

# THE 'SENSE' OF FEMINIST BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP FOR CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*In trying to identify the possible wider influence of feminist biblical scholarship, two matters receive attention: the dualisms characteristic of patriarchal culture and feminist scholars' questioning and overcoming of these, and the Bible in feminist discourses. With regard to the former, special attention is paid to the dualism between mind and body, reason and emotion, which is fundamental to much of mainstream academic discourse, and to attempts to redefine the knowing subject in the direction of 'wholeness'. In the section which deals with the Bible in feminist discourses the search for the one and only meaning of biblical texts and the uncritical reading of texts oppressive against women are problematised. A few suggestions are then made as to why the insights of feminist biblical criticism should transcend the boundaries of academic discourse and how this could happen.*

## 1. Sense and/of feminism

While reading, a while ago, one of the articles in *A feminist companion to reading the Bible*, I wrote on one of the pages: "overwhelmingly sensible". This is where the title of the article partly derives from. In my initial encounter with the field of feminist biblical scholarship I experienced something of what the Afrikaans writer Hennie Aucamp once wrote with regard to great works of literature. A book, he said, if it wants to be an "awakener", should be a total onslaught on its reader, overwhelming the reader intellectually, emotionally and morally. Having read such a book, he continues, the reader should feel it her/his duty and responsibility to share her/his enthusiasm with others (Aucamp 1993:1, 2).

As I became better acquainted with this field of research, I tried to formulate reasons for my initial somewhat intuitive impression. What sense do feminist biblical scholars, and feminist scholars in other disciplines, speak which I have up to now missed, or which is not explicitly expressed in much of mainstream biblical scholarship? With which insights did and do they come up which not only make sense, but which may also contribute to transcending the boundaries of traditional male scholarship and be of relevance for a wider audience?

The fact that Hennie Aucamp's words, referred to above, came to mind in my encounter with feminist scholarship, already implies the involvement of the *person*, of the *whole person*, in feminist scholarship. To this crucial feature of feminist scholarship a number of others can be added, some of which are closely related to this. In feminist studies I find the articulation of what was previously thought, but to a great extent left un-articulated; the relatedness to real contemporary life, if in a questioning way; the problematising of much that is often still taken for granted, both with regard to women and their position in church and society, and the way scholarship is often conducted. Characteristic of feminist scholarship is also the putting of the cards on the table in a field where, both in its academic and confessional manifestations, this is still not always done. In this kind of scholarship one's eyes are, moreover, acutely opened for the constructedness of much which still goes through as "how it is" or "how the world works" within both academy and church, for example the compartmentalisation of different kinds kept intact for centuries, including that within the knowing subject. And, since feminist biblical

scholarship recognises the Bible's influence on Western and also other cultures, and its contribution to the preservation of patriarchal societies, attention is here not only paid to the biblical texts and their contexts, but also to their *impact*, especially the negative side of this.

Not everybody would, of course, typify feminist biblical scholarship as *sensible*. In the churches feminism is, mainly as a result of ignorance on the matter, still regarded by many as something unnecessary and even dangerous, as a statement by a minister I recently heard in a congregation of the Dutch Reformed church shows: "Since Jesus there has been no sexism" he said. "We should, however, beware of the other extreme of sexism: feminism". Some mainstream biblical scholars regard feminist readings of the Bible as a disrespectful, modern approach to these ancient texts, as the naïve reading into them of what one desires to find there, just another problematic dealing with these texts which should be undermined by valid, history-oriented biblical scholarship (e.g. Malina 1996:96). That this should, for various reasons, be regarded as an oversimplification of the matter, will shortly become clear.

One could, moreover, ask if it is the *task* of biblical scholarship, or a branch thereof, especially as an academic discipline at a secular university, to be of relevance to church and society. Even if it would be possible to do so, *should* it? To ask the centuries-old question again: Should biblical scholars not confine themselves to the safe havens of the academic compartments created by and for them, as they have up to now all too often done, where they can treat and respect the biblical writings as ancient writings which can and should be of little or no relevance to the messy business of real, contemporary life? In her recent book, *Jesus and the politics of interpretation*, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:56), for example, writes that when she started teaching, one of the first lessons from a senior colleague was that she should confine herself to critical exegesis and stay away from the religious or theological significance of biblical texts for today, since this could lead to the foundering of scholarship on the "slippery slope of relevance". Whereas relevance in a "positive" sense is regarded to be unscientific by many biblical scholars, relevance or relatedness in a "negative" sense, that is, in a questioning way, is mostly unwelcome outside the academy, in confessional Christianity and the discourses influenced by this. Thus, not unlike other academics, biblical scholars write mainly for their colleagues. Unlike many of their colleagues, however, the object of their study is still widely read or listened to and continues to influence the lives of many people in many ways.

