scholarship has taught us that it is necessary to understand the historical setting, the cultural environment, the literary forms, and the specific language of a text if we interpret and teach or preach the Bible. Discussion of interpretation has underlined that a value-free, objectivistic historiography is a scholarly fiction. All interpretation of texts depends upon the presuppositions, intellectual interests, politics, or prejudices of the interpreter, historian, or theologian. Scholars are always committed, whether they realize it or not. Feminist analyses have, therefore, pointed out that the biblical texts were not only recorded from an androcentric point of view but were also consciously or unconsciously interpreted by exegetes and preachers from a perspective of cultural male dominance. Several biblical texts that were throughout the centuries quoted to support women's inferiority and submission do not have in their original intent and context a misogynist slant. The study of androcentric traditions in the Bible has thus to observe not only the original intention of the texts but also their androcentric history of interpretation. Biblical history, just

like history on the whole, has become “his story”² recorded and interpreted from an androcentric point of view.

This chapter discusses a sampling of patriarchal texts and androcentric interpretations of the Bible in order to demonstrate how a reading of the Bible from a feminist perspective could contribute to a better and deeper understanding of the biblical message. Insofar as this discussion singles out for interpretation androcentric and patriarchal scriptural texts, it might appear at first glance one-sided and overly critical. Insofar as it uncovers sexist presuppositions and biases of modern exegetes and preachers, it will provoke emotional reaction and controversy. Yet such a study might also recover in some seemingly androcentric texts a tacit criticism and transcendence of patriarchal and androcentric values. Moreover, a feminist interpretation can show that some texts, even though recorded from an androcentric perspective, refer to a historical situation in which women had more authority and influence than is usually attributed to them.

ANDROCENTRIC TRADITIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Although some texts of the Old Testament³ might reflect a matriarchal or matrilineal society, the patriarchal character of Hebrew culture is undisputed. Spanning nearly a millennium and embracing a variety of religio-cultural contexts, the Hebrew Scriptures clearly espouse male priority and superiority in the national as well as in the religious community.⁴ *Patriarchal Texts*: Israel as a nation and as a religious community was constituted by male-dominated families, and full membership in it was reserved to the adult male. It is true that Israel had this patriarchal fabric in common with all the surrounding Near Eastern cultures and religions. Yet the legal and social position of women was often lower in Israel than in the neighboring countries.⁵ In Hebrew patriarchal society, women were totally dependent on their fathers and husbands. Numbers 30:2-12, for example, demonstrates the complete dependency and subordination of a daughter or a wife, not only in familial-cultural affairs but also in religious matters. The vows of a daughter or a wife were not considered valid if the father or the husband vetoed them.

But when her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows, or concerning her pledge of herself, shall not stand: her husband has made them void, and the Lord will forgive her. (Num. 30:12)

The main values of patriarchal society were the perpetuation of the family and the clan, as well as the protection of property. Since sons prolonged the family line and preserved the family's fortunes, they were highly desired.

Daughters were less valued, because they would leave the family when they married. A daughter was the property of her father and could even be sold as a slave if the purchaser intended to make her his own or his son's concubine (Lev. 21:7-11). In early Hebrew society the future husband had to pay a bride-price as a compensation to the bride's family. Well known in this regard is the story of Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:16-30), who complained that their father, after having sold them, had used the money paid for them (Gen. 31:15). Less known but even more drastic is the story of David, Saul, and Michal (1 Sam. 18:20-27).

That a daughter was at the disposal of her father is apparent in the story of Lot and his daughters. In Gen. 19:1-11⁶ two strangers accept the invitation of Lot to stay in his home. When the men of the town want to abuse them sexually, Lot offers his own daughters instead: "Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (Gen. 19:8). Although the daughters are not ravished, the sacredness of hospitality is clearly the greater value in the story. The incident cannot be explained as an example of "bargaining by the unacceptable alternative," in which the offer is so shocking that no one would dream of accepting it. This becomes apparent when we consider the very similar tale in Judg. 19:22-30. As in Gen. 19:1-11, a father offers his virgin daughter and his guest's concubine to the men of the town for sexual abuse in order to protect the male guest of his house. When the men did not listen to him, the guest "seized his concubine, and put her out to them; and they knew her, and abused her all night until the morning" (Judg. 19:25). Because the woman dies from their violence, Israel rallies to warfare against the offending town of the Benjaminites, "for they have committed abomination and wantonness in Israel" (Judg. 20:6). However, there is uttered no word of criticism of the husband who saved his own life by offering his concubine for rape and abuse.

