

THE BIBLE AND WOMEN: BLACK FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Black feminist hermeneutics. Principles for a feminist hermeneutics are discussed. The situation of Black women in South Africa is discussed. As the most marginalized of all people, with patriarchy as a most serious enemy, particularly as it manifests itself in the Bible, these women need appropriate approaches to the reading of the Bible in order to achieve their liberation.

1. Preliminary Remarks

Up to the early nineteenth century, most intellectual and theological work was conducted from a pre-feminist perspective. Researchers and authors were not consciously aware that an understanding of women's experience was essential for intellectual work. It was generally the world of men with women forming part of the male story (Zikmund 1985:21, 22). In this regard Souga (1988:26) contends: 'Even a glance at our society leads us to conclude that the lived experience of African women is not always taken into account. Everything is in the hands of men: they have the power, it is they who have the right to speak ... to take the initiatives ... Being a woman means silence, being brushed aside, suffering, weakness'.

Gradually however, women came to believe that their experience as women was being ignored and undermined and they began to agitate for change. They became conscious about themselves as women (Zikmund 1985:22). It is this awakened self-consciousness in women, that will shape the contents of this paper. The paper focuses specifically on how women and in particular Black women, who are at the bottom position of the occupational ladder, and also the victims of a trilogy of oppression, can appropriate the liberative message of the Bible in their lives. Black women have been singled out specifically because little so far (particularly from the South African context) has been written on Black feminist hermeneutics. It is thus unfortunate that these women, who form a vast percentage of the South African population, are silent and have few people who can speak on their behalf. According to Mandew (1991:130) this shortage is probably the result of patriarchy in the Black Church. He argues:

It is important to question whether the lack of trained Black Feminist scholars in the field of hermeneutics (as well as in other fields) is accidental or coincidental or is it deliberate and calculated? Is this lack not a direct result of the patriarchal nature and structure of the Black Church? How far has the leadership (which is male of course) in the Black Church considered this a priority? Have efforts at remedying the situation been instituted?

Though Black women in South Africa will be the main focus of this paper, they, like all other women, are the victims of sexism as a form of oppression caused basically by the phenomenon of patriarchy. The first part of this work will therefore highlight

general feminist issues particularly as they relate to the Bible and the second part will propose various ways in which Black women can read the Bible effectively.

2. Feminist Hermeneutics

2.1 *Principles for feminists hermeneutics*

Although the feminist consciousness includes many elements (which are not all agreed upon by feminists), there are some central convictions shared by large groups of feminists. The most basic one is the conviction that women are full human beings and are therefore to be valued as such. This conviction may however not be misinterpreted in a non-feminist way to mean that women are derivatively or partially human (Farley 1985:44).

Ruether (1985:115) contends that whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be viewed as not reflecting the divine or authentic relation to the divine, or as not indicating the authentic nature of things or as being the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. The positive principle is also implied: that which promotes the full humanity of women is holy and shows true affinity to the divine and the true nature of things.

Coupled with this main principle is the principle of mutuality. The latter is based on the view that human persons, as embodied subjects, are in essence relational as well as autonomous and free. In feminist hermeneutic circles these principles function as interpretive principles and also as normative ethical principles in a feminist theory of justice. They are used to counter whatever biases are noted to be perpetuating gender inequalities and structural hindrances to human mutuality (Farley 1981:44).

2.1.1 *Equality*

Contemporary feminist consciousness which has been developed by a cautious heeding of women's own experience (largely shaped by new ways of sharing this experience) includes some conclusions:

All efforts to justify the fact that women are inferior to men falsify women's experience. Women have noted a contradiction between received interpretations of our identity and function on the one hand, and our own experience of ourselves on the other.

Women have also uncovered deceptive theories that make claims to a principle of equality but still assume fundamental inequalities among people on the basis of gender, race or any property of individuals or groups not essential to their humanity.

Likewise there are also strong theories of 'complementarity' which have been exposed to accommodate patterns of inequality - for relationships in which one partner's role is always inferior to, dependent upon and instrumental to the role of the other (Farley 1985:46).