It is in this respect that I gratefully honour the life-long contribution of Bernard Combrink to biblical scholarship – not only for his academic integrity, but particularly for his continuous concern for the implications of New Testament exegesis for the everyday life of church and society.

## **2. Feminist and mainstream biblical scholarship**

It is not my intention to deal here in detail with feminism(s) in all their diversity and complexity (cf e.g. Beasley 1999), of which feminist biblical scholarship forms part. According to Schneiders (2000:7) feminism is "a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women's experience of sexually-based oppression, that engages in a critique of patriarchy as an essentially dysfunctional system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization". This definition of feminism implies that it is a mentality or life stance that colours *all* one's commitments and activities. Feminism visualises a different reality, and concerns an active participation in change to bring about that reality (Schneiders 2000:8). The emphasis on *change* is related to feminism's roots in the women's movements which date especially from the end of the nineteenth century and which, in the course of the twentieth century, although changing their focus as time went by, were consistently concerned with *change*, be it political and social change, or

changes in the cultural imagination and the definition of humanity (Schneiders 2000:8, 9). Feminist *biblical* scholarship, which is *inter alia* concerned with women's experience of the Bible's negative and restraining impact on their lives, specifically problematises and addresses the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts and the "world" (cultures, societies) of which these texts were and are still co-creators.

Although feminist and mainstream biblical scholarship differ in various respects and took different routes, one should not fail to see their common traits. Intellectually, historical critical scholarship of the Bible and the feminist movement, which both date back to the late nineteenth century, shared a great deal (Bass 1982). Both made use of the tools of critical historical inquiry and sought explanations for the things which puzzled them. Both historical-critical and feminist biblical scholars "were on authentic quests for truth of a new and disturbing kind" (Bass 1982:7). Whatever criticism can be launched against feminist biblical scholarship, it cannot be regarded as a naïve, uncritical enterprise unaware of the results of historical scholarship. However, feminist biblical scholarship does not stop with the understanding of texts in their ancient contexts. Some of feminist scholarship's "sense" lies precisely in the fact that it is political in nature, which implies that it has as its objective societal change.

### **3. Just another compartment?**

Up to now, partly as a result of the simplistic and onesided way in which feminism, also feminist biblical scholarship, is often defined, especially by the uninformed but nevertheless influential in church and society, it has in our South African context often been regarded as concerned only with women. It is therefore thought of as something optional. Having developed as something removed from mainstream thought, what has been done in this field has, to a large extent, either remained on the periphery of mainstream scholarship and contemporary life (where it is more or less uninfluential or "harmless"), or has been regarded by mainstream scholars to fit safely into just another compartment with a specific label on it, where it also has merely a restricted influence. As a pharmacist carefully labels medication of a restricted application and effect. So the insights of feminist scholarship are easily pushed aside while business goes on as usual. A good example of this in our own context is that, while since the eighties of the twentieth century there has been a tremendous boom in feminist biblical scholarship, especially in North America, in South Africa a female doctoral student in New Testament could during this time be presented with a doctoral program in which no awareness of this was reflected. That there is not only an unawareness of this field of research among many mainstream biblical scholars in South Africa, but also an aversion towards it, became clear at a recent conference in Potchefstroom on women in church in society (September 2001). Feminist biblical scholars were, at this occasion and during its aftermath, blamed by some mainstream biblical scholars for claiming a standing for themselves within the field of biblical scholarship.