The extent to which women were in the power of men is also demonstrated in the conclusion of this narrative cycle. After the Israelites have defeated the Benjaminites, they feel compassion for them. "One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. What shall we do for wives of those who are left, since we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them any of our daughters as wives?" (Judg. 21:6-7).

When the congregation finds out that no one from Jabesh-Gilead had taken this oath, they decide to kill all inhabitants of the city except for four hundred virgins whom they gave as wives to the surviving Benjaminites (Judg. 21:12). Since there were still some men without wives, the elders of the congregation decide to obtain more women through "highway" robbery. When, at the occasion of the yearly festival, the daughters of Shiloh came out to dance in the vineyards, the Benjaminites abducted them, and the elders of Israel were prepared to defend this action against the complaining fathers or brothers of

the women (Judg. 21:20-23). The virgin daughters are clearly the possession of their fathers. The women themselves have nothing to say throughout all these events. Just as at the beginning of the narrative cycle hospitality was more highly valued than the lives of women, so at the end the survival of the tribe of Benjamin justifies the brutal violence against them.⁷

In a patriarchal family structure the daughter is dependent upon her father or brother and the wife becomes totally reliant on her husband. Thus, the woman remains all her life a minor. The Decalogue includes a man's wife among his possessions, along with his house and land, his male and female slaves, his ox and his ass (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). The root meaning of the Hebrew verb "to marry a wife" is "to become master" (*ba'al*, see Deut. 21:13; 24:4). The wife, therefore, calls her husband master (*ba'al*, see Exod. 21:4, 22; II Sam. 11:26) and lord (*'adōn*, Gen. 18:12; Judg. 19:26; Amos 4:1). Even after the wife is widowed, her father-in-law retains authority over her (Gen. 38:24).

The wife's primary task in life is to bear children, and her greatest honor is motherhood. Barrenness was, therefore, seen as misfortune and divine punishment (Gen. 11:30; 30:1; Exod. 23:26; 1 Sam. 1:6; Hos. 9:14).⁸ In Hebrew society, polygyny was legally recognized, the husband could take a concubine, and divorce was a male prerogative (Deut. 24:1-4). Whereas woman's sexual misconduct was severely punished, infidelity on the part of the man was penalized only if he violated the rights of another man. Since sexual intercourse with a betrothed virgin or a married woman offended the property rights of the patriarch, it was severely punished and provoked even Yahweh's intervention. A good example is the story of Abraham and Sarah, which we find with variations three times in Genesis: Gen. 12:10 to 13:1; 20:1-18; 26:6-11 (Isaac and Rebekah).

According to the Yahwist's (J) account (Gen. 12:10 to 13:1), in order to save his own life Abraham persuades his beautiful wife Sarah to pass as his sister in Egypt. She is taken into the harem of Pharaoh, but Yahweh intervenes on her behalf. Pharaoh reproaches Abraham for not telling him the truth and extradicts him and his company. The Yahwist's account tells the marvelous preservation of the future mother of the heir of promise. Abraham is at fault.

Even though location and names are different, the Elohist's (E) story (Gen. 20:1-18) materially corresponds in detail to the Yahwistic account. Yet the story clearly now has a different theological tendency. The author takes pains to justify, theologically, Abraham's selfish action. This androcentric shift becomes clear from the following points: First, Yahweh has to castigate Abimelech because Sarah is another man's wife (v. 3). Abraham's property rights are violated. Second, the story stresses that Sarah herself says that she is the sister of Abraham (v. 5). Third, it is emphasized that Abimelech does not touch Sarah (v. 6c). Fourth, Abraham justifies himself, giving as his motive theological reasons ("There is no fear of God at all in this place," v. 11b). Fifth, Sarah is indeed Abraham's sister because they have the same father, but a

different mother (vv. 12, 16). Finally, Abimelech takes care to honor Abraham, to restore Sarah to him, and to vindicate her publicly. Abraham in turn prays for Abimelech and his house, and the wrath of Yahweh is taken from them. The Elohist's story thus glorifies Abraham and exonerates King Abimelech. Sarah comes into view solely as Abraham's compliant wife who remained untouched by another man because of Yahweh's intervention on behalf of her husband's rights. The story clearly exhibits patriarchal values and pictures its characters from an androcentric point of view.

