

“Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies”

– Phyllis Trible on the study of women in Hebrew Scriptures –

Introduction

Phyllis Trible is a North American academic who has held professorial positions at Wake Forest University, Andover-Newton Theological School and Union Theological Seminary (“Phyllis Trible” 2015). In this brief article, published in 1982, she describes “three approaches to the study of women in Scripture” (Trible 2007, p. 156). The scope of Trible’s comments is restricted to Hebrew Scriptures, which were “born and bred in a land of patriarchy” (Trible 2007, p. 156), though the observations easily generalise to the whole of the Christian Bible and its traditional interpretation.

Three approaches

Trible claims that the Biblical analysis in the first stages of modern feminism focussed on documenting the negative view of women that dominates the traditional reading. Both the Biblical narratives and legal proscriptions imply that women were secondary to, inferior to, and the property of men. There are many cases of the abuse of women in the Bible, such as Lot offering his daughters to the men of Sodom (Genesis 19) and Amnon raping his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Such analysis requires us to consider how we can believe and act in response to a scriptural tradition that seems so misogynous¹. As Trible points out, some may denounce the whole, some may adopt an anti-Semitic stance, some may deny that the text has any spiritual authority, others may despair at the on-going disempowerment of women in the Christian community.

In a second phase of feminist analysis, Trible notes a pattern of “highlighting neglected texts and reinterpreting familiar ones” (Trible 2007, p. 157) in order to bring to light a critique of patriarchy from within the text itself. An example of highlighting neglected texts is the feminine image of God giving birth to us in Deuteronomy 32:18. An example of reinterpreting familiar texts is an analysis of the Genesis account of The Fall, in which, rather than being seen as subordinate to Adam, Eve is presented as being the spokesperson for the Edenic couple. I would add that the dominance of men over women arises after The Fall – it is predicted within God’s so-called curses (Genesis 3:16), which all humanity and the history of redemption seeks to mitigate – rather than as part of God’s original intention (see also LaCugna 1993).

A third approach in feminist critique, according to Trible, is to retell Biblical stories in a mode more sympathetic to the female experience. Consider, for instance, the rape, murder and dismembering of an un-named concubine recounted in Judges 19. By approaching this story through the eyes of the concubine, and applying a reader-response methodology, a deeper story of remembrance emerges.

¹ Scholars of the Qur’an face the same challenge, although in the context of Islam the hermeneutic options are reduced. Since the Qur’an is believed to be dictated word-for-word by Allah and hence immutable, there is less scope for reader-response criticism or creative re-interpretation. One approach taken in Islamic hermeneutics that is not mentioned in Trible’s summary of Christian feminist options is to assert that the portrayal of women, however unpalatable to modern ears, was progressive and liberating for women at the time the text was written (Saeed 2008). In the Christian tradition, and perhaps in the equally patriarchal Islamic tradition, this option is more likely to be applied by male apologists than by feminists.

To take Tribble's rhetorical criticism of this passage further, I would add that the "remembrance" of this horrendous abuse contributes to and underscores one of the most potent trajectories of the Biblical narrative: that a violent response to violence will inevitably fail to bring justice, peace or social stability. In the context of that broader anthropological story, the remembrance of this unnamed target of male violence may even act as an Anamnesis, sacramentally calling readers to pay attention to God's solidarity with the victim.

Conclusion

In this article, Tribble describes three approaches to the study of women in the Bible in order to exemplify the range of options open to feminist hermeneutics. Her intention is not to be exhaustive, but to generate awareness in the hope that feminist challenges to traditional Biblical exegesis may "yield a biblical theology of womanhood (not to be subsumed under the label humanity) with roots in the goodness of creation female and male" (Tribble 2007, p. 160). Given that Tribble wrote this article in 1982, I would be interested to research whether further approaches in the intervening 33 years have moved towards that hope.

Reference List

- LaCugna, C. M. 1993. "God in Communion with Us - the Trinity." In *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, 83–114. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
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- Tribble, Phyllis. 2007. "Feminist hermeneutics and biblical studies." In *The Christian Theology Reader*, edited by Alistair E. McGrath, 156-160. Blackwell Publishing. Originally published in *Christian Century*, 3-10 (1982) 116-118.