Feminist scholars, who are critical of the compartmentalising and polarizing tendencies of patriarchal culture, disagree sharply with the separation of their work by and from mainstream scholarship. In accordance with what has been said above about feminism as a comprehensive ideology, feminist biblical criticism questions the very foundations of the masculinist epistemology upon which the academy has been built (Milne 1997:59). Far from remaining on the periphery, feminist criticism is about the radical rethinking and re-evaluation of the norms and canons of biblical criticism, which should lead to the transformation of our intellectual frameworks (Reinhartz 1997:32, 37). Though feminism is a distinct perspective which emerges from the experience of women, it is regarded by feminist scholars to be applicable to human experience as a whole (Setel 1985:35). These statements by feminist biblical scholars are in line with the views of feminist scholars in other disciplines, especially in the field of

philosophy. Braidotti, for example, refers to feminism as “an intellectual style ... the constant desire for forms of investigation, expression and transmission of knowledge other than those established within the patriarchal discursive systems” (1991:150).

In trying to identify feminist biblical scholarship's possible influence on church and society, feminist scholars' “sense” with regard to two matters will be addressed:

- The way feminist scholars deal with the dualisms characteristic of patriarchal society, which so decisively influenced, and continue to influence, the lives of women and people of other classes and races over many centuries, including the dualisms within the knowing subject postulated by patriarchal culture. Attention to and undermining of these dualisms are for feminist scholars in all disciplines of utmost importance, and for various reasons. It is important for exposing the roots of much that is in our “world” still taken for granted and regarded as normal. It is important because feminist scholars emphasise, even radicalise, the role of the interpreter in the interpretation of texts, which makes the question of how the interpreter probes a crucial one.
- In the light of feminist biblical scholars' realisation of the Bible's patriarchal nature and of its sometimes negative impact on the lives of women and other marginalised people, and in the light of their redefinition of the interpreting subject and her role in the interpretation of texts, can and how can their views contribute to a more meaningful discourse about and reading of the Bible?

In dealing with the Bible, it is presupposed that it is a collection of books which does not merely belong to the past in which it originated, but which has become the book of believing communities, also of present day churches. It is, moreover, presupposed that the Bible is still influential in our society, both in a positive and negative way.

## **4. Overcoming dualisms**

### **4.1 A dualistic way of thought criticised**

Since feminism questions patriarchal culture, which is characterised by a dualistic way of thought, one of the recurring themes in the work of feminist scholars of all kinds (feminist theorists, philosophers, biblical scholars, etc) is their pointing out, critique and rejection of this fundamental characteristic of patriarchal society (e.g. Rich as quoted by Braidotti 1991:268).

According to the dualistic view of the world, the whole context of human experience is divided into dualistic categories such as male/female, rational/emotional, spiritual/material, mind/body, et cetera. Not only are these regarded to stand *over against* each other; they are also overlaid with *gender* and related in a *hierarchical* way, with the former regarded to be more valuable than the latter. Worse still, feminist scholars have long since pointed out that this system of categorisation and polarisation is one of *domination* which is *oppressive* against women. In the dualistic mode of thought, “[Woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he in reference to her; she is the accidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other” (De Beauvoir as quoted by Setel 1985:36). From a feminist perspective, to accept dualistic perception as an inevitable condition of human experience is also to accept the inevitability of oppression (Setel 1985:36).

Although the origin of a dualistic mode of thought lies in the distant past, and it became influential especially through Greek philosophy and the discourses influenced by this, it is still prevalent in some academic discourses. Mostly unconsciously, and exalted to the status of common sense assumptions, it is also still prevalent in contemporary society and church, where it deeply influences the lives not only of women but also of many other people. In his autobiography the Afrikaans singer and writer Koos Kombuis, for example, identifies the

dualism between good and evil, with which he grew up (white/black, Jesus/the devil, the Bible/*Kyk* and *Keur*, etc), and which he specifically associates with the Afrikaner psyche, as *the* problem which troubled him since childhood and which deeply influenced his life (Kombuis 2000:22, 23).