In prophetic times, the patriarchal marriage relationship becomes theologized insofar as it becomes a model for the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. This theological model not only divinely authorizes the superiority of the husband but also theologically sanctions the inferior role of women in the patriarchal marriage relationship. Further, the image of the marriage between Yahweh and Israel eliminates female imagery and symbolism from the divine realm insofar as Yahweh has no divine female consort but only a human bride to love and to serve him.⁹ The oracle of salvation in Hos. 2:19 does not project divine equality between Yahweh and Israel for the future, but solely announces that "Israel will not just respect Yahweh somewhat reluctantly, since he is its legal lord, but it knows itself to be placed into a completely new, loving relationship with him."¹⁰

The prophets, moreover, often use the image of Israel or Jerusalem as a woman or wife in a negative way in order to censure Israel for its apostasy to the cults and mythologies of Canaan. Through the marriage metaphor, Israel's apostasy and idolatry become identified with the adultery, fornication, and whoredom of women. This theological language and imagery associates women not only with sexual misconduct but also with unfaithfulness and idolatry.

Plead with your mother, plead— for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband— that she put away her harlotry from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born. (Hos. 2:2-3)

The theological image of Yahweh as the loving husband and Israel as the unfaithful wife has in the history of theology perpetuated the subordinate role of women and associated them with whoredom and adultery as well as with apostasy and idolatry.

ANDROCENTRIC INTERPRETATION

The Yahwistic creation story—Genesis 2 and 3—is an example used throughout Christian history by theologians and preachers both to teach that woman is according to God's intention derivative from man and to characterize her as

the temptress of man and the one through whom sin came into the world.¹¹ More recent feminist studies, however, have convincingly shown that, far from being “sexist,” the Genesis story maintains the coequality of woman and man, although Gen. 2:18 clearly indicates that the story is told from the male point of view since *'ādām* (Genesis 2) not only is a generic term but also communicates that the first individual human being was male.¹²

The narrative follows an ancient pattern of creation myths in which the gods at first attempt a trial creation before they accomplish the perfect creation.¹³ The creation of the animals follows this trial-creation pattern insofar as the animals are not coequal beings with *'ādām*. Only the woman who is taken from *'ādām* is coequal with him and the perfect creation. The linguistic consonance of the terms “man” (*'īsh*) and “woman” (*'ishsha*) underlines this coequality. The statement of the narrator in Gen. 2:24 summarizes the intention of the creation story (Gen. 2:4b-24). It explains that man leaves his parents in order to become one flesh with a woman. This summarizing statement of the Yahwist interestingly enough does not presuppose the patriarchal family model, according to which the woman leaves her family to become part of the male clan, but states exactly the opposite.

As Genesis 2:4b-24 attempts to explain the coequality and unity of man and woman in marriage, so Genesis 3 attempts to come to terms with Israel's experience of the oppressive human reality in which man and woman find themselves. Along with ch. 2, the narrative in ch. 3 forms a unit that is not prescriptive but is a story that tries to make sense out of man's and woman's present existence. It explains why woman lives now under patriarchy and suffers from childbearing, and why man has to toil and wrestle his livelihood from the earth from which he is taken. Whereas before the Fall the husband left his family to become one flesh with his wife, now the woman is tied into a relationship of domination by her desire for her husband. In consequence of this desire, her childbearing increases and, moreover, causes her great pain and suffering. The penalties in 3:14-19 reflect the culturally conditioned situation of man and woman in a nomadic and agricultural society. Man's domination of woman is a consequence of sin and transgression. Yahweh did not intend this patriarchal domination of woman, but had created her as coequal to man.

The Priestly writer (P) grasped this point of the Yahwistic creation account when he summarized God's intention in the creation of humans:

God created humankind (*'ādām*) in his own image . . . ; male (*zākār*) and female (*n^eqēbā*) he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

Far from being the androcentric or sexist story as it is often misunderstood, the Yahwistic creation account implies a criticism of the patriarchal relationship between man and woman. The domination of the wife by the husband is interpreted as a consequence of sin.

ANDROCENTRIC TRADITIONING

If we wish to understand biblical texts, we have not only to ask whether a tradition of androcentric interpretation has veiled their original intention but also to question whether the original narrator or author in an androcentric way has told history that was not androcentric at all. A good example of such a male-centered tradition process is, in my opinion, provided by the scattered references to the prophet Miriam. Exegetes generally agree that Miriam originally was an independent leader in Israel and was made a sister of Aaron and Moses only in the later traditions of the Old Testament (see Num. 26:59 [P]). According to Exod. 15:20 (J), Miriam was a prophet who proclaimed the triumph of Yahweh over the Egyptian Pharaoh. Her song is the oldest extant praise of Yahweh in the Old Testament. The prophetic tradition knows Miriam as a leader of Israel during the exodus, coequal with Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4). Numbers 20:1 mentions Kadesh as her burial place.

