

FOREWORD

One of the most productive catch-phrases of new literary criticism is Barbara Johnson's notion of "the difference within", which she used in her seminal 1987 book, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press). The present book shows why. Difference within, within the Hebrew Bible for example, makes room for interests other than the traditional preoccupations of scholarship, yet by exploring the internal dividedness of such an influential body of texts it also enables, explains, and thus helps along, the more traditional questions by providing them with more rather than less impact.

On Gendering Texts is a wonderful book in a field that demonstrates its maturity by this publication. It discusses the important and traditional issue of authorship. Whereas the idea of a unique and divinely inspired biblical author has long been abandoned, the issue of authorship itself has not. The criticism in line with "separation of sources" takes the Bible to be a patchwork of various strands, and its analytical procedures cannot solve the problem of mixture, blends, and other forms of diversity-within. The possibility that women might have contributed to the production of the Bible has not been taken seriously and yet the idea that everything is male unless otherwise proven is hardly acceptable. What can one do?

The two authors of this book shrewdly displace the question. Rather than worrying about unprovable historical authors, they consider gender-positions; authority; gendered textuality and attributions of gender within the text; voice; world-view and ideological content. Each of these issues is important, and the gesture of raising them in connection with that of authorship alone makes this book worthwhile. Thus they are able to lead a thorough discussion of the problem through to an attractive attempt at an answer. On the way, they discuss method and texts in parallel. Staying away from essentialist assumptions and from separationist cuts, they salvage the issue from the marginality it had been cast into, and from the mess any attempt to discuss it has so far led to.

This book is both unique and in line with a growing tradition; a climactic point in the developing area of feminist biblical study. There have been many contributions to biblical interpretation from

a feminist perspective, but as a whole the field of Biblical studies remains largely male-dominated. Yet this is not due to lack of goodwill; I have noticed in my own vagaries in that field that Biblical studies is more open than any other field I know of to the feminist perspective. But the current generation of scholars has not had the proper training to raise the right questions in this respect. Yet, as a consequence of the tremendous interest and the excitement created by feminist scholarship, the interest in feminist studies is growing so rapidly that a good textbook is more than called for.

This is such a textbook. The interest in the Hebrew Bible is immense, and this book offers such a wide variety of analyses, covering so many and such divergent texts, genres, and perspectives, that no one studying the Bible can afford to ignore it. In terms of methodology, the book is not overburdened with jargon and theory, yet is exemplarily explicit about its choices and procedures. Hence, even in classes which study none of the texts chosen, the book has immense value.

Early feminist criticism was hampered by a lack of theoretical knowledge and an excess of religious and social zeal, focusing on an audience of preachers more than scholars. Phyllis Tribble's work, in both its merits and its obvious limitations, marks the limit of how far that takes one. If Tribble's work has been extremely valuable in getting the feminist study of the Bible started, this book demonstrates the definitive move beyond that start.

Others have followed the lead. Most of those held on to the divide between "positive" views of the Bible (Tribble) and "negative" ones (the much-needed anger of Esther Fuchs comes to mind). The latter's justified resentment tends to make scholars blind to anachronistic projections, and blaming the Bible for today's problems is no help at all. This book is one of the few to move beyond that division, and to strike the difficult balance between, in fact, *two* divisions: between adherence and angry rejection on the one hand, and between historical distance and contemporary "use" on the other. This balance is characteristic of what I would call "second round" feminist scholarship, the one that has matured and has been integrated in most universities.

But that has not yet yielded a great deal of published work. This book compares with, and usefully complements, the best work done these days in this area. In New Testament studies, Elisabeth S. Fiorenza and Bernadette Brooten have been leaders; their work

is addressed explicitly and, I think, rightly, in the methodological *intermezzi* this book offers. In Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, I think most highly of the work of someone like Cheryl Exum. A tradition is on its way to being established.

The present book can compete with the best work in the field in terms of thoroughness and inventiveness, while it beats all published work in the field I know of in range and methodological explicitness and innovation. It is still more widely useful than any of it. This book covers a wide range of genres and texts, and, while being on the highest level in terms of methodological subtlety, it is easy to read and, hence, more likely to conquer the classroom.