While a critique of ancient texts for their patriarchal tendencies, and of ancient patriarchal societies, is relatively easy for people living generations later, it is much more difficult to question one's own taken for granted assumptions which are still pervaded by the dualisms of patriarchal culture. A dualism basic to academic discourse, and the discourses influenced by it, is that between mind and body, between reason and emotion. During the past few decades much work has been done on "subjectivity" and "rationality" by post-structuralist/postmodernist philosophers, with whom some strands of feminism show clear similarities. This work has not only called into question the epistemic structures of the rational subject, but has also unveiled the structural links between rationality and the spirit of mastery. Some strands of feminism show clear similarities with this, and, additionally, problematise "disembodied thinking". Despite the insights which resulted from this work, in the academic sphere reason is still regarded by many as the one and only indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge (Braidotti 1991:7, 258-282; Jaggar 1989:129). It often still seems to be viewed as something which exists and functions detached from the other human faculties. Since the traversing of this dualism calls for philosophical reflection, some attention is here paid to the work done by feminist philosophers in this regard.

#### 4.2 The mind/body, reason/emotion dualism

Feminist scholars point out that the oppositions between mind and body, between reason and emotion, are *gendered*, that is, that the mind and its capacity to reason are associated with masculinity, while the body, together with emotional sensibilities are associated with the feminine (James 2000:29). Apart from being gendered, they are, like other dualisms, related in a *hierarchical* way, with the former regarded as more valuable than the latter. Like the other dualisms, they are oppressive against women. In fact, the idea of reason and rationality is singled out by some feminist scholars as the instrument of masculine domination *par excellence* (cf Braidotti 1991:176, 177).

How do feminist scholars respond to these dualisms, specifically the mind/body and reason/emotion dichotomy, and thereby to a dualistic way of thought? What difference does feminism make as to how the knowing subject is viewed?

In problematising reason and rationality, feminist philosophers obviously do not propose the abolition of rationality. They problematise its monopolisation by males during most of history, its relation to domination, its detachment from other human faculties, from the body and from real life experiences, and its exclusion of the unconscious, the emotional, et cetera (e.g. Braidotti 1991:212). They (or at least some of them) therefore call for the "*restructuring* of the construction of the rational subject" (Irigaray as quoted by Whitford 1991:53).

#### 4.3 Thinking "thought" differently

While feminist philosophers propose a reasoned critique of theoretical reason, and point out that dualism leads to a reductive vision of human thought, in which the imagination is devalued and the creative power of thought mutilated, they also attempt to think "thought" in a different way (Braidotti 1991:174, 268). For feminist scholars "thought" entails the inclusion of what has previously been excluded. It entails the reintegration of the unconscious, the subjective, the emotional with the structural, the rational, the intellectual (Rich in Braidotti 1991:212; cf also Jaggar 1989). Feminist scholars emphasise that thinking is a *creative* activity, with critique and invention

progressing together. This implies that the transition between the critical, reactive moment and that of creation, is almost imperceptible (Braidotti 1991:172, 216, 217). In the words of Braidotti (1991:189): "The hope which nurtures the feminist project is to evolve towards the discovery of a richer, more living form of thought, above all a thought with which women can more creatively live". Thinking and being, mind and body, are regarded by feminist scholars to be indivisibly connected. And thinking is reconnected to lived experience (Braidotti 1991:165, 172).

The convergence of the critical and the creative in feminist thought is important when dealing with a book like the Bible, which, although it originated in a time different from our own, and has in some respects become problematic for contemporary readers, nevertheless continues to influence the lives of many people positively (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1984: xiii; Weems in Aichele et al 1995:251). It is also important when keeping in mind that "a religious tradition is a living thing" (Stendahl 1982: 214).

An interesting proposal as to how thought could work when the whole person is involved in thinking, is that of the feminist philosopher Stenstad. She calls, namely, for a kind of atheoretical thinking ("anarchic thinking"), thereby rejecting the notion that thinking is restricted to what the tradition has allowed it to be (Stenstad 1989:338). According to her we need to do more than confront patriarchal thinking in its own terms and by its own rules. We need to think in ways that deliberately break the rules, denying to patriarchy the right to dictate the terms for feminist thinking (Stenstad 1989:332). In the kind of thinking she proposes, the distinction traditionally made between passion and reason, with only reason assigned to the realm of "real thinking", is not operative. "Anything that deeply concerns us, touches us in mind and heart, sparks thinking. It might be something as particular as one sentence heard or read, or as general as wonder in the face of life..." (Stenstad 1989:333).

