Countertraditions in the Bible
A Feminist Approach

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remained mostly untouchable because of its status as a "religious text." Dealing with biblical texts extensively was in a sense perceived as an affirmation of the Bible’s authority. The rise of the second wave of feminist criticism in the late 1970s, with its focus on female texts, did not bring about much change in this respect.

**Phyllis Trible**

Within the domain of religious studies feminist discussions of religion have flourished from the seventies on. Most of the important books pertaining to this trend, such as Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father* (1973) and Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), deal primarily with theological issues rather than with textual analysis; as such they remain outside the scope of my discussion. Phyllis Trible, whose work I will discuss at length, is one of the few feminist biblical scholars who has applied literary theory (New Criticism in particular) to the Hebrew Bible. Her scholarly and comprehensive study of biblical texts is an important landmark, although it lacks what Mieke Bal defines as “contemporary theoretical reflection” (1986:73).

In “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” her most influential article, Trible challenges the assumptions of the first wave of feminist criticism, refuting Kate Millett’s claim that “Patriarchy has God on its side.”

Trible’s depatriarchalization of biblical criticism has been her most significant contribution to feminist criticism of the Bible. She has outlined a way of undoing misogynist readings of the Bible which is far more refined than Stanton’s brief commentaries. And yet the fact that Trible remains on God’s side—exempting Yahweh from critique—makes her approach problematic. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza criticizes Trible for her neo-orthodox theology, claiming that “a biblical theology that does not seriously confront ‘the patriarchal stamp’ of the Bible and its religious-political legitimization of the patriarchal oppression of women is in danger of using a feminist perspective to rehabilitate the authority of the Bible, rather than to rehabilitate women’s biblical history and theological heritage” (1983:21).

It comes as no surprise that the first account of creation is of great importance in Trible’s work. In “Clues in the Text,” her theoretical introductory chapter to *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, she regards Genesis 1:27 as the primary scriptural clue for the subject of God and the rhetoric of sexuality. Trible suggests that “the formal parallelism between the phrases ‘in the image of God’ and ‘male and female’ indicates a semantic correspondence between a lesser known element and a better known element” (1978:17). Implicitly, then, metaphor becomes the chosen trope, with the image of God as the tenor and human sexuality as vehicle. By turning this parallelism into a guiding metaphor, Trible highlights the pluralism and equality that God’s image suggests, refuting all those (whether feminists or sexists) who see Yahweh as a male deity. “God is neither male nor female,” she claims, “and yet detecting divine transcendence in human reality requires human clues. Unique among them . . . is sexuality . . . To describe male and female, then, is to perceive the image of God; to perceive the image of God is to glimpse the transcendence of God . . . In this metaphor the vehicle con-
tributes explicit meanings, while the tenor exists through hints and guesses" (pp. 21-22).

Trible unjustly restricts the rhetorical function of Genesis 1:27. This parallelism could be perceived as a literal analogy between the human and divine realms. It could also be construed as a metonymy: "male and female" being extensions or contiguous aspects of the "image of God." Furthermore, even if this verse is perceived as a metaphor, why must God be the tenor? Genesis 1:27 is primarily a poetic celebration of the special status of humanity as the climax of creation. God is not quite the topic.

Using this metaphor as an interpretive clue, Trible goes on to suggest that the imagery of God needs to be analyzed in light of both the feminine and masculine facets of the divine image. But already in the final line of this introductory chapter, Genesis 1:27 turns into "a metaphor that highlights female imagery for God" (p. 23; emphasis added). Similarly, Trible's discussion throughout God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality focuses on female metaphors for God (God as mother, midwife, mistress). The predominant male metaphors (God as father, husband, warrior) remain unexamined.

But let us now consider Trible's detailed analysis of Genesis 2–3. Unlike Stanton, she does not reject the second account, nor does she see it as a less refined sexist text which contradicts the egalitarian depiction of creation in Genesis 1. Trible neglects to take into account the differences between the Yahwistic text and the Priestly one, or, rather, she ignores the findings of historical biblical criticism. This is but one example of the anachronism which her ahistorical New Critical approach involves. Seeking an organic unity of the text, she ignores the poetic and political implications of the stitching together of diverse documents dating from different periods.

