Bread Not Stone
The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation

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Recenly I was involved in a discussion with students at one of the leading theological schools in this country. The women expressed their need for feminist biblical education and hermeneutics. One of them expressed their complaints well: "I have just come from a course that purports to introduce us to New Testament interpretation. But the guy talked a whole hour about historical-critical studies developed by German men in the last century. I am a second-career student and I do not have the time and the patience to bother with questions formulated by men in the past. What I want to do is to confront my own questions with the biblical text in order to find out whether it has something to say to my questions and to see what a feminist interpretation would do to my preaching and teaching of the Bible."

I was impressed and at the same time uneasy. I was impressed with this woman's articulate statement of her own theological goals challenging the established scholarship of the school. Remembering my own dodginess and "unconsciousness" as a woman student twenty years ago, I realized with pride that the work of the past decade in developing feminist theology and biblical interpretation had had some success in enabling women to articulate our own questions and to challenge the prevailing androcentric frameworks of scholarship. At the same time I was uneasy because the student was so certain that historical-critical scholarship had nothing to say to her own feminist theo-
logical quest and therefore could easily be discarded. I at least had experienced historical-critical scholarship as liberating, setting me free from outdated-doctrinal frameworks and literalist prejudices. Has nobody bothered to make connections between her feminist theological questions and the line of historical-critical scholarship? Or had I experienced historical-critical scholarship as opening up intellectual doors because I was a prefeminist when I was introduced to it? Was she right in her assumption and had I just been co-opted into thinking otherwise? Or was I merely naïve? I had always found the historical-critical method helpful for feminist critical interpretation and therefore assumed that resistance to such an interpretation was not because of the method but because of academic bias against women and our questions. What was it, then, that prohibited women in biblical studies from raising feminist questions as legitimate intellectual-historical problems? Were historical-critical methods such as textual criticism, philology, archeology, history of religions, tradition history, or form and redaction criticism at the root of the resistance to the feminist permeation of the field, or were the assumptions and frameworks of the historical-critical biblical discipline the source of the problem? And how much could method and conceptual frameworks be separated?

I. The Rankesian Understanding of History

The quandary evoked by my conversation with women students was deepened upon my return home, where I found a German collection of essays entitled Woman in Early Christianity. The contributions were written by my fellow students, with whom I had enjoyed exegetical discussions during the Schnackenburg doctoral seminar and theological-critical dialogues over Frankenwein during my student days. The volume pretends to be a response to the emancipatory tendencies of women in the church, but in reality it is an attack on a feminist critical hermeneutics that pursues, not the topical study of woman in the New Testament, but a feminist reconceptualization of early Christian history that could locate women's historical role not only at the margin of social-ecclesial relations but also at the center of them. Therefore prominent scholarship—the objectivity, reliability, and strictly historical approach of the authors—is stressed. "In order to engage in a discussion appropriate to the subject matter (sachgerecht), an exact knowledge of the New Testament foundation is necessary. How was it in the beginning?" Established and "well-known" authors (none of them a feminist exegete!) explore the statements of the New Testament on woman with wissenchaftlicher objectivity and scientific methods. What early Christianity has to say about the role of woman is here zuverlässig (reliable), presented for the discussion on the "woman question" (Frauenthema) in the church. An additional contribution on feminist theology was especially solicited from a woman who, however, is not a biblical scholar and thus not an equal partner in the dialogue. Nevertheless, the editors insist that the objective of the volume is not a "direct discussion of present-day topics or hypotheses of feminist theology but rather the collection and interpretation of all New Testament texts on 'die Frau.'" No mention is made that several scholarly collections and interpretations of these texts are already available and that the wissenchaftlich hermeneutic-methodological discussion has advanced beyond such a "typical" treatment of woman in the singular.