#### 4.4 Returning to the body

Related to their redefinition of thought, feminist scholars emphasise the importance of the *body* and show how mind and body interrelate, and how the body contributes to, and is implicated in thought (James 2000:30). Since they question the universality of the knowing subject, and criticise the complicity of masculinity and rationality, there is among some of them a renewed interest in the sex-specific nature of the subject, and therefore the realisation that, when speaking of subjectivity, one must begin with the idea of embodiment (Braidotti 1991:218). Feminist scholars speak, for example, of "thinking through the body", in this way connecting what has for so long been disorganised (Rich in Braidotti 1991: 8). Those feminist philosophers who point to the importance of the body in thought and discourse, emphasise that the body should not be reduced to the biological. Neither can it be confined to social conditioning. They see the body as "a field of intersection of material and symbolic forces ... it is one's primary location in the world, one's primary situation in reality (Braidotti 1991:219)".

#### 4.5 What about differences?

Since in a dualistic way of thought differences (from men) meant *inequality* and *oppression* for women, the acknowledgement of, and emphasis on, difference were initially regarded to be dangerous by feminist scholars. The initial urge to deny difference or to transcend it has to be understood as the rejection of the system of domination and social hierarchy in which differences were used as synonym for oppression (Braidotti 1991:155). More recently some feminists have paid attention to the possibility of formulating otherness without devaluing it. Is it not possible, they have begun to ask, to think of the other not as other-than, but as a positively other entity (Braidotti 1991:177)? Can difference, in other words, be redefined away from domination and subordination? At least some feminist scholars have come not only to

acknowledge differences between men and women, among women, and within each woman, but also to evaluate these positively (cf Tolbert 1999:158-162.)

The acknowledgement and positive evaluation of differences by some feminist scholars are related to their realisation that there exists more than one pattern of oppression of women (Braidotti 1991: 129). Ideas of difference and multiplicity are also regarded by these feminists as a necessary resistance to a kind of “reversed domination”, to a new “regime of truth”, to changing merely the players but not the game, to the One, in favour of the plurality and multiplicity of women’s discourses (Braidotti 1991:130, 278; Tolbert 1999:158). As Tolbert (1999:158) puts it: “We must come to see what dualistic language tries to prevent us from seeing: instead of living in a world of binary oppositions, we actually live in a world of difference. There are not just two voices speaking but many voices, both within each of us and across the world around us”. The implications of this for biblical interpretation will receive more attention in the discussion of the Bible in feminist discourses.

## 5. The Bible in feminist discourses

Since we are, in the end, interested in the “sense” of feminist *biblical* scholars for church and society, specific attention must be paid to their views of and dealing with the Bible. While doing this, what has been said above should constantly be kept in mind. For it is, inter alia, feminist insights concerning the nature and role of the investigating subject, which call for, and make a different way of dealing with the Bible possible.

Since feminist biblical scholars approach the Bible from the “problem” of patriarchal culture inscribed within it and continued by it, what does this imply for their view and interpretation(s) of the Bible? What does the realisation of the fact that the Bible took part in the maintaining of patriarchal culture, the realisation of the negative effects which parts of it had for many centuries on women’s and other marginalised people’s lives, imply for how feminist biblical scholars view and read the Bible? Are feminist readings of biblical texts, like so many other readings, merely interesting ones which, in the end, leave the view of the Bible as authoritative Scripture intact? Should explicitly patriarchal verses about women in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor 14:34, 35; 1 Tm 2:9-15), which were previously used (and are still used in some churches) as proof that women’s submission to men in home, church and society is the revealed plan of God (Tolbert 1999:141), merely be ignored or left behind, without influencing their view of the Bible and its interpretations? Is the problem restricted to problematic parts of the Bible, which can merely be ignored, as often happens to texts which no longer make sense? Or does this call for a radical rethinking of the nature of the biblical writings and the way we should deal with them, including the doctrine of the authority of the Bible?

