

EVE WAS FRAMED AND OTHER INTERPRETATIONS FROM THE EXEGETICAL VANGUARD

Deborah Kahn-Harris

On 21 January 2017 I went to central London with my then ten year old daughter, Ella, to join approximately five million women worldwide for the Women’s March. When I asked Ella a week or so before the march if she wanted to go, she replied with an enthusiastic ‘yes’ and asked if she could make a banner to carry at the march. ‘Of course,’ I said and left her to it. The day before the march Ella came out of her room, proudly displaying her banner to me. It read ‘Eve was framed’ and was decorated with a magnifying glass over the ‘f’ of ‘framed’ with an apple embedded it.

I want to assure you that I had nothing to do with the creation, design, or sourcing of the slogan. She had used the internet to find ideas and asked for a white poster board. I was simply the provider of Wi-Fi access and money for the art shop. ‘Why,’ I asked her, ‘did you choose that slogan?’ I cannot remember the exact words of her answer, but effectively she said ‘it’s subversive and it resonates with me’. At the age of ten my daughter already understood the power of biblical stories and the potential impact they have on the lives of real people. I really could not have been prouder (or more astounded).

‘Eve was framed’ was not a new slogan invented for the 2017 Women’s March. It dates back at least as far as 1981, when badges with this slogan were advertised in *Spare Rib*, the groundbreaking British Women’s Liberation Movement magazine founded in 1972. Of course, the name of the magazine is not accidental either. Spare rib is itself a reference to the story of Eve’s creation out of Adam’s rib, a debatable translation of the word **צלע** (מצלעותיו) in Genesis 2:21. Marsha Rowe, who alongside Rosie Boycott founded *Spare Rib*, recalls that this allusion to the biblical story was an opportunity both to subvert the traditional interpretations by foregrounding the centrality of the female, as well as to foregrounding the creation of something new just as Eve herself had been a new creation.¹

Perhaps something more than serendipity is at play here in noting that the emergence of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s shares the same cultural space as the birth of this conference fifty years ago. Fifty years ago the space race was still on, access to reliable contraception was redefining the nature of (at least) heterosexual relationships, race relations both in the UK and USA were poised between entrenched racism (e.g. Enoch Powell’s infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech) and Martin Luther King’s dream (e.g. the Civil Rights Act of 1968 signed in the wake of Dr King’s assassination), West and East were embroiled in proxy wars in South-East Asia, and colonialism as it had been known for at least three centuries appeared to be in its dying days.

¹ Morse, pg. 75.

These historical situations alongside major world events such as the Prague Spring and the Student and General Workers Strike in France created a heady mixture of possibility and protest. I am struck by the notion that Bible Week has been both – a beacon of possibility, a model of how across the religious divide we might learn to speak to each other, and a protest against the horrors that happen when we do not.

As someone who has only just turned fifty myself, I speak against this backdrop not merely as a historical footnote, but more importantly to situate myself as a middle class, American/British, Jewish woman with a PhD and rabbinic ordination, whose own life journey has been informed, shaped, and impacted profoundly by this social history. I cannot speak of the text of the Hebrew Bible, particularly within the context of developments over the past fifty years, without positioning myself in this way for part of my own academic journey – and the story that I am about to share with you – has been to begin to understand the ways in which each of our own social locations shape our readings. That has been, in my view, one of the greatest insights of feminist hermeneutics and shared with earth-centred, queer, post-colonial, and indigenous readers of the text. Without acknowledging who we are, we can never truly have the I-Thou relationships we seek, whether with each other, our God, or our sacred Scriptures.