Since I am not interested here in evaluating this particular collection of essays but in examining its polemical rhetoric against a feminist critical biblical interpretation, it is necessary to look at the understanding of historical-critical method and its goals presented there. This particular volume can serve as a case study to pinpoint the source of tension between historical-critical and feminist-historical biblical studies. The antipartisan understanding of historical-critical studies as it was formulated in the last century by Ranke comes to the fore in the introduction to the article on the household code of Colossians. This statement is quoted at length because it indicates the emotions and interests that inspire the rhetoric of a scientific, and well-established historical-critical scholarship that claims not to be influenced by present-day concerns.
Women who currently rebel ever more violently for their rights in society usually bring into play the so-called household codes (Husseufeln) of the New Testament when they present their generally harsh and re-signed grievances against the traditions and institutions of a Christianity that in their opinion has considerably promoted and sanctioned the oppression of women. Without question, therefore, in a book on the woman in early Christianity the Husseufeln must become an important topic. It is useful, however, at the very beginning to mark the terms to which the New Testament scholar must be bound if he (sic) does not want to gamble away his methodological credibility. He (sic) may find his professional honor only in the fact that he does not interweave these ancient texts with the texture of modern emancipatory impulses and certainties, but rather seeks to explain them in correlation to their origin at the end of the first century A.D. This means especially that he can recognize their ethical quality only in a comparison with more or less vague, average injunctions for social behavior in later Hellenist antiquity. He must therefore be especially cautious not to explain away too quickly as conditioned by time or anachronistic all that which disturbs him today. His most important task will rather be to make exactly the offensive strangeness of these ancient expressions before the enlightened horizon of his own time. Such a rhetorical statement not only voids its apologetic aggression by claiming for itself historical objectivity but also advocates a nineteenth-century concept of history based on the assumption that the historian can “step out of his own time” and study history “on its own terms,” “uncumbered by questions and experiences of his own day.” I deliberately use here the pronoun he for the historian, since women who have entered the field in the past hundred years or so could not do so on their own terms but only by adopting an anachronistic conceptual framework and perspective that acknowledged women’s experiences and intellectual questions only peripherally or not at all. Therefore, women scholars no less than their colleagues subscribed to the Rankian definition of history as what actually happened. To bring their own issues to their intellectual work would have meant destroying the agreed-upon basis of this work. The feminist study of the Bible, therefore, did not originate with historical or biblical scholars in the academy but with women articulating their own biblical questions in their confrontation with anti-feminist biblical arguments used against them in their struggle for liberation.

The true exegete is expected to examine all the material in a truly dispassionate manner in order to study the past “for its sake” and to find out what actually happened. This ethos of historical-critical studies is also expressed in the following statement by the British scholar I. H. Marshall, which appeared in a book on New Testament methods of interpretation.

By “historical criticism” is meant the study of any narrative which purports to convey historical information in order to actually determine what actually happened. ... The phrase “what actually happened” is by no means free from difficulties of interpretation, but a common-sense view of it will suffice us in the present discussion.

The task of the historical exegete is therefore to interrogate the texts in order to construct a picture of the event which they reflect, a picture which will be in itself historically coherent and which will also serve to explain the wording of the sources. If it is assumed that the New Testament texts mirror the reality of early Christian women and give us an accurate picture of their involvement in early Christianity, then it is the “scientific” exegete who establishes objectivity with us as Anfang war. Moreover, since the work of Dilthey, the historian is expected to enter “sympathetically” into the minds or consciousness of historical persons to empathize with their motivations, intentions, and actions, to see them from their own point of view and not from that of the inquiring historian. Historical “objectivity” compels interpreters to put themselves
Historical facticity and theological truth can become identical. Historians assemble historical facts, drawn from historical sources and evidence. They use this collected evidence to discover and relate what actually happened at a certain time and certain place. Historians succeed at least sometimes in describing with “scientific objectivity” the actual events of the past.

The constructionist epistemology of historical knowledge stresses its “time-boundedness” and “situatedness,” which make it impossible for us to know the “real past” as we would know an object in the present. Neither the description of “data” nor the establishment of “historical facts” is scientifically verifiable because the description of historical data and facts is “narrative-laden.” Statements of historical fact do not emerge by themselves as ready-made mirrors of past events. In order to make statements of historical fact, scholars must draw inferences based in part upon their “data” or “sources” and in part upon their general understanding of human behavior and the nature of the world. They not only deal selectively with their historical sources in order to present a “coherent” narrative account, but also see historical “significance” to their “data” in accordance with the theoretical model or perspective that “orders” their information. This emphasis corresponds with the insight of the hermeneutical discussion that the interpreter is not able to step outside the “hermeneutical circle.”

In History and Social Theory Gordon Leff repeatedly states the criteria for a “good history.” According to him historical “objectivity” consists not of “pure” facts or “data,” but of the dynamic interrelation between the information gleaned from the sources and the “unifying vision” of the interpreter. Historians gather all available evidence, account for its correct use, and order it within a framework of reasoning. Nevertheless, historians argue from evidence as opposed to events accessible to our experience. In the attempt “to make the past intelligible,” the historian must go beyond the events in an act of “intellectual recreation.”

In doing so the historian shows at once why, for example, “Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon was significant for posterity and what it meant for Caesar and his
"history for." It is "history for" in the sense of being told with some ideological goal in mind and in the sense of being written for a certain group of people. "The clue to the meaning of a given historical discourse is contained as much in the rhetoric of the description of the field as in the logic of whatever argument is offered." Therefore the traditional distinction between "historical facts" (data) on the one hand and their interpretation (or the story told about the facts) on the other hand is misleading. It obscures the epistemological difficulty of distinguishing between these two levels.