As one would expect, feminist scholars respond to these questions in different ways. There are indeed big differences in the way feminist biblical scholars view and deal with the Bible. These differences are, as in the case of mainstream biblical scholarship, related to the scholars themselves, the contexts in which they work, how they sum up the current situation in church and society, what they regard to be necessary at this stage, et cetera. A good example of this variety is the way they deal with the authority traditionally ascribed to the Bible. While some feminist scholars regard the authority of the Bible as something which should be taken seriously and respected, although it should be carefully defined (e.g. Camp 1993), others regard the authoritative way in which the Bible still functions as a problem to which serious attention should be paid (cf Tolbert 1998, 1999). Some scholars, like Schüssler Fiorenza, shift the authority from the Bible itself to what women experience as liberating (1984:13). While some still try not only to understand biblical texts oppressive to women, but to wring something positive from them, others think that a “oneway” procedure is no longer viable and that a

dialogue has to be undertaken with these texts, in which women can decide what matters and what does not, on the basis of their own lived experiences and the questions these pose to them (Nebara 1993:173). Related to the question of biblical authority is that the boundaries of the biblical canon are, for some feminist scholars, no longer rigidly in place. In the feminist commentary *Searching the Scriptures* (1993), for example, edited by Schüssler Fiorenza, the boundaries of the canon are extended to include extra-canonical early Christian writings.

In discussing the Bible in feminist discourses, two matters will receive attention: *firstly*, the absoluteness which often still characterises discourses about the Bible and the interpretation of biblical texts, especially in a church context, and *secondly*, the uncritical way the Bible is often still dealt with, and feminist scholars' contribution in this regard. Since the absolute nature of much of religious discourse is, in the case of the Bible (like most other religious discourses), coupled with that of absolute *male* discourse, the link with the previous section, with its emphasis on the redefinition of the knowing subject and her way of thought, is not difficult to detect.

### 5.1 Against the one and the only

In a number of essays, the latest one in the volume *Escaping Eden* (1999), on which I will mainly focus here, Mary Ann Tolbert pays attention to traditional views of the Bible, biblical interpretations and the authority ascribed to these. Although she calls her article "A feminist interrogation of the canon", much of what she says is not specifically feminist in nature; her work is also informed not only by mainstream biblical scholarship, but also by literary theory. Her work is, however, also clearly informed by a number of insights identified above as the "sense" of feminist scholars, especially their advocating of interpretation from a specific perspective, and their resistance to the "One and only" and therefore their positive evaluation of differences. In fact, the crux of her essay, is her arguing against the search for the *one* meaning of biblical texts and for the *one* intention of the author of a biblical text, which is, in the case of the Bible, often boosted even further and made more unassailable by an appeal to the doctrine of biblical authority, and therefore to God or Jesus.

Having pointed to the *negative use* which is often made of the doctrine of the authority of the Bible (the fact that it has often been used to *exclude* certain groups of people, and that it supplies ecclesiastical bodies with power to proclaim as normative Christian belief issues like the subordination of women or the sinfulness of homosexuality), Tolbert pays attention to the fact that, in one way or another, both in the churches and in biblical scholarship the search for the *one* is still on. In the former, especially in conservative circles in the churches, it is manifest in the search for the inerrant Scripture, and in the latter, inter alia, in the search for the intention of the biblical author. Focusing on the role of the reader in the production of meaning, an insight not only of feminist criticism and contemporary literary theory, but something to which the history of the interpretation of the Bible convincingly attests, she points out that any attempt to assert a singular, universally correct meaning is not only problematic; it is an act of power which limits and excludes the meanings of others rather than a "simple" reading of "just what is there" (Tolbert 1999:155). If readers and interpreters of Scripture are construing its meanings, naming that meaning as God's or Jesus', as is still commonly claimed in the churches, disguises its real source. In this way a divine face is given to a human process, and divine sanction to human drives to power over the opinions of others (Tolbert 1999:154, 155). Although many interpreters do acknowledge the reality of different interpretations, they seldom draw the implications of this. Appeals to the authority of the Bible are not dropped because they confer a divine authority to human words and because the power they supply is a singular, exclusive power to limit or deny the meanings of others, a power which is basically totalitarian in nature (Tolbert 1999:156).



Of course Tolbert's emphasis on different interpretations and therefore of different meanings does not imply a return to a naïve position, to validating the reading of any meaning whatsoever into biblical texts. As an informed biblical scholar, she emphasises that the Bible originated at a time different from our own, and is, like any other book, saturated by the social, cultural, political and religious understandings of the people who produced it, and that this has to be taken into account when dealing with the biblical writings (Tolbert 1998:74). She also problematises the existence of (at least) two totally different and separate discourses about the Bible, that of scholarship and of the churches, and regards as its solution the becoming theologically literate of Christian believers. She even regards the future of Christianity to be dependent on this (Tolbert 1998:183, 184).