Trible begins her chapter on Genesis 2–3 with a list of traditional interpretations which she refutes one by one. She refutes, for example, the common notion that God created man first and shows that even if this were the case, it does not necessarily imply his superiority vis-à-vis woman. Relying on the fact that ha'adam is a generic Hebrew term meaning "humankind," she suggests that it is not man who is created in 2:7, but a sexually undifferentiated "earth creature." (Trible thus underscores the biblical pun which links the terms ha'adam [humankind] and 'adama [earth].) Human sexuality is created only in 2:22–23. Only after God operates on this earth creature, to produce a companion, its identity becomes sexual. The surgery is radical, for it results in two creatures where before there was only one. The new creature, built from the material of ha'adam, is female, receiving her identity in a word that is altogether new to the story, the word 'ishah. The old creature transformed is male, similarly receiving identity in a word that is new in the story, 'ish. In the very act of distinguishing female from male, the earth creature describes her as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23). These words speak unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality. Accordingly, in this poem the man does not depict himself as either prior to or superior to the woman. His sexual identity depends upon her even as hers depends upon him. (pp. 98–99)

Trible's insistence on the ambiguity of the term ha'adam in the story as well as her suggestion that sexual-differentiation takes place only when the concepts 'ish and 'ishah are created are most convincing. Her argument, however, becomes murky once the earth creature is transformed into a male creature, or rather when the term ha'adam is still used after sexual differentiation takes place as the proper name of the first man. In other words, instead of dealing with the ongoing fluidity and built-in ambiguity of the term ha'adam and examining its possible functions, she attributes one meaning exclusively to 2:7–21 and the other to 2:22–23.
It is fascinating to see how the same details can be read so differently by different feminists. When dealing with the material from which woman was created, Trible, unlike de Beauvoir, sees God's building (bnh) of woman from the rib as a sign of her uniqueness, not only vis-à-vis man but also with respect to the rest of creation. (Trible rightly points out that, in addition to the earth creature, animals and plants were also created from earth.) After depicting the complex mysterious work which the creation of woman involved, she concludes that "woman is no weak, dainty, ephemeral creature. No opposite sex, no second sex, no derived sex—in short, no 'Adam's rib.' Instead, woman is the culmination of creation, fulfilling humanity in sexuality. Equal in creation with the man, she is, at this point [Genesis 2:23] elevated in emphasis by the design of the story" (p. 102).

In Trible's hands the Bible almost turns into a feminist manifesto, where every detail suspiciously ends up supporting woman's liberation. This is also the case with her treatment of the Fall. When dealing with the conversation of woman and serpent, she describes the first woman as an intelligent, perceptive, informed theologian or exegete who, unlike her passive partner, is familiar with the divine command and doesn't hesitate to reflect on it. Woman's decision to eat of the fruit of knowledge is accordingly seen as a courageous act which above all reflects her quest for knowledge. Only when Trible discusses the respective punishments of man and woman does she speak of the strife between the sexes and the inequality brought about by their transgression. But here too equality is somehow maintained, for "woman is corrupted in becoming a slave, and the man is corrupted in becoming the master" (p. 128). Moreover, the God responsible for the formation of these sex roles remains immaculate. Yahweh, according to Trible, does not prescribe such sex roles but rather presents them as the bleak result of transgression. "This statement [that the husband rule over his wife] is not license for male supremacy, but rather it is condemnation of that very pattern. Subjugation and supremacy are perver-
sions of creation" (1976:20).

Esther Fuchs

In the mid-eighties a few comprehensive feminist critiques outside the domain of religious studies emerged, in part, I would suggest, in response to the flourishing of the literary approach to the Bible, and in part as a result of the regenerated interest in male texts. Two articles by Esther Fuchs on the characterization of women in the Bible appeared in 1985. These were followed by an article concerning the patriarchal functions of biblical type-scenes in 1987 and an article on Rachel's story in 1988. Fuchs's main objective is to examine the political implications of supposedly "innocuous poetic constructions." Following the preliminary guidelines set in the writings of de Beauvoir, and especially in those of Millett, she focuses on the repressive androcentric aspects of biblical poetics, offering "a theoretical articulation of biblical sexual politics, or the ways by which the biblical narrative universalizes and legislatates its male centered epistemology" (1986).

Fuchs, however, does not provide an extensive analysis of the creation of woman. She rightly asserts that the victimization of woman in Genesis 2–3 has been acknowledged by numerous feminist critics, suggesting that what is still lacking is a comprehensive literary critical study of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Nevertheless, in "Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism," Fuchs briefly analyzes Eve as the prototypical deceptive woman. "Deceptiveness is a common characteristic of women in the Hebrew Bible," she claims "From Eve to Esther, from Rebekah to Ruth, the characterization of women presents deceptiveness as an almost inescapable feature of femininity" (1985:137).

She goes on to suggest that Eve is an exemplary case of