Numbers 12 (JE) represents one of the oldest and most interesting traditions related to Miriam. The text does not yet know that Miriam, Aaron, and Moses are siblings. The story begins with the rebellion of Miriam and Aaron against the superiority and authority of Moses. They not only reproach Moses for having married a non-Israelite wife, but they also maintain that Yahweh has not revealed things solely through Moses: "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" With these words, Miriam and Aaron claim to be equal with Moses as recipients and mediators of divine revelation. The rest of the story is told in order to reject this claim of Miriam and Aaron.

The narrative not only betrays a bias for Moses but also repudiates Miriam much more severely than Aaron. Whereas the text mentions Miriam first, as leader of the rebellion, the answer of Yahweh addresses first Aaron and then Miriam (v. 5). Yahweh stresses that Moses is the authentic revelation bearer to whom God speaks "mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech" (v. 8). Although the speech of Yahweh is described as first addressing Aaron and Miriam, the Lord punishes Miriam but not Aaron.

The punishment of the rebellious woman is the main theme of this androcentric text. The narrative stresses her dependence on the goodwill of Aaron and Moses. When she is afflicted with leprosy (see also Deut. 24:9), Aaron begs Moses to intercede and Moses prays for her to God. Yet Yahweh behaves like a stern patriarch. Miriam is punished in the same way as if she were a girl whose "father had but spit in her face." Therefore, she is "shamed seven days" (v. 14). The story clearly establishes Moses' superiority and accords Miriam the same relationship to Yahweh as a girl had in a patriarchal family. The narrative, however, presupposes the knowledge that Miriam competed with Moses for the prophetic leadership of Israel and argues against such an aspiration by a woman.

In dealing with this story of an “uppity woman,” modern male commentators are helpless. They speculate about jealousy between siblings¹⁴ or the displeasure of the “prima donna” of the women’s choir¹⁵ over God’s preference for Moses. Even such a scholar as Martin Noth¹⁶ attempts to explain away Miriam’s exceptional role by asserting that as the only female figure around Moses she led the case against the Cushite women, but in claiming equal prophetic status with Moses she was only following Aaron. According to Noth, the point of the story is the mild punishment of Miriam, who actually should have been afflicted with permanent leprosy for revolting against the great servant of Yahweh.

Just like the first recorder, so modern commentators on the story cannot conceive of Miriam as an independent leader in Israel, but only as the jealous and rebellious sister of Moses with whom Yahweh deals as a patriarchal father would handle his uppity daughter. The story of Miriam’s rebellion in its present form functions to repudiate Miriam’s leadership claim and to extol Moses’ superiority. A careful reading of the story, however, detects elements of a tradition that knew that Miriam was a leading figure in Israel’s past.

With these few examples I have attempted to show that a feminist reading of various Old Testament texts uncovers their patriarchal and androcentric character. Yet such an interpretation can also liberate biblical texts from an androcentric bias and misunderstanding by demonstrating that certain narratives, which are often misunderstood by an androcentric interpretation, indirectly protest against their patriarchal cultural values (see Genesis 2 and 3), or that they reflect a stage in the tradition that was relatively free from such a bias (see Genesis 12). Such a feminist reading might furthermore be able to recover traces of the lost “her-story” of great women in the Old Testament.

ANDROCENTRIC TRADITIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is quite remarkable that the canonical literature of the New Testament does not transmit a single sexist story of Jesus,¹⁷ although he lived and preached in a patriarchal culture and society.¹⁸ Studies of the sociocultural conditions of the early Christian movement have shown that it was a socially and religiously deviant group similar to other sectarian Jewish groups of the first century. In distinction to the sect of Qumran, for instance, the Jesus movement was not an exclusive group but was rather inclusive. Jesus did not call into his discipleship righteous, pious, and highly esteemed persons but invited tax collectors, sinners, and women to be his followers and friends. He rejected the primacy of the cultic purity laws and therefore could include in his community of disciples the outlaws and nonpersons of the Jewish religion and society.¹⁹ In the fellowship of Jesus, women apparently did not play a marginal role,

even though only a few references to women disciples have survived the androcentric tradition and redaction process of the gospels.

Women accompanied Jesus as disciples in his ministry in Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem (Mark 15:40 and parallels) and witnessed his execution as a criminal [by the Romans] on the cross. They were not afraid to be known as his followers. Moreover, women were, according to all criteria of historical authenticity, the first witnesses of the resurrection, for this fact could not have been derived from contemporary Judaism²⁰ or invented by the primitive church. That the tradition did not leave these women disciples anonymous, but identified them by name, suggests that they played an important role in the Christian group in Palestine. Their most outstanding leader appears to have been Mary Magdalene,²¹ since all four Gospels transmit her name, whereas the names of the other women vary. Thus, according to the Gospel traditions, women were the primary apostolic witnesses for the fundamental data of the early Christian message: they were the witnesses of Jesus' ministry, his death, his burial, and his resurrection.