As for the beginning chapters of **בראשית**, the book of Genesis, first a bit of polemics – already in naming the topic for this lecture I find myself faced with a dilemma. How shall I refer to this text, in Hebrew, in English, in German? How should I denote what bit of the text? According to the Christian chapter and verse division, according to the Jewish division into weekly readings? These questions are central to the contemporary debates around the shared ownership of this text and essential to how we will read these first stories. In an age of personal politics, asserting the nature of the text I am reading is core. If I refer to Genesis 1 – 2:4a as the first creation story, I am already situating myself within a certain framework – one that asserts that only a standard Christian versification is mutually comprehensible and therefore privileged as the primary way of referencing the text. Additionally if I were to delineate particular stories in this way and attempt to pull apart Gen 2:4 into an ‘a’ and ‘b’ section, I am place myself in a 19th century academic framework, which not only foregrounds the historical-critical model, particularly source theory, but also seeks to categorise and dissect the text for the purposes of correct interpretation – what is the genre of the story told, who is the author or authorial school, what are the ancient near eastern reference points, etc. Even if I think that this model does not always hold the best keys for approaching the text, in the world of academic biblical studies the historical-critical model still holds much sway. So just the simple matter of just trying to tell you what part of the text I am going to discuss is already a salient example of the ways in which the debates in biblical studies have shifted in the past fifty years.

For the purposes of this lecture, however, I will focus on insights brought by feminist exegetes, with whom I share a part of my personal identity, as well as a commentaries by earth-centred, queer, post-colonial and indigenous exegetes whose voices and views I have tried to be open to, whilst acknowledging that most of them come from a social location that is not my own. By necessity this lecture will be little more than a whistle stop tour with one or two examples at most of each of these types of interpretations. The literature on Genesis 1 – 3 over the past fifty years is vast and even merely to give you a bibliography would likely exceed my word limit, so I will focus largely on Genesis 1:26-28. To do otherwise would take several lectures easily.

Creation

And God stepped out in space
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely –
I think I'll make me a world.

from "The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson in *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, 1927²

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ:

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' or 'When God began to create the heavens and the earth'. But why? Why did God choose the act of creation? The poet, James Weldon Johnson imagines an answer to this implied question in his 1927 poem "The Creation" from his collection *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Like God's diagnosis for Adam in Genesis 2:18, God, too, is lonely. God needs the world. In Weldon's poem, the climax of the story is on the creation of human beings. After creating the sun and the stars, the rivers and the seas, the flora and the fauna, God says: 'I'm still lonely'.³ Thus, according to Johnson, God contrives to create humanity. Johnson describes this act imagined from his own particular social location, describing 'This Great God / Like a mammy bending over her baby / Toiling over a lump of clay / Till he shaped it in his own image'.⁴ And in that last phrase is the full power of the creation of human beings – the notion that all of us, irrespective of skin colour or gender or any of the manifold superficialities that appear to divide us, are a true reflection of the **צלם אלהים**, the divine image.

I mention Johnson's poem in particular, because though I was asked to reflect on the past fifty years of exegesis, we would be foolish to think that we, or even the previous generation, are the first to realise the full implications of many of our biblical texts, in this case Genesis 1:26-27 in particular. For example, *The Women's Bible* published in 1895 and the work of a collective of first wave feminists, begins with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's commentary on exactly these verses. She writes,

If language has any meaning, we have in these verses a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. ... Thus Scripture, as well as science and philosophy, declares the eternity and equality of sex ... In the great work of creation the crowning glory was realized, when man and woman were evolved on the sixth day, the masculine and the feminine forces in the image of God, that must have existed eternally, in all forms of matter and mind ... As to woman's subjection ... it is important to note that equal dominion is given to woman over every living thing, but not one word is said giving man dominion over woman.⁵

Cady Stanton herself stood on the shoulders of numerous women who came before her, many of whom had railed against the traditional, particularly Christian, interpretations of the creation of women as somehow inferior to men. Interpreting the creation of Eve in Genesis 2, sometimes in relation to the creation of human beings in Genesis 1, sometimes employing other means of reassessing the creation of Eve, the existence and writings of women like Christine de Pisan in 1405, Ester Sowernam and Rachel Speght in 1617, and Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, demonstrate clearly that women's history does not begin in the latter half of the 20th century. In biblical studies, no less than in so many other academic disciplines, the recovery of women's history and especially their writings from our collective cultural amnesia has been one of the most essential contributions of the contemporary feminist scholar.