Students learn, not only from methodological guidelines, but equally, if not more, from seeing these applied. The combination of methodological discussion—also good examples to follow—and broad as well as in-depth analyses makes this book an ideal tool for teaching.

Feminist exegesis has a heavy burden to carry: it must make itself plausible in discussion with standard views, it must show competence even in the traditional skills, and it must integrate literary as well as biblical traditions with feminist philosophy. The danger is that unless it falls short of these high expectations, the heaviness of the load makes itself felt. I admire the skills with which this book has been kept readable—in a sense, light. For example, the systematic summing up of relevant points makes it easy to handle. Yet, in spite of its pedagogical accessibility, all the expertise is there, and explicitly so: feminist theory is presented and endorsed; literary theory is adopted; and Biblical scholarship gets its due. The book is obviously not separatist.

Several features make this book absolutely unique, and I attribute much of this uniqueness to the dual authorship. This book is about authorship, authority, and ideology, and the presentation contributes much to its persuasiveness in this respect. The way the authors have handled their own double authorship in a study on a revision of the very notion of authorship is impressive. One might argue with the decision to stay with the first person singular in the individual essays, where a “we” would have been smoother. But the “I” here and the “we” there, make for an honesty that has intellectual implications. No feminist book of this scope has been authored by two authors from respectively a Jewish and a Christian background and

training. They agree on the basics and differ to some extent on details, and what is more realistic, and also, more constructive, than showing that overtly? I appreciate the way, for example, in which some of the issues raised by Van Dijk in Part I are taken up, in more detail, and with a somewhat different angle, by Brenner in Part II. Each author contributes her views on women's perspectives, and that fact emphasizes the diversity amongst feminists, much in need of emphasis. And Part IV is a mix of both authors' views on the issue of sexual oppression—there, when facing a common problem, they present a more unified front.

The book is equally unique in its combination of thoroughly historical considerations and contemporary concerns. The orchestration is masterfully effective. All through, the authors keep these two current but separate, and this leads to very fortunate emendations of previous attempts, as well as to very ingenious new interpretations. And then, dramatically, in the final part, where *The Story of O* serves as a direction for reading Jeremiah, the blend becomes so total that the reader must step back and think about what it means to do such a daring thing. My own conclusion is, then: why not? But if one wishes to distance oneself from this move, one is still burdened with the charge of defining the difference. Nothing is more illuminating. To end on such a provocative note is daring; it is also most stimulating, and I can imagine classroom assignments that will help students do the best thinking they have done so far.

The composition of the book shows the traces of the dual authorship, and given the above remarks, I mean that positively. It is surprising but innovative and good. First the authors present a combination of considerations of method and "application" of their preferred method to a large number of genres, with examples. This broadens the scope of the book usefully, and yet it shows enough of "how to do this". This first part (by Van Dijk) would make a useful book in and of itself. The examples demonstrate Van Dijk's long-standing expertise and experience as a teacher of this material. Her respectful attitude toward others, including opponents, sets a good example for students prone to show their cleverness by trashing predecessors. It also helps to bridge the gap between feminist and standard scholarship.

After this survey part, the second and third parts (by Brenner) go into more detail about one of the genres Van Dijk had outlined. This, too, helps the teacher and makes the general case more

convincing. Even if one does not agree with every detail, one will still be encouraged to follow the lead and go into more detail on one of the other genres. And then, Part IV supplies a timely complement: after the search for traces of female positions, this final part rounds the discussion off with discussions of unambiguously male positions. To call this pornography may seem a bit strong to some readers, but it certainly clarifies things.

I consider this book a most valuable contribution to the field of feminist biblical studies, and *thereby* to biblical studies in general. This stems from the combination of interdisciplinary methodology, wide-ranging text choice, and the diversity of aspects (genre, particular genres, authorship, pornography) discussed.

March 1992
Mieke Bal