## 5.2 Against the 'passive' and uncritical reader ('receiver')

If Tolbert emphasises the role of the reader in the production of meaning, in this way undermining the idea of *one, absolute* meaning, which, to make it even more unassailable, is ascribed to God, other feminist scholars pay special attention to what the role of the reader should entail. Whereas Tolbert exhorts us to honesty about the origin of our meanings, Fontaine exhorts us to *actively* and *critically* partake in the task of interpretation. In the light of feminist insights regarding both the nature of the biblical writings and the nature and role of the interpreter, the readers' role can, according to her, no longer be that of passive receivers of eternal truths contained in the texts, a role for which we have for long been trained (Fontaine 1997:111; cf also Tolbert 1998:174-176). Feminist reading is not merely about understanding texts and complying with them (Brenner 1997:138). The role of the reader should be a *critical* one, in which both text and reader is held ethically responsible (Milne 1997:55). In the words of Brenner (1997:140): "[O]ur own voices need to break away from what does not suit us ethically and existentially". In this kind of thinking the Bible gets, according to Fontaine, a different function. If in past societies the Bible has been used to socialize people into an acceptance of the patriarchal worldview, for many it currently serves as a locus for our critique of that system (Fontaine 1997:111).

If feminist biblical scholars have opened our eyes for the patriarchal nature of the biblical writings, due to the nature of the cultures to which these writings belonged, if we know that the Bible, apart from its positive influence, also impacted and still impact negatively on the lives of many people, if we, in the light of this realisation, can no longer read the Bible merely as passive receivers of eternal truths, why should it still be read and dealt with?

Fontaine points out that, as long as the Bible is used against women, children, non-heterosexuals, et cetera, it will be necessary to talk about its nature and the problems in its uncritical use. Moreover, since it is part of our religious and literary heritage, to deal with the Bible is to gain insight in where we come from (Fontaine 1997:112). Instead of abandoning the Bible, it must, according to her, be made to serve the abused. This entails the reopening of the canon to include texts which help us to understand the religious experiences of those who do not figure in the biblical texts. It, moreover, entails embracing what is liberating and resisting what is not (Fontaine 1997:112).

## 6. Conclusion

How, then, can the "sense" of feminist scholars, also feminist biblical scholars, be related to church and society? What difference can their insights make in these spheres? Even if there is in this case, unlike that of great works of literature, no guarantee of an enthusiastic audience, an attempt should at least be made.

There is, of course, no easy or instant answer to these questions. In fact, it would be much

easier to identify barriers in the way of feminists' discourses making any difference, especially in a church context. What is offered here are not ready-made, not even direct answers. They are only a few indirect suggestions.

With regard to the difference feminist biblical insights could make in the churches, one has to ask whether the discourses of feminist biblical scholarship do not differ too much from that of the churches even for real conversation to take place, not to mention a possible impact. While the discourse of the churches is still to a great extent an *uncritical* and *authoritative* one, feminist criticism calls for a *critical* reading of the biblical texts from the viewpoint of those disadvantaged by patriarchal culture, and is critical of the authoritative way the Bible is often dealt with in the churches, especially when used to *exclude* certain categories of people. Whereas the (or at least some) churches are still in search of final answers from God as to questions such as the ordination of women, the question of homosexuality, et cetera, answers which they regard to be in the Bible, waiting to be discovered, feminist scholars problematise the search for the *one, often merciless answer* from texts which originated in different cultures, point to the effects which the answers regarded to come from God have had and still have on the lives of many people and call for answers which are also informed by insights from other academic disciplines and our contemporary world.

For new insights to have an effect, especially in the sphere of religion, the ground has to be thoroughly prepared. In the Christian churches in South Africa, many of whom are, at this important stage in the history of our country, taking the anti-intellectual route, very little, if any, of this preparation is done. We hear a lot about re-packaging, little about rethinking. Since the biblical writings themselves, as writings in their own right, mostly function so thinly and selectively in the churches, and since sections nowadays regarded to be problematic are usually merely ignored without problematising them, thus not allowing them to influence people's view of the Bible, a thorough rethinking of the nature of the Bible and the way it functions and should function is seldom undertaken or regarded necessary in the churches.