Perhaps nowhere is that memory loss more poignant than in early second wave feminism. Take, for example, Phyllis Trible's 1978 foundational work of feminist theology, *God and the Rhetoric of*

² <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/johnson/johnson.html> (accessed 10/04/18)

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Stanton, pp. 14-15.

Sexuality. In the first chapter of this work, Tribble employs a close reading of Genesis 1:27 as ‘the topical clue’ for discussing God and the rhetoric of sexuality.⁶ From her reading of this verse, she makes a number of arguments, summing up eventually she writes, ‘To describe male and female, then, is to perceive the image of God ...’⁷ Even as late as 1993, in Helen Schüngel-Straumann’s “Creation of Man and Woman”, she observes regarding Genesis 1:27 that ‘First, human rule over other humans is excluded; secondly, humans are qualified clearly as male and female. So this statement *explicitly* excludes men’s rule over women! Oddly, enough this has not been noticed before.’⁸ That both of these important second wave feminist scholars arrive at these interpretations without reference to Cady Stanton, and ostensibly in ignorance of her, says something profound about the historical rupture that two world wars and their aftermath created in the history of women’s thought.⁹

But, of course, much of second wave feminist thought is original – for example, Mary Phil Korsak’s translation of אדם to ‘groundling’ foregrounds the relationship between אדם and אדמה and offers a brilliant English language solution to a word play that is so clear in Hebrew.¹⁰ My point, in any case, is not merely that the rediscovery of first wave feminism has been a major part of second wave feminism, but rather that every generation must discover the text of the Hebrew Bible new for themselves, making the text relevant for their own lives. To that end I would like to demonstrate how some of the most relevant issues of our times are explored by contemporary exegetes of Genesis.

Environmentalism

Of all of the crises that face us collectively at the moment, global climate change – a direct result of human behaviour towards earth – is perhaps the most urgent. Genesis 1:28, in particular, holds a crucial role in the Jewish and Christian understandings of our responsibility towards our planet. The injunction both to ‘rule over’ (רדה) and ‘subdue’/ ‘subjugate’ (כבש) has been understood variously, ranging from a responsibility to steward the earth to the right to exploit nature for the benefit of humans alone. While the criticism of the so-called ‘Judeo-Christian’ position towards the earth began in earnest with the publication of Lynn White’s article for the journal *Science* in 1967 and the critique of his article has raged for most of the past five decades since, the truly groundbreaking (pun intended) work lies in exegetes such as Norman Habel and his co-creators of the Earth Bible Project based in Australia.

Published in 2000 *The Earth Story in Genesis* is the second in a five volume set which focuses on reading from the perspective of the Earth. Each volume is underpinned by the six ecojustice principles which guide the project.¹¹ Approximately a third of the articles in the Genesis volume are devoted to issues arising from Genesis 1 – 3. Habel’s own article, “Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1” represents a remarkable upending of the standard anthropocentric stance from which we all too often interpret the biblical text. Habel reads Genesis 1 as ‘an origin story in which the Earth and *Elohim* are both major characters with roles to play.’¹² From the outset Habel treats the Earth as having intrinsic value and uncovers a coherent story with the Earth at the centre, which is interrupted by and at odds with the secondary story of the creation of human beings. According

⁶ Tribble, pg. 12.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 21.

⁸ Schüngel-Straumann, pp. 74-5. Emphasis original.

⁹ We need only think of the forgotten and rediscovered history of Rabbi Regina Jonas to see another example of this rupture occurring.

¹⁰ Korsak, pg. 40.