Historical discourse itself is the actual "combination of facts and meaning which gives to it the aspect of a specific structure of meaning that permits us to identify it as a product of one kind of historical consciousness rather than another." Thus two levels of historical discourse can be distinguished: The "surface" level of the discourse consists of the historical facts and their interpretation and the "generic story type" comprises the conceptual model to which the events are to be likened but which is not always consciously chosen. This "generic story type" can be detected in the rhetorical "clues" and "emotional laden" words pointing to the figurative element of the discourse. Since every account of the past is mediated by the style of language in which historians describe the historical field, a nonrealistic account of historical reality is not possible. Rankean "realism" also was "relativistic" insofar as it required that historians view the past on "its own terms" or "for its own sake." Objectivity meant thinking one's way back into the consciousness of the historical epoch and getting "outside" one's own time and culture, viewing the world of antiquity, for example, "from its own perspective," as ancient people would have understood it. Therefore the historical-critical exegete had first to find out, for example, what the text of the New Testament meant in its historical context, whereas the preacher's task was to "apply" it and to explicate what it means today. But this division overlooks that we know "more" about the Greco-Roman world than the early Christian might have known. It also neglects the hermeneutical insight that "stepping outside" one's own time and culture is not only

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impossible but also not desirable. History is not written today for people of past times but for people of our own times. The historian understanding of history is not only epistemologically impossible but also historically undesirable. What needs to be rediscovered is the understanding of history not as artifact but as "historical consciousness" for the present and the future, a historical consciousness that understands historical knowledge in terms of the topos coined by Cicero: *Historia magistri vitae* (De Oratore libri tres II,36).10 Historical knowledge is not only "history for" but also knowledge dependent on the self-image of the social group for which historians speak and to which they belong. Far from being absent it actually happened with the utmost objectivity and value-neutrality, historians have written history for the dominant groups in society. History was conceived as a history of empires and wars, or as the history of political or cultural heroes, and it was written in order to instill national pride or cultural hegemony. History was made and written by the "winners"; the oppressed and vanquished of the past do not have a "written" history.

Social historians have pointed out that we know little about the everyday lives of most groups of ordinary people. Our sources rarely speak about the experiences and contributions of slaves, serfs, prostitutes, working-class people, or colonized peoples. American historians have shown that historiography in this country was from its inception occupied with questions of public policy and sought to imbue Americans with a sense of national pride. "From the days of the first doctoral program at Johns Hopkins, where "History is past politics" was a slogan inscribed on the seminar room wall, historians have defined their subject as a record of the public and political aspects of the American past."11 Feminist historians in turn have pointed out that most histories were written as if women did not exist or as if we were some rare and exceptional creatures on the fringes of American social life.

Intellectual historians, moreover, have shown that the three eminent historians of "realist historiography," Ranke, Meinecke, and Croce, were antiprogressive and politically reactionary. Ranke developed his notion of history in opposition to the revolution of 1830 and for the sake of the Prussian governmental and social elites. Although he stated "his historical urge to survey the whole (of modern history) from a detached viewpoint," he maintained that the separation and independent development of the European states, which were fortified by the centrifugal force "of the national principle," express "the secret of world history" and thus serve as the conservative general counter-part to the "general movement of democracy" which would dominate or homogenize the individual states.12 In Meinecke as well as Croce, realist historicism is also intertwined with clearly conservative positions: "In Meinecke it is tied to a nineteenth-century conception of the national state of romantic inspiration on the one hand and Bismarckian politics on the other hand; in Croce it is intertwined with a form of liberalism which is not only ademocratic but clearly antidemocratic.13 Thus historical discourse is not only "narrative-laden" but intrinsically linked to the specific sociopolitical reality in which it arises and to the sociopolitical location of the historian who produces it.

The past is not a continuum of given facts we can rediscover by mere objective observation, but rather discloses itself only to us if we put specific questions to it. Historians are never able to free ourselves totally from our own experiential presuppositions or institutional interests, and we should not even attempt to do so. What makes our work interesting and fruitful are the specific questions, concerns, insights, perspectives, and commitments that compel us to study a certain epoch of the past or to choose from the complexity of historical reality those elements that enable us to make the causal link between the past and our world. Therefore, all historical discourse and judgment stands as it were with one foot rooted in the self-image of a certain group in society. The current values, interests, and traditions of the group to which the historian belongs and which make up his [sic] audience determine not only the subject matter the historian