Feminist consciousness therefore promotes i) individual autonomy and ii) a capacity for free choice. Once these features are applied to women as well as men, women also should be respected not as mere 'means' but as 'ends' (Farley 1985:46).

Feminists have universalized the principle of equality to include a claim by all to an equitable share in the goods and services essential to human life and basic happiness. So a woman, like a man, should be judged on her merits as an individual and not as a female (Farley 1985:46; Jaggar 1983:176).

2.1.2 Mutuality

Though feminist consciousness promotes individual autonomy as we noted in the preceding section, autonomy should not be the only basis of human dignity and the single principle determining social arrangements for in such situations, individuals are atomized. In these settings, the individual's fundamental mode of relating becomes one of opposition and competition between the self and the other. Such gross forms of individualism, women argue, fail to recognize the essential feature of personhood - that of relationality, that feature which ultimately requires mutuality as the basic goal of interpersonal relationships (Farley 1985:85).

Ruether (1985: 116) holds a more or less similar view when she contends that women cannot affirm themselves as created in God's image and as full human beings in a way that diminishes male humanity. 'Women as the denigrated half of the human species, must reach for a continually expanding definition of the inclusive humanity: inclusive of both genders, inclusive of all social groups and races. Any principle of religion or society that marginalizes one group of persons as less than fully human diminishes us all' (cf also William 1987:44; Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann, J 1974:14).

Feminists are convinced that persons, women and men, are centres of life capable of being centred more and more in themselves even as they are centred more and more beyond themselves in one another. There is a need for men and women to cooperate on the basis of mutuality. God's plans of differentiation of God's creatures was not meant to disadvantage others but that each sex will enrich the other (Farley 1985:85; Ramodibe 1988:19).

Significant questions remain: How are these principles to be used in biblical witness? With these principles and convictions, how is one to approach Scripture?

2.2 The Bible and Women

Hermeneutics is necessary in order for interpreters to hear what was said in other times so that the meaning can be understandable for them. In Christian circles, the need to hear the Bible message repeatedly has been there from the beginning.

If the biblical witness is discerned fully, it can yield feminist insights which in turn can become useful principles for the interpretation of the rest of Scripture (for example, the principle of equality). However, feminist consciousness cannot solely be attributed to Scripture (Farley 1985:48).

A relevant question to be raised in this section is: What does it mean to acknowledge the authority of Scripture as a source for Christian and feminist faith, theology and ethics?

What it can mean for feminists to acknowledge the authority of Scripture as a source of understanding human life is that i) at least Scripture includes something more than a patriarchy and ii) the 'more' that Scripture contains is at least harmonious with the truth of women's reality as it is understood in feminist consciousness - touches it or unfolds it (Farley 1985:49).

Another question that needs to be addressed is how the feminist consciousness can function in the interpretation of Scripture. Farley (1985:49) argues that principles of feminist hermeneutics will first serve as a negative limit. Whatever contradicts women's deep convictions (for example, that women are full human beings like men) will not be accepted as an authoritative, authentic revelation of truth. Based on feminist convictions

some interpretations may be ruled out. Thus for example, a divine imperative which universalizes that women play inferior roles, is ruled out as the final word of the biblical witness. Various feminists will rule out such interpretations differently: Some will deny the validity of texts with such content; some will relativize texts with such content; some will relativize the significance of such texts; some will interpret them under a feminist paradigm which makes them negative symbols of what the whole witness is highlighting (Farley 1985:50).

In as far as Scripture is believed to elucidate human experience, feminist interpretive principles must be employed to look into its stories and its teachings, its poetry and its oracles, in search of positive clues for the ongoing task of finding meaning as well as making decisions in our lives. As new questions are asked, feminist hermeneutics can allow more scales to drop from our eyes, and in that way the biblical witness can be freed for our seeing in a way that could have otherwise remained forever sealed (Farley 1985:50-51).

3. The Bible and Black Women: a hermeneutics of Liberation

In feminism (including feminist theology) the experience of women plays a pivotal role. In feminist hermeneutics for example, women's experiences play a role in the interpretation of Scripture. This is the case because human experience is both the starting point and the end of the circle of interpretation (Ruether 1985:113).