But if feminist criticism, as I said at the beginning, should not be regarded as something separate or optional ("just another compartment"), if it forces us to rethink taken for granted assumptions about ourselves, the texts we investigate, the scholarship with which we busy ourselves and about "how the world works", if it aims at breaking down boundaries that have been maintained for centuries, also those between scholarship and the church, and between scholarship and real life, we should at least try to spell out some possible implications of this kind of scholarship. If feminist scholars' view of the Bible, and its role in shaping the thoughts of believers and society, is not merely a rarefied academic perspective (Fontaine 1997:86), their work indeed deserves wider attention.

For reasons mentioned earlier (the exposure of the roots of dualistic thought, which is still prevalent in many of our discourses, including religious ones, and feminist scholars' acknowledgement and emphasis on the person and role of the interpreter), but also because women's voices are in South Africa, especially in biblical scholarship and in the churches, not only a rarity, but if heard, not necessarily taken seriously, I called on a number of feminist scholars, both biblical scholars and philosophers, to speak for themselves. It was, of course, not possible and not my intention to come up with a comprehensive account of feminist scholarship or even feminist biblical scholarship. No attention has, for example, here been paid to black and Asian feminist scholars. Since I am writing from the perspective of a white female scholar and her reactions to traditional male scholarship and to the way the Bible mostly functions, especially in the white section of society and the white churches, I selected a number of sources which provide crucial insights into the nature of feminist scholarship, and a number which deal specifically with the way (some) feminist biblical scholars deal with the Bible. Most of these are from North America and from Europe, where traditional biblical scholarship, as practised in

South Africa, has its roots.

As scholars the feminist philosophers' critique is, of course, mainly aimed at (much of) mainstream scholarship, which means that it will not necessarily be directly applicable to the sphere of the churches. Whereas, for example, in many academic discourses reason, often narrowly defined, is "overused", or used in isolation from the other human faculties and from the body, and for these reasons criticised by feminist philosophers, in the churches it is often "underused". However, since fundamentalism, still a common phenomenon in many churches, is not unrelated to rationalism, feminist scholars' critique of (disembodied) reason could also be of relevance for the discourses of the churches. Feminist scholars, who realise and emphasise that they interpret from a specific position, and that they are actively involved in their interpretations, can contribute to making people aware of the origin of their views and meanings. Their redefinition and enrichment of thought has the potential for contributing to a less rigid and more humane and meaningful kind of religious discourse.

Even if the churches would not take feminist insights, also feminist biblical insights, seriously, the wider impact of the Bible on culture and society, including its sometimes negative impact, and the fact that it is still used in a dubious way in public debates concerning social and ethical issues, calls for a different kind of discourse and reading of the Bible. To this end feminist biblical scholars have made a great contribution during the last few decades. Since the Bible is regarded by religious communities as a divine product with divine content and purpose, it has not always been easy to pinpoint the negative side of its impact and to analyze the ways in which it might have been contributing to the oppression of different groups of people, such as women, children, people of other faiths, homosexuals, and the created universe (Fontaine 1997:92). One could add to this that, since in the Christian tradition suffering is commonly regarded as God's will for people, many Christians through the centuries and even in our time have been conditioned to regard oppressions of various kinds as coming from God, which implies that they have to be obediently accepted.

Taking the feminist insights with regard to the Bible discussed above seriously would imply that, in seeking answers for today, in relating patriarchal texts to present-day contexts, it will no longer be sufficient to ask what these texts mean and to apply these meanings directly to present-day situations, as has been done for so long and as is still done in some churches. It will also not do to try and wring, at all costs, positive meanings from texts which are not conducive to this. How does one, for example, interpret a concept such as "submission", a "state" to which women are summoned in some biblical texts (1 Tm 2:11, 12; 1 Pt 3:1), positively? In order to arrive at more informed, just and meaningful answers for our own time, different questions will have to be asked, questions such as: Do we want to continue the patriarchal culture of which these texts, specifically those about the position of women, formed part, and in which the biblical prescriptions applied? What *effect* does what is presented to women and to other marginalised people as the Word of God have on their lives? Asking different questions, which could lead to new answers, could, for many people, be very liberating.

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