¹¹ The full list can be viewed here: <http://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/ebprinciples.html>

¹² Habel, pg. 34.

to Habel the beginning of the Genesis 1 describes a world that is hidden by both water and darkness, but on the third day of creation God reveals the Earth. Habel deliberately uses the word reveal, thus coining the term 'geophany'.¹³ With the creation of flora and fauna he writes that '[l]ife from Earth is the living value of Earth.'¹⁴

Only the creation of human beings disrupts this otherwise Earth-centred story. As the story sets up a tension between the Earth as the locus for life and human beings as the hierarchical rulers of the Earth, we, as human centred readers, have failed to see the intrinsic value of the Earth or honour the Earth as would be fully just. 'We have negated the Earth by giving the human story primacy.'¹⁵ Our task now must be to find ways to retrieve the Earth story in Genesis and redeem the Earth in the face of the current environmental crisis in which we find ourselves.¹⁶

Queer readings

If global climate change remains a crisis still without a transformative answer for our world, perhaps no cause has achieved as much in Western, developed democracies in the past fifty years as LGBTQi rights. While queer readings of the Hebrew Bible, like second wave feminism, date back to the 1970s, the past twenty has seen a flourishing and deepening of queer reading as an interpretative stance. By way of example, Margaret Moers Wenig's 2009 contribution on **פרשת בראשית** in *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible* states regarding Genesis 1: 27 that '[p]erhaps no Biblical verse has meant more to the LGBT people than this one.'¹⁷ Wenig goes on to detail real life examples of gender identity, based in both the biological and non-biological, that lie outside of the heteronormative definitions of male and female. She discusses the estimated 1.7 percent of the population born intersex alongside transsexuals, true hermaphrodites, cross dressers, and people transitioning. In addition to the biblical text, she examines briefly rabbinic literature on these subjects and identifies that even in antiquity the rabbis understood that a wide range of sexual identities existed.

In the end Wenig directs us, employing midrashic-like language, '[r]ead not "God created every single human being as either male or female" but "God created some humans male, some female, some who appear male but know themselves to be female, others who appear female but know themselves to be male, and others still who bear a mix of male and female characteristics."¹⁸ Wenig asserts that the phrase 'male and female' should be understood as a merism, where a whole is represented by the use of its most diverse parts. For example, Wenig explains that **ויהי בקר ערב ויהי בקר** doesn't really mean 'there was evening, there was morning'; rather it means that a whole day had passed – morning, evening, noon, tea time, midmorning snack time, midnight, dawn, dusk, etc. In the same fashion she believes that 'in the case of Genesis 1.27b, the whole diverse panoply of genders and gender identities is encompassed by only two words, "male" and "female." Read not, therefore, "God created every human being as either male or female" but rather "God created human kind *zachar u'nikvah* male and female and every combination in between."¹⁹

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Wenig, pg. 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*. Emphasis original.

Post-colonial and Indigenous Readings

If Genesis 1:27 can be interpreted to mean that both women and men are equal and that a full range of sexual identities are embedded in God's creation of humanity, then we should not be surprised that the creation of human beings also encompasses the entire array of race and ethnicities that exist on our planet. Moreover, this first creation story does not privilege any one group of humans over any other and yet, the experience of many post-colonial societies and native peoples runs counter to that interpretation.

The history of post-colonial thought is too long and diverse to go into today, but for the purposes of this lecture, post-colonial and indigenous readers of the Bible share, in common with feminist and queer exegetes, an approach to the Bible rooted in their own lived experiences. For many across the globe in post-colonial spaces such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, India, Hong Kong, and parts of Oceania, for example, the Bible was historically a tool of Christian missionaries, imposed on local people as part of a process of cultural imperialism. While their contemporary circumstances may be somewhat different, the same is true for indigenous and aboriginal peoples in countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.²⁰ Problematically, then, for many people across the globe the Bible is now both part of their lived religious experience and an embodiment of the injustices enforced upon their traditional societies. Moreover, the typically white, Western, male interpretations of the biblical text were a) presented not merely as normative, but *the only* correct interpretations and b) were employed to wipe away traditional, indigenous religions and cultural practices.