Received symbols, formulas and laws are authenticised (or not authenticised) through their ability to shed light and interpret existence in a way that is meaningfully experienced. If the symbol fails to speak in a meaningful way to existence, it becomes dead and is discarded or changed to provide new meaning (Ruether 1985:113).

Experience in this context does not primarily relate to 'experiences created by biological differences; it refers to women's experiences created by the social and cultural appropriation of biological differences in a male dominated society. In such a society, women experience even their biological difference in ways filtered and prejudiced by male dominance and by their own marginalization and inferiorization. Menstruation and childbirth are interpreted by them as pollution vis-à-vis a male controlled sacred sphere (Ruether 1985:113). These experiences of women will differ from one context to the other. For example, in the South African setting, Black women unlike their White counterparts, are not only the victims of sexism, but are also subjected to racism and classism as other forms of oppression. They thus understand fully, the interrelatedness of sex, race and class oppression (Hooks 1984: 14; Cochrane 1991:25).

Gordon (1987:15) commenting on these three oppressive forces says: 'Indeed, most often, these three oppressive forces impact upon Black women simultaneously with a relentlessness that leaves them drained of both creativity and vision'.

In this setting, they rank second almost everywhere, members of the second race, second sex and also second or third class.

In the case of White women, racism allows them to oppress Blacks (men and women) even though they may be victims of sexism (but only from White men). For Black men, though they are victims of oppression due to their race, sexism, allows them to exploit and oppress Black women. The latter are oppressed in almost all spheres of their lives (church, family, work, etc). Their approach to the Bible will normally differ from White women's approach as can be noted from the following examples:

Mofokeng (as quoted by West 1991:34-35) portrays the history of the Bible in the South African context from a Black perspective. He argues that Black people show the

dialectically related realities that arise from the following statement that he quotes 'When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible'.

The realities are:

- ◆ They portray the central position occupied by the Bible in the ongoing process of colonization, national oppression and exploitation.
- ◆ They also confess the incomprehensible paradox of being colonized by Christians and yet being converted to their religion and thus accepting the Bible, the very ideological weapon through which they were colonized, oppressed and exploited.
- ◆ They express a historic commitment - accepted from one generation to another; a commitment to bring to an end exploitation of humans by other human beings.

The arguments portrayed in the preceding paragraph mostly prevail among the elite and the youth. Thus these groups, the Black women elite and the young women (students mostly) in South Africa will view the Bible differently from their White counterparts. As a matter of fact, modern Black youth (both males and females) possibly due to being too politicized and mainly due to how the Bible has been abused to their disadvantage, are negative towards the Bible, Church and related matters.

Due to the poor educational facilities provided for Blacks in the past, coupled with the fact that in typical African societies it was deemed a waste of money to educate (in the Western sense of the word) a daughter, the majority of Black women are illiterate. They cannot therefore read the Bible. Mosala's comments following the research he made on the African independent churches illustrate this point: 'The fundamental class issue that affects the reading of the Bible in the AICS is the educational levels of the members ... They simply do not have a literate knowledge of the Bible. In other words, the 'source of their knowledge of the Bible is not the biblical texts themselves. Members have an oral knowledge of the Bible' (as quoted by West 1991:151). Coupled with this fact is that very few of our pastors (particularly in these churches) have received theological training, let alone the women in these churches.

Factors such as the above-mentioned few will definitely make Black feminist hermeneutics differ from its white counterpart.

Christian feminists who intend and hope like the biblical prophets to work within their religious heritage must address the question of the authority of the Bible in the life of their community of faith (Sakenfeld 1985:55). Black feminist interpreters, like all other feminists, will have as their starting point a stance of radical suspicion. This is in line with Ricoeur's view of hermeneutics, as quoted by Thisleton (1992:372). He contends that one of the functions of hermeneutics, and in particular the hermeneutics of suspicion, is to unmask human wish fulfilments and to shatter idols. Feminists have noted that patriarchy was one of the most stable features of ancient biblical society over the many years of the Bible's composition and redaction. In this regard Schneiders (1989:4) argues:

There can no longer be any doubt that the Bible is androcentric, i.e., male centered. It was written largely if not exclusively by men, for men and generally about men in language which, when it does not demonize women, usually marginalizes them or renders them invisible. It is pervasively patriarchal, i. e., governed by a hierarchical dualism in which male superiority to females is foundational and paradigmatic, and it not infrequently propounds patriarchy as divinely established and normative.