A closer examination of the Gospel accounts, however, discloses the androcentric tendency to play down the women's roles as witnesses and apostles of the Easter event. This trend is apparent in Mark's Gospel, which stresses that the women "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). It is also evident in Luke's comment that the words of the women seemed to the Eleven and those with them "an idle tale, and they did not believe them," but instead went to see for themselves (Luke 24:11). In Acts 1:21, Luke excludes the apostleship of women when he stresses that only a man was eligible to replace Judas. This androcentric bias is also reflected in the Lukan confessional statement: "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24:34).

This Lukan androcentric confessional formula corresponds to that of the pre-Pauline creedal tradition quoted in 1 Cor. 15:3, which mentions Cephas and the Eleven as the principal witnesses of the resurrection, but does not refer to the witness of the women.²² The androcentric proclivity to play down the first witness of the resurrection by women is also apparent in the editing of the Fourth Gospel, which takes pains to ensure that the beloved disciple, not Mary Magdalene, was the first believer in the resurrection (John 20:1-18). Most contemporary commentators show the same androcentric inclination to suppress the significance of the women as primary witnesses to the resurrection when they stress that their witness had only a preliminary function, since according to Jewish law women were not competent to witness.

Patriarchalization of the Early Church. Scholars generally agree that Jesus did not leave his followers a blueprint for the organization and structuring of the Christian church. In Paul's time, leadership roles were still diversified and based on charismatic authority. The process of solidification and institutionalization set in only gradually during the last part of the first century. The

pastoral epistles provide evidence that the Christian community and its offices were perceived and patterned after the patriarchal family structures of the time. Church authority was vested in elders, deacons, and bishops. Criteria for their election from the male members of the community were that they must be husbands of one wife and must have demonstrated their ability to rule the community by the proper ordering of their households and the successful upbringing of their children (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

From a sociological perspective, the gradual institutionalization and adaptation of the Christian movement to the patriarchal societal structures of the time was unavoidable if the Christian community was to expand and to survive. At the same time, this structural solidification meant a patriarchalization of the Christian leadership functions that gradually eliminated women from roles of leadership and relegated them to subordinate feminine roles. The more Christianity became a genuine part of the patriarchal Jewish or Greco-Roman society and culture, the more it had to relegate women's leadership to fringe groups or to limit it to women's functions. In gnostic as well as catholic groups, "maleness" became the standard for being a full Christian. The recently discovered Coptic Gospel of Thomas states:

Simon Peter said to them [the disciples]: Let Mary [Magdalene] go away from us, for women are not worthy of life. Jesus said: Lo, I shall lead her so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven. (Log. 114)

The androcentric emphasis of the Pauline tradition stresses the subordination of women on theological grounds and reflects the reactionary patriarchal evolution of the Christian community. Whether or not Paul himself initiated this patriarchal reaction is discussed by scholars.²³ Certainly, however, the theological justification of the patriarchalization of the Christian community expressed in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 14:33b-36 was able to claim the authority of Paul without being challenged.

In the context of his discussion of Christian enthusiasts Paul addresses, in his first letter to the Corinthians, the question of women's behavior in the Christian congregation. In both cases when Paul speaks about women he is concerned not with women's rights or the role of women in the church in general but with their concrete behavior in the Christian worship assembly in Corinth. In 1 Cor. 11:2-16, Paul does not deny that women can prophesy; he only demands that they should be appropriately dressed. In this debate, Paul adduces different arguments that he derived from nature, custom, and Scripture.

According to Paul, the order of creation is hierarchical: God-Christ-Man-Woman (v. 3). The Corinthian women still live in this order of creation and

they ought to behave accordingly (vs. 4-6). Verse 7 theologically justifies the inferiority and dependence of woman: Man is the image and glory of God, whereas woman is only the glory of man, a prolongation and manifestation of his authority and power. With his reference to Gen. 2:18-23 in vs. 8-9, Paul demonstrates that man is prior to woman in the order of creation, and in v. 10 he adduces a further theological argument, namely, the presence of the angels in the worship assembly. Verses 11-12 assert that Paul does not wish to negate the reciprocity of man and woman in Christ. Yet, at stake in the Corinthian discussion is not the theological coequality of Christian women and men but the propriety of women's conduct (vs. 13-15). In his last sentence, Paul points to the universal practice of the churches and to his own apostolic authority. It is clear that for him the issue is one of contentiousness and party spirit (v. 16).