The practice of becoming a post-colonial or indigenous reader, then, is, like in feminism and queer readings, an act of reclamation, of finding one's own exegetical voice to find new insights into the biblical text. Notably, post-colonial and indigenous readings often intersect with the other readings we have discussed as people's identities are complex.²¹ I will discuss just two examples – one post-colonial, one indigenous – of how these reading practices work.

In Amadi Ahiamadu's 2010 article for the South African theological journal, *Scriptura*, he examines Genesis 1:26-28, with a particular emphasis on verse 28 and its impact on human treatment of the environment. Ahiamadu walks a well-trod path, asserting that acting in *imago dei* means these verses are best understood as a reference to the ancient Near Eastern kingship model. Human beings, therefore, should act with responsible authority and accountability in reference to the natural world. More interesting is where he posits how reading Genesis 1:28 in this fashion could have real life implications. Ahiamadu writes,

With special reference to oil exploration, exploitation and exportation in Nigeria it is obvious that multinational oil companies have carried out their industrial and chemical operations in total disregard of ecological balance, environmental integrity and geological cohesion of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. ... Conversely a postcolonial hermeneutics suggests an interpretation of Biblical texts that supports human rule and dominion over creation that is humane, responsible and accountable. Such a postcolonial critical hermeneutic is basic to a re-reading of the Bible in Africa which produces the desired result respectively of human rights and dignity.²²

The final example, one that is very close to my own heart, is an indigenous reading of creation by Randy Woodley in 2013's *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*. Woodley's article brings together a reading of both creation stories in Genesis alongside a creation story of the Keetoowah Cherokee. He identifies that all of these stories demonstrate the interconnectedness, and thus the well-being, of all of God's creation. All of creation once lived harmoniously in a state of *shalom*, until that peace is broken when we, humans,

²⁰ My own knowledge of these subjects is largely limited to the English speaking world; hence, the examples I have listed above.

²¹ Owing to time considerations and the complexities of and debates around intersectional theory, I am not discussing it directly here.

²² Ahiamadu, pg. 103.

use/abuse the natural world in ways that God never intended. When human beings set themselves above God, deciding how they will exploit the earth's natural resources instead of listening to God's will for the earth, we disrupt the original unity of creation. We are then left with the destructive behaviours that damage not only the natural world, but our own ability to thrive.²³ Woodley concludes by saying that

all those who are honest about what they see happening in creation have a great ethical and theological foundation for the pressing work of restoring the community of creation. It is articulated in all three ancient "Books": the primal words of Genesis, our sacred Indigenous origin stories, and the voice of creation. But we need ears to hear.²⁴

Conclusion

I have purposely concluded with Woodley's powerful call – 'we need ears to hear'; for, what all of these readings I surveyed alongside the so very many I have, by necessity, left out of this lecture – including minority readers, third wave feminists, and liberation theologians – is an approach that, like my daughter's poster at the very beginning of this lecture, speaks to the lives of real people. But we must have ears to hear all of those whose voices have been marginalised, silenced, ignored, and side-lined for too long.

I cannot even imagine the voices that might come to us over the next fifty years, but I am confident that they will inform, change, and shape new ways of thinking. That the text of our shared sacred Scripture continues to inspire new exegetical voices is a testament to continued value of the religious life. I look forward to ensuring that I and, I hope all of you, will have ears to hear these new voices and to allow those voices to transform us. And I pray, as ever, that Bible Week continues as a space for another fifty years and beyond, where together we may continue the practice of hearing each other deeply as we study together the text of the Bible that binds us together.

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²³ Woodley, pp. 92-103.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 103.

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Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn-Harris is Principal of Leo Baeck College in London, where she also lectures in Hebrew Bible. Her PhD in feminist bible criticism is from the University of Sheffield. She previously served as a member of the rabbinic team at Sha'arei Tzedek/North London Reform Synagogue and as the Teaching Fellow in Judaism at SOAS, University of London. She lives in London with her husband and two children.

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