Therefore, in studying any biblical texts, feminists need to be watchful not only for an explicit patriarchal bias but also for evidence of more subtle androcentrism in the world view of the authors of the Bible. According to Sakenfeld (1985:56), only such a frank and sometimes painful assessment of the depth of patriarchal perspective in the text furnishes us with an honest point of departure for considering how the tradition can have meaning for us today.

Thus patriarchy, as it manifests itself as an oppressive weapon against women today, should also be rejected. Black women, unlike White women, experience a more intensive impact from patriarchy. Hence, Fiorenza (1985:127) contends: 'Patriarchy cannot be toppled down except when the women who form the bottom of the patriarchal pyramid, triply oppressed women, become liberated'.

Sakenfeld (1985:56-64) contends that Christian feminists, noting the patriarchy of the biblical witness, approach the text with at least three different emphases:

- ◆ Looking to texts about women to counteract famous texts used 'against' women.
- ◆ Looking to the Bible generally (not specifically to texts about women) for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy (some may call this a liberative perspective).
- ◆ Looking to texts about women to learn from the intersection of history and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.

These emphases are not the only possibilities but rather major categories that can be identified in current biblical interpretation.

In the following paragraphs I intend to analyse each of these options to see how useful they may be for a Black feminist hermeneutics.

3.1 *Option 1* : Looking to texts about Women to counteract Famous texts used 'against' Women

The Bible has been used in various ways to justify the traditional place of women in most cultures. Texts and traditions which have been used to uphold the status quo include: the theme that woman was created after man, (Gn 2) and was the first to sin (Gn 3) and that women must be submissive to their husbands (Eph 5). Feminism, being a prophetic movement, identifies such texts or their traditional interpretation as being 'against' women. A twofold response then follows:

- ◆ An effort is made to reinterpret some of these familiar texts
- ◆ 'Forgotten' or 'lost' texts that portray women in a different light are brought into a discussion.

A few examples will suffice: Phyllis Trible's penetrating analysis of Gn 2:23 (as quoted by Swidler (1979:78)) is noteworthy: 'As *ishshah* is taken from *ish*, so *ha adam* is taken from *ha adamah*. On the contrary the creature is given power over the earth so that what is taken from becomes superior to. By strict analogy, then, the line "this shall be called *ishshah* because from *ish* was taken this" would mean not the subordination of the woman to the man but rather her superiority to him'. She goes on to argue that in the context of the line 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' the connotation of the superiority of a woman is not appropriate. The relationship of this couple is one of equality and mutuality and not one of female superiority, and surely, not one of female subordination.

Another example is that of the discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5. Emphasis in this text is on the opening theme of mutual subjection in verse 21 (Sakenfeld 1985:55; Ward Gasque 1988:8).

Complementing such reinterpretation of negatively viewed texts is a new emphasis on texts which appear to speak positively on women. Galatians 3:28 is a favourite example. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. A tendency of some to interpret this text in futuristic terms is rejected by feminists. They argue that the text obtains in a context in which Paul discusses practical implications of the gospel (eg, the question of circumcision; Kretzschmar 1990:43; cf also Okure 1988:55). A feminist interpretation of this text can be more appealing to the Black woman for in Christ we are one, whether Jew or Greek (race), slave or free (class), male or female (sex). In Christ human traditional classifications crumble down.

In this option, feminists also turn to the many stories of Jesus' relationship with women as recorded in the gospels. His attitude towards women (speaking with them, taking them seriously) is viewed as exceptional and even revolutionary for his time - an attitude which critiques patriarchy both in the early church and today (Sakenfeld 1985:58; Russel 1974:34-35). For African women, Jesus is attractive because he fights for justice, he heals and he is a teacher. These women retell Jesus' story because it speaks directly to those areas of their lives where God's reality is active and compelling (Edet & Ekeya 1988: 10).