Similarly, the passage 1 Cor. 14:33b-36, which is widely held to be a post-Pauline interpolation, addresses the question of order and competition within the community (see v. 40). For the sake of order, 1 Cor. 14:33b-36 explicitly forbids women to speak in the assembly and directs them to their husbands for religious instruction. The main argument here is decency: "For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

The so-called household code texts of the later Pauline literature uphold the patriarchal family order of the time and therefore demand the subordination of the wife to the husband. Their rules of conduct for women, children, and slaves are not specifically Christian, but are a part of the Jewish and Greco-Roman culture of the time.²⁴ These culturally conditioned injunctions are, however, theologized or, better, Christologized in Ephesians, so that the model after which the Christian patriarchal marriage ought to be patterned is the relationship between Christ and the church.

It is true that the husbands are admonished to imitate Christ's love for the church in their love of their wives. Nevertheless, the author does not demand equal love and subordination of husband and wife, but decidedly preserves the patriarchal order in a Christian context. Just as Christ loves the church, which is clearly subordinated to him, so a husband should love his wife, who is required to be subordinated to him in everything (Eph. 5:24) and to pay him his due respect (Eph. 5:33). The subordination of the wife to the husband is, as in 1 Corinthians 11, justified with the theological rationale that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 5:23).

The household code of 1 Peter 3:1-7 may be considered an extension of Pauline patriarchal emphasis, inasmuch as the first letter of Peter is widely considered to represent Pauline theology and tradition. The author points to the example of the holy women of the Old Testament, especially of Sarah, in order to justify his stance that women best practice their Christian mission in submitting to the societal patriarchal order. In doing so, they might win over their husbands to Christianity without saying a word. The recommendation

to the husbands in turn asks that they live considerately with their wives and bestow honor unto them.

The author stresses that husband and wife are “joint heirs of the grace of life,” but considers woman to be the “weaker vessel” (KJV). As elsewhere in the New Testament, here again the term “weak” refers to physical, moral, or spiritual and intellectual inferiority. The expression “vessel” derogatorily describes woman as an object. Since this mode of characterizing woman is based on Jewish as well as Hellenistic sentiment, the author maintains the natural weakness of woman in accordance with the androcentric definitions of his time.

First Timothy 2:9-15 combines both the household code tradition and the silence in church tradition of the Pauline androcentric emphasis. Concerned with the proper behavior at worship, the author demands that men lift up their hands when they pray and that women not wear braided hair, jewelry, and expensive dress. They are, moreover, to be quiet and to learn with all submissiveness. They may on no account presume to teach or to have authority over men (v. 12). The author theologically justifies his androcentric injunctions with a reference to Genesis 2 and 3: Eve is not only second in the order of creation but she is also first in the order of sin. Woman’s task is childbearing, and her salvation is dependent on this task (v. 15). Christian women were to conduct themselves according to contemporary patriarchal role definitions.

The author appears to formulate his patriarchal theology and ethics in order to counter the influence of a rival Christian group. This group seems to have had great success among women (2 Tim. 3:6), probably because it accorded women teaching and leadership functions and did not limit them to their societal patriarchal roles. In opposition to this Christian theological understanding of women’s role, the author stresses that women are not to behave in an unusual way by wanting to teach or to have authority in the community. They are rather to be silent (stressed twice!), submissive, and modest.

ANDROCENTRIC TRADITIONING

At the end of the first century, a Christian prophet, who was the head of a prophetic group or school, exercised great leadership in the community of Thyatira (Rev. 2:19-23). The authority of this prophet must have been well established in the community, since the author of the book of Revelation criticizes the congregation for not having actively opposed her, and her influence must have been far-reaching and threatening to him. In labeling her “Jezebel” he insinuates that, like the Old Testament queen, the prophet promoted idolatry and achieved her goals through seductive power and malevolent scheming.

The author characterizes her activity with language gleaned from the imagery and language of the Old Testament prophets, describing the lapses of Israel into idolatry and apostasy as adultery, whoredom, and gross immorality. Despite this attack by the author of Revelation, the text still communicates that the prophet was not the head of an already heretic group, since she still exercised her leadership within the community of Thyatira.²⁵ Her impact must have been lasting, because Thyatira became in the second century a center of the Montanist movement in which female prophets were prominent (Epiphanius, *Heresies* 51.3).