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman could be appealing to a Black woman for he did not segregate her according to her sex or her race. The interpretation of the *Magnificat*, the song of Mary a poor woman in Luke 1:46-55 can also be refreshing to Black women. According to Wittenberg (1991:10) the *Magnificat* not only indicates that God is concerned about the plight of the poor and helpless, but it makes a radical claim that God will reverse the social relations so that the injustice can be rectified. The significance of the *Magnificat* for women today is its potential for integrating a theology of women with a theology of the poor. 'The theology of women needs to take its starting point not from women's experience in abstract, but from the experience and concerns of women on the bottom rung of the social ladder, from the kind of woman who first heard and were touched by the message of Jesus, to the humble and poor' (Wittenberg 1991:18). Mary's example (a woman - despised sex), a Jew (insignificant race of the time) and a poor woman (class) shows that for the poor in general and particularly women, Jesus' coming means a social reversal.

The main strength of this approach or option according to Sakenfeld (1985:58) is its drawing attention of the diversity of biblical testimonies about women, because it recovers forgotten positive texts and traditions. The latter fact shows that the Bible may not necessarily be rejected out of hand as an instrument of patriarchy. However, there is a potential weakness in this strength. From this option it is sometimes assumed that the Bible furnishes us with some clear and explicit teaching about the position of women and that this teaching can be found in texts specifically about women and that it can be discovered by a cautious exegesis. If that is the case, the question is: Why have the reinterpretations of such texts not gained universal acceptance? The other problem with this approach is that for the average Black woman with a poor educational background, such an exegetical study will not be so easy.

Another loophole of this approach is that it purports to choose between texts upholding the status quo and texts challenging it. Some may suggest a principle like

Jesus over Paul; eternally valid statements over those that are culture-bound. Often, however, a person struggling with this matter views the situation as the one in which competing proof-texts are at work (Gal 3:28 competing with 1 Tim 2). Each of these two principal areas of limitation point to the basic question about the meaning of biblical authority and the significance of the Bible for Christian faith.

Despite these limitations, however, I have argued elsewhere that this option can be rewarding for Black feminist hermeneutics because:

- ♦ It neutralizes the male-biased biblical interpretations by foregrounding women and making them realize that they too (looked down upon as they may be) have a place in God's book, the Bible. For most of them the Bible is literally God's book.
- ♦ Through this option, Black women will appreciate the fact that the God of the Bible also used women for God's sovereign purposes (Miriam, Mary etc).
- ♦ Through this option the attitude of Jesus, whom many Black women regard as their Saviour, can be refreshing (Masenyana 1994: 12-13). In this regard Cannon (1985:40) contends that knowledge of the stories of Jesus in the New Testament helps Black women to be aware of the bad housing, overworked mothers, functional illiteracy and malnutrition still prevalent in the Black community. Nevertheless, as God-fearing women, they argue that Black life consists of more things than defensive reactions to oppressive conditions. Black life is the rich, colourful creativity that has emerged and reemerges in the Black quest for human dignity. Jesus provides the necessary soul for liberation.

3.2 Option 2: Looking to the Bible generally for a Theological Perspective offering a Critique of Patriarchy

This option, unlike the first one, does not focus on particular texts as the basis for developing a Christian perspective on the role and position of women. It approaches the Bible hoping to recognize the essence of the gospel and from that recognition work toward a specificity about women. At a most general level, this option understands the Bible as a witness to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.

The central focus in this option is thus the liberating act of God in Jesus. The problem within this option is to discern some central witness of Scripture that can be identified as the embodiment of Christianity (Sakenfeld 1985: 59). Russel and Ruether are some of the feminists who are comfortable with this option. For Russel, for example, God is portrayed as a liberator who acts in history and a biblical theology of liberation will remain incomplete as long as women's oppression is not addressed. Likewise, Ruether believes that the liberating core of the biblical tradition is the promise of redemption for the poor and the oppressed proclaimed by the prophets of old and by Jesus of Nazareth (Christ 1977:206-207). These two scholars are interested in the overall biblical message and not individual texts about women.

Ruether (as quoted by West 1991:85) argues that the prophetic liberating tradition, as a norm through which to criticize the Bible does not choose a marginal idea in the Bible, but rather a tradition that can be fairly claimed to be central on the basis of generally accepted Biblical scholarship.

One great strength of this approach is that it can look beyond the reactive side of feminism as antipatriarchalism and move to (even start from) the more positive and constructive side of one of the elements of feminist emphasis, that is *shalom*, which refers to wholeness or salvation in the widest and deepest sense of the word. As this

shalom includes all people, both women and men, in all conditions of life (race, ethnicity, class), this approach makes feminist use of biblical materials available to the concerns and quests of other oppressed groups including Black women. A basis is thus provided for affirming solidarity with the rest of humanity (Sakenfeld 1985:60). This approach can thus have prospects for a Black feminist hermeneutics. Black women, like the rest of humanity, should also enjoy the wholeness ushered in by the era of Christ.

This option also has potential limitations. The gospel, or what may be called its central witness, is too general and for many people (cf the vast majority of uneducated or untrained Black readers) an encounter with the general message of Christianity in the Bible is vague and diffuse compared to an encounter with particular texts.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1983:14-21; cf also Christ 1997:207) points to two other potential limitations of this approach. The first is the risk of concealing patriarchy in the Bible. She argues that, rather than drawing an abstract picture of the biblical and prophetic traditions, she (Ruether) should retrieve them in and through a feminist critical analysis.

The second limitation pointed out by Fiorenza (1983: 14-21) obtains in the possible claim that there is some timeless or eternal truth to be identified in Scripture while all the actual biblical authors and texts do not have that truth. As a matter of fact many people using this approach try to peel off the culturally conditioned parts of the Bible in order to find this timeless truth.

This option, like the first one, also raises a question on the ultimate usefulness of the Bible and also draws our attention to issues of authority.

3.3 *Option 3: Looking to texts about Women to learn from History and Storie of Ancients and modern Women living in Patriarchal Cultures*

In this option, unlike in option 1, in which texts about women are classified as for or against women, all these texts are used to address the condition of women as people, oppressed due to their sex and as people yearning for freedom. The Bible, in this option, is viewed as an instrument through which God shows women their true condition as oppressed people, yet people who are given a vision of a different heaven and earth, and various ways of how to live toward the vision.

Phyllis Trible, as one of the biblical feminist specialists, falls within this option. In her 'Texts of Terror', she gives close literary attention to narratives showing women as victims, some of whom however find ways to proclaim their personhood. As she interprets the story of rape and murder of an unnamed woman (Judg 19), that of a daughter offered as human sacrifice due to her father's foolish vow (Judg 11), she does this in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past embodied in the present and to pray that these terrors will not happen again (Sakenfeld 1985: 62-63).

One strength with this approach is that it offers the possibility of facing the pervasive androcentrism of biblical material directly, without excuse or evasion. Women, including Black women, may appropriate the tradition by identifying with biblical women in their oppression and in particular in their exercise of freedom.

The limitation of this option however, is its ignorance of whether texts perpetuating violence and oppression against women are not authoritative in that respect. This option also leads us to the problem of questioning the authority of the Biblical text.

3.4 To give up on the Bible or to Understand its Authority in an new Way

Whatever option Christian feminists use, there is an assumption that patriarchy will disappear. If, however, their assumptions prove to be fruitless, they end up giving up on the Bible and even their Christian faith remarking: 'Why would God let such a book become the church's book?' (Sakenfeld 1985:63).

I would however, argue as I did elsewhere (Masenya 1994:9), that religion and in particular the Christian religion plays a central role in the lives of most Black women. This is probably due to the holistic religious view of life that typical Africans have. Their socio-economic condition, as Sampson (1991:55) would argue, could be playing a significant role in this regard. He contends that the demands made by a highly industrialized society and the fact that women in communities of the oppressed are much more disadvantaged than men are, create a situation where people rely very much on crutches for their survival. Religion thus assumes a very significant social function in such communities, while religious symbols like the Bible are highly esteemed. As a result of the latter, these women find it very difficult to accept a critical approach to the Bible, (Sampson 1991:56), let alone its rejection.