Although we no longer know the real name of the prophet of Thyatira, the text of Revelation furnishes us with an example showing that even at the end of the first century women exercised prophetic leadership in the Christian community. In addition, this text provides a paradigm of how patriarchal and androcentric theologizing and polemics distorted the contribution of women in the early church. A feminist history of the first centuries of the Christian church could uncover the struggle between those women who were inspired by the Christian vision expressed in Gal. 3:28 and the androcentric leadership of the church that attempted to force Christian women back into their limited cultural, patriarchal roles.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERPRETING ANDROCENTRIC TEXTS OF THE BIBLE

The methods for the interpretation of historical texts, as well as those of feminist studies, enable us to approach the androcentric passages of the Bible with the following insights and guidelines:

1. Historical texts have to be understood and evaluated in their historical setting, language, and form. Since the biblical texts have their origin in a patriarchal culture, they reflect the androcentric situations, conditions, and values of this patriarchal culture. They appear to be, therefore, an excellent tool for the consciousness-raising of women and men in preaching and teaching.

2. Since biblical texts are rooted in a patriarchal culture and recorded from an androcentric point of view, a careful analysis from a feminist perspective might unearth traces of a genuine “her-story” of women in the Bible. It is very important that teachers and preachers point out these instances of a genuine “her-story” again and again, so that women in the church become conscious of their own “her-story” in the biblical patriarchal history.

3. Since biblical androcentric texts are recorded and told from a patriarchal point of view, it will be helpful to retell the androcentric biblical stories from the woman’s point of view. As the Elohist retold the story of Abraham and Sarah from Abraham’s point of view, so we should attempt to retell it from Sarah’s perspective. An example of the retelling of Genesis 2 and 3 is Judith

Plaskow's "The Coming of Lilith."⁶ Such a retelling of biblical stories is not a feminist invention. Throughout the centuries we have examples of parallel elaborations such as the apocryphal infancy stories or our Christmas legends.

4. Biblical texts are not only recorded but also translated and interpreted from an androcentric perspective since most exegetes are not aware of a feminist perspective. We have therefore to be cautious in adopting standard scholarly translations and interpretations of texts and to screen such interpretations for their androcentric or sexist presuppositions or prejudice.

5. Biblical revelation and truth about women are found, I would suggest, in those texts that transcend and criticize their patriarchal culture and religion. Such texts should be used to evaluate and to judge the patriarchal texts of the Bible. A biblical interpretation that is concerned with the *meaning* of the Bible in a post-patriarchal culture has to maintain that solely the nonsexist traditions of the Bible present divine revelation if the Bible should not become a tool for the oppression of women. Such an interpretation does not suggest a "modernizing" of ancient texts,⁷ but is a necessary corrective if we do not want to give the impression that we worship a sexist God and thus an idol who is made in the image of males.

NOTES

¹For a more thorough discussion, see my article "Feminist The*logy as a Critical The*logy of Liberation," *Theological Studies*, 36, no. 4 (1975): 611, and the excellent article by J. Lambert, "Un-Fettering the Word: A Call for Coarcial Interpretation of the Bible," *Covenant Quarterly* (May 1974): 3-26.

²The feminist use of "his story" or "her story" is *not* an etymological explanation but a wordplay to point out the male bias of all history and historiography. To quote Henry Adams: "The study of history is useful to the historian by teaching him his ignorance of women; and the mass of this ignorance causes one who is familiar enough with what is called historical sources to realize how few women have ever been known. The woman who is only known through a man is known wrong." See Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History* (Macmillan, 1971), 219.

³Today, I would write "Hebrew Bible."

⁴In writing this section, I found extremely helpful Phyllis Bird's article "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism*, 41-88.

⁵Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (McGraw-Hill, 1961), 40. Here I unwittingly reproduce the Christian prejudice that Hebrew society was more patriarchal than its surrounding cultures. This was written before the feminist anti-Judaism discussion that underscored that such malestream Christian prejudices were unwittingly also reproduced by Christian feminists.

⁶Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., OTL (Westminster, 1973), 215-22. Von Rad pleads that the text "must not be judged simply by our Western ideas" (218).

⁷Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Das Buch der Richter* (ATD), 9, no. 19: 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1965), 254-56, points out that the final redactional remark in Judg. 21:25 attributes the events to the fact that Israel had no king at the time. But Hertzberg argues that the actions against the women were justified because the survival of an Israelite tribe was endangered.

⁸See L. Blagg Harter, "The Theme of the Barren Woman in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Concern* (Nov. 1971): 20-24, (Dec. 1971): 18-23.