A quotation from a booklet 'Speaking for Ourselves', written by the African Independent Churches, highlights what has been outlined in the previous paragraph:

We read the Bible as a book that comes from God and we take every word in the Bible seriously. Some people will say that we are therefore 'fundamentalists'. We do not know whether that word applies to us or not but we are not interested in any interpretation of the Bible that softens or waters down its message ... We do not have the same problems about the Bible as White people have with their Western scientific mentality (as quoted by West 1991: 158).

In such communities, therefore, there will be very few people who may give up the Bible as a source of divine revelation. I guess most of them will argue with Russel (1985: 138) that:

The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ (cf also African women's positive attitudes to Christ in Fabella & Oduyoye 1988: 1-59).

It must however be mentioned that this uncritical reading of the Bible by Black women, may delay the course of their liberation for with such an attitude, many are scared to challenge the status quo and thus remain comfortable with their own oppression. Some are not even aware of it. Despite this state of affairs, I would however still argue that if these women are furnished with appropriate approaches to the reading of the Bible, they will still find the Bible's message to be liberative.

Overriding the options mentioned above, I would recommend the approach proposed by Schneiders (1989:7-9) in which the Bible is to be approached as a text. There are two ways of understanding a text as a text. The first is the positivist way (whether historical or theological) of understanding a text as a fixed and unchanging verbal object.

The second one is to understand the text as a mediation which occurs as an event in the reader. Meaning is thus an event of understanding mediated by reading rather than verbal constructions in a text. Such an understanding of the text as a dynamic medium rather than a static object, makes room for very different approaches to interpretation (Schneiders 1989:5). As she tries to respond to the question of how an oppressive text can be liberative, Schneiders appeals to Paul Ricoeur's theory of distanciation. Distance, created by the passage of discourse from speaking to writing, can be productive.

Ricoeur, in answering the question of what happens when speech ends and the discourse becomes fixed by inscription, indicates that the vividness of the dialogical discourse does not fade into writing. Instead, the discourse is enriched by a surplus of meaning which makes it susceptible to endless, and a variety of, interpretations (Schneiders 1989:7). Elaborating on this distanciation Schneiders argues:

Herein we might find the possibility of not only multiple valid interpretations but of the texts exploding the very world out of which it came and whose prejudices and errors it ineluctably expresses (1981a: 139). On this hypothesis, it might be possible for the Gospel to subvert the patriarchal world which produced it and whose biases it expresses and promotes.

According to Ricoeur's theory of distanciation, the fixation of discourse by writing/inscription effects three sea-changes on the discourse:

- ◆ The discourse is protected from destruction by the permanence and the stability of the written word.
- ◆ Much more significant, it is cut loose, as it were, from its writer. It therefore attains a relative semantic autonomy in relation to the author's intentions. The matter of the text therefore escapes the horizon intended by the author. 'The text now means what it means and all that it can mean regardless of whether that meaning was intended by the author or understood by the original audience'. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that this autonomy has limitations because the text, depending on the linguistic content, structure and dynamics, means only what it can mean.
- ◆ After inscription the text transcends also its own psycho-sociological area of production. It can thus be decontextualized and recontextualized by successive readings as long as there are competent interpreters.

These recontextualizations will explore and exploit the surplus of meaning which is enjoyed by the now autonomous text due to its emancipation from authorial intention and the particularities of the setting of production (Schneiders 1989:7).

I would argue that the second and the third sea-changes caused by the inscription of discourse can be fruitful for Black feminist hermeneutics. While it is good and perhaps scholarly to enlist the help of historical-critical research as one studies the Bible, this enlistment is mostly limited to the scholarly world. That is not done by the majority of ordinary readers, particularly those who are marked by a high rate of illiteracy like Black women. Hence, I would maintain that Ricoeur's theory of distanciation can offer more possibilities for the encounter between Black women and the Bible.

The contents of this paper highlight the fact that all women have a task: they have to critique the status quo; to look for strategies of dismantling sexism and to point to women's experiences and hopes. Those who would wish to be theologians, stand as servants to this cause whose goals affect all humanity -both men and women (Edet & Ekeya 1988:13). In conclusion, the words of Ramodibe (1988:18) are worth noting: 'Women need to emerge as full human beings, liberated from all forces that have kept them in slavery for the past years. The Christian faith should be the great motivating force in this movement toward self-fulfilment'.

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