⁹See “Images of Women in the Bible,” *Women’s Caucus Religious Studies Newsletter*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1974): 1–6; J. C. Williams, “Yahweh, Women, and the Trinity,” *Theology Today*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Oct. 1975): 234–42; and the unpublished paper of Phyllis Bird, “Masculinity and Monotheism: An Inquiry into the Limitation of the Feminine in Old Testament Representation of the Deity with Attention to Its Sources and Consequences,” delivered at the Southwest Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, March 1975.

¹⁰Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974), 14, 24.

¹¹This tendency is still found in the most recent scholarly Old Testament lexicon, where the Fall is attributed to the fact that the first woman distanced herself from her husband and acted without him (Gen. 3:1–6). See G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), col. 244 (N. Bratsiotis).

¹²See Phyllis Bird, “Images of Women in the Old Testament,” in Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism*, 87, who contests the argument that ‘adam is understood as an androgynous being. See Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalization in Biblical Interpretation,” *JAAR* 41 (1973), 35.

¹³Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament (Neukirchen: Vluyn, 1970), 245.

¹⁴Herbert Lockyer, *The Women of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1967), 113.

¹⁵Michael Cardinal von Faulhaber, *Women of the Bible*, ed. Brendan Keogh (Newmans, 1955), 50.

¹⁶Martin Noth, *Das vierte Buch Mose: Numeri*, ATD 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966), 84.

¹⁷For a more detailed argumentation, see my article “The Role of Women in the Early Christian Movement,” *Concilium* 7 (1976).

¹⁸Leonard Swidler, “Is Sexism a Sign of Decadence in Religion?” in Judith Plaskow and Joan A. Romero, eds., *Women and Religion*, rev. ed. (Scholars, 1974), 170.

¹⁹I would replace the distancing “the” with “his” Jewish society and religion.

²⁰Again, this rule of New Testament Historical Jesus research is dubious in light of the anti-Judaism discussion in the intervening years.

²¹See my book *Der vergessene Partner, Grundlagen, Tatsachen und Möglichkeiten der Mitarbeit der Frau in der Kirche* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1964), 57–59, 125–27.

²²In my sermon “Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles,” *UTS Journal*, April 1975, 22, I pointed out that, according to the Pauline and Lukan criteria of apostleship, Mary Magdalene and the other women were apostles, since they accompanied Jesus and had seen the resurrected Lord. R. E. Brown accepts this suggestion but then plays down this insight: “The priority given to Peter in Paul and in Luke is a priority among those who became official [italics mine] witnesses to the Resurrection. The secondary place given to the tradition of an appearance to a woman or women probably reflects the fact that women did not serve at first as official preachers of the church—a fact that would make the creation of an appearance to a woman unlikely.” See Brown’s article “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies* 36, no. 4 (1975): 692n12. I do not understand what the qualification “official” means in a situation where church offices were in the stage of development and when we know that women had leading roles as prophets, apostles, and missionaries in the early Christian communities. It is problematic to project later church institutional forms back into the early church.

²³Scroggs, “Paul and the Eschatological Woman,” 5–17; W. A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne,” *History of Religion* 13 (1974): 165–208; W. Munro, “Patriarchy and Charismatic Community,” in Plaskow and Romero, eds., *Women and Religion*, 189–98; W. O. Walker, “1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and Paul’s View Regarding Woman,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975): 94–110.

²⁴J. E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972). John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 163–92, however, argues that the concept of subordination is a specific Christian concept. See his argument against Krister Stendahl’s position, *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics* (Fortress Press, 1966): “What if, for instance, the sweeping, doctrinaire egalitarianism of our culture, which makes the concept of the ‘place of woman’ seem laughable or boorish and makes

that of 'subordination' seem insulting, should turn out really (in the 'intent of God' or in long-run social experience) to be demonic, uncharitable, destructive of personality, disrespectful of creation, and unworkable?" (177n22).

²⁵For the wider context, see my article "Apocalyptic and Gnosis in the Book of Revelation and Paul," *JBL* 92 (1973): 565–81.

²⁶Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith," in Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism*, 341–43.

²⁷See Katherine D. Sackefeld, "The Bible and Women: Bane or Blessing?" *Theology Today* 32, no. 3 (October 1975): 228. Sackefeld speaks about the danger of searching for "timeless truth" that "seems to transcend the normally expected cultural biases of the author" because new biases about what is "timeless" are often introduced. Although revelation occurs within the human sphere and it is not possible to make absolute identification of such "truths," it is possible to look for points at which the liberating Word of God seems to have broken through cultural patterns on behalf of the oppressed.