QOHELETH (ECCLESIASTES)

WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 24

Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)

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Dedicated to Mom, the first one to teach me the power of feminism

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LMW
From the Library overlooking the Cloister at Saint Paul's
Episcopal Cathedral, OKC,
Various coffee shops and libraries all over the country,
And the West Wing of the Gold Star Building
at Oklahoma City University
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BCE	Before the Common Era
BDB	*Brown Driver Briggs and Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*
BH	Biblical Hebrew
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
BHQ	*Biblia Hebraica Quinta*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
CE	Common Era
CEB	Common English Bible
CTR	*Criswell Theological Review*
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
ERV	English Revised Version (1885)
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*

IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
Int	*Interpretation*
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JHebS	*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MH	*Mishnaic Hebrew*
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEA	*Near Eastern Archaeology* (formerly *Biblical Archaeologist*)
NET	New English Translation
NIB	*New Interpreter's Bible*
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDB	*New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
NIRV	New International Reader's Version
NISB	*New Interpreter's Study Bible*
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Translation
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology

OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Old Testament Message
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SymS	Symposium Series
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006.
ThTo	*Theology Today*
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
USQR	*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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Foreword

"Tell It on the Mountain"—or, "And You Shall Tell Your Daughter [as Well]"

Athalya Brenner-Idan

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What can Wisdom Commentary do to help, and for whom?

The commentary genre has always been privileged in biblical studies. Traditionally acclaimed commentary series, such as the International Critical Commentary, Old Testament and New Testament Library, Hermeneia, Anchor Bible, Eerdmans, and Word—to name but several—enjoy nearly automatic prestige, and the number of women authors who participate in those is relatively small by comparison to their growing number in the scholarly guild. There certainly are some volumes written by women in them, especially in recent decades. At this time, however, this does not reflect the situation on the ground. Further, size matters. In that sense, the sheer size of the Wisdom Commentary is essential. This also represents a considerable investment and the possibility of reaching a wider audience than those already "converted."

Expecting women scholars to deal especially or only with what are considered strictly "female" matters seems unwarranted. According to Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[1] But this maxim is not relevant to our case. The point of this commentary is not to destroy but to attain greater participation in the interpretive dialogue about biblical texts. Women scholars may bring additional questions to the readerly agenda as well as fresh angles to existing issues. To assume that their questions are designed only to topple a certain male hegemony is not convincing.

At first I did ask myself: is this commentary series an addition to calm raw nerves, an embellishment to make upholding the old hierarchy palatable? Or is it indeed about becoming the Master? On second and third thoughts, however, I understood that becoming the Master is not what this is about. Knowledge is power. Since Foucault at the very least, this cannot be in dispute. Writing commentaries for biblical texts by feminist women and men for women and for men, of confessional as well as non-confessional convictions, will sabotage (hopefully) the established hierarchy but will not topple it. This is about an attempt to integrate more fully, to introduce another viewpoint, to become. What excites me about the Wisdom Commentary is that it is not offered as just an alternative supplanting or substituting for the dominant discourse.

These commentaries on biblical books will retain nonauthoritative, pluralistic viewpoints. And yes, once again, the weight of a dedicated series, to distinguish from collections of stand-alone volumes, will prove weightier.

That such an approach is especially important in the case of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is beyond doubt. Women of Judaism, Christianity, and also Islam have struggled to make it their own for centuries, even more than they have fought for the New Testament and the Qur'an. Every Hebrew Bible/Old Testament volume in this project is evidence that the day has arrived: it is now possible to read *all* the Jewish canonical books as a collection, for a collection they are, with guidance conceived of with the needs of women readers (not only men) as an integral inspiration and part thereof.

In my Jewish tradition, the main motivation for reciting the Haggadah, the ritual text recited yearly on Passover, the festival of liberation from

1. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007), 110–14. First delivered in the Second Sex Conference in New York, 1979.

bondage, is given as "And you shall tell your son" (from Exod 13:8). The knowledge and experience of past generations is thus transferred to the next, for constructing the present and the future. The ancient maxim is, literally, limited to a male audience. This series remolds the maxim into a new inclusive shape, which is of the utmost consequence: "And you shall tell your son" is extended to "And you shall tell your daughter [as well as your son]." Or, if you want, "Tell it on the mountain," for all to hear.

This is what it's all about.

Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)

Barbara E. Reid, OP

General Editor

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the "Hebrew Bible" and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox

Communions (i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

A Symphony of Diverse Voices

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

Woman Wisdom

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct

wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as "a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sirach 24:23-34; Baruch 3:9–4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Baruch 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, "put your neck under her [Wisdom's] yoke and let your souls receive instruction" (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called "wisdom's children"). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

Feminism

There are many different understandings of the term "feminism." The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full flourishing of human beings and all creation. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women's efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women's concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use

of the internet as a platform for discussion and activism.[1] As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

Feminist Women and Men

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.[2] Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*: *A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."[3] She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."[4] One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berakot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about the Divine as feminine.[5] Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.[6]

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2003), 110–11.

to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.[7]

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.[8]

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).[9] In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.[10] Another prominent abolitionist, Isabella Baumfree, who adopted the name Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches[11] and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,[12] published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.[13]

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God.*

13. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.[14] A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encylopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.[15]

Another groundbreaking work is the collection The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commentaries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, Feminist Companion

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature). Five more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni; English translation ed. Amy-Jill Levine (2015); *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015); and *Early Jewish Writings*, ed. Eileen Schuller and Marie-Theres Wacker (2017). For further information, see http://www.bibleandwomen.org.

to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

Methodologies

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.[16] In the Wisdom Commentary series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and the dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.[17] Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."[18] Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.[19] Wisdom Commentary aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, Companions to the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.[20] A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.[21] In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.[22]

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.[23] They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in

20. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

22. See Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, GBS, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

23. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.[24] Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.[25] Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.[26] Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.[27] Feminists also use other postmodern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and

24. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

25. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978).

26. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

27. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.[28] The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.[29] Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.[30]

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.[31] Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."[32] Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate

28. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia* 59 (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

29. See, e.g., Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When *They*, *We*, and the Passive Become *I*—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 61 (2005): 401–16.

30. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).

31. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004).

32. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also, Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp,

women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.[33]

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."[34] Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.[35] Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").[36] Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."[37] Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.[38]

Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

33. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

35. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

36. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

37. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

38. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, Studies in Latino/a Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.[39]

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.[40]

Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as

39. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

40. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, SymS 46 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America*, Women from the Margins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.[41]

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term "God" has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.[42] Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d.* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G*d*.[43] Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.[44] In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

41. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

42. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

43. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3.

44. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, "God," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.[45] Moreover, for Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants.[46] The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.[47] Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.[48]

45. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

46. Representing the *via media* between Catholic and reformed, Anglicans generally consider the Apocrypha to be profitable, if not canonical, and utilize select Wisdom texts liturgically.

47. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

48. Elizabeth Castelli, "*Les Belles Infidèles*/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.

Because of these complexities, the editors of the Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled "Translation Matters." When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

Art and Poetry

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

Glossary

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

A Concluding Word

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that Wisdom Commentary, by making the best of current feminist biblical

scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.

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Author's Introduction

A Feminist Toolbox for Interpreting Qoheleth

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

—Audre Lorde[1]

Qoheleth has been dangerous—even deadly—for women. For some of us who are feminists, that would be enough reason to stop reading. Such a suggestion is not unheard of in our circles, from Mary Daly rejecting the Bible outright to Renita Weems acknowledging that resistant readings are our only way to survive.[2] Qoheleth easily morphs into a handy tool for misogyny, and misogynists have implemented it with ease. Furthermore, some parts of the book that are not

1. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkley: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007), 110–13.

2. Daly told *The Guardian*: "I hate the Bible. . . . I always did." Mel Steel, "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," *The Guardian* (August 25 1999); Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 103.

obviously misogynistic nonetheless glorify the patriarchal mind-set of empire-supporting hierarchy and wealth. Yet oddly enough, the questions raised in Qoheleth—the kinds of questions and our persistence in asking them—may also become tools for the feminist to undermine patriarchy, hierarchy, racism, homophobia, and classism. Qoheleth insistently questions doctrinal beliefs. This crucial practice in the hands of feminists has become our pickax against the walls of patriarchal theology and even against the so-called "stained-glass ceiling."[3] Qoheleth fosters and encourages a hermeneutic of suspicion toward much of ancient Israelite theology, an approach that has long been acknowledged as crucial for feminist biblicists and theologians. Indeed, use of Qoheleth for feminist aims involves subversive reading that must reject many of the Sage's basic assumptions if we are to start a revolution that will truly create something new. As Jennifer L. Koosed has aptly observed,

> In the end, Ecclesiastes may offer a word of advice to feminist activists. Espousing a revolutionary feminist agenda runs the risk of dismissal; working within sexist systems to reform these systems runs the risk of co-optation. Revolution and reform must work in tension and in tandem, often deliberately defying or subverting conventional notions of consistency, in order to transform the world.[4]

Similarly, Audre Lorde warns me that even though my feminist methodology drives me to ask who is fixing the feast for Qoheleth's *carpe diem*, my biblical analysis had better not overlook the women who care for my children and who clean my house.[5] Lorde is right that we may well be in trouble if we think the very tools of "the master" will solve our

3. The earliest citation of this term appears to have been from Ruth Fitzpatrick, the national coordinator of the Women's Ordination Conference. An April 1992 draft of a pastoral letter, addressed to American bishops for review, continued to exclude Roman Catholic women from ordination. In response, Fitzpatrick said that in the document the women only got "crumbs." "Some women will say, let's take these crumbs. . . . I say, we've got to stop licking up the floors and break the stained glass ceiling." Ari L. Goldman, "The Nation: Even for Ordained Women, Church Can Be a Cold Place," *New York Times* (April 9 1992), 18.

4. Jennifer L. Koosed, "Ecclesiastes," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Ann Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 246.

5. Lorde wrote, "If white american [*sic*] feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?" ("The Master's Tools," 112).

problems. Our task is to create new tools, though who says we cannot use the old ones as raw material?

Date

Qoheleth's book is famously difficult to date. Traditionalist readings place the book in the time of the monarchy, due to the reference in 1:1, "son of David," and a reference to "the king" at the end of the "test of pleasure" in 2:1-12, which details luxuries that have much in common with what is elsewhere reported from King Solomon's reign (1 Kgs 4:20-34). Nonetheless, we have long known that just because a biblical book mentions a biblical figure, it does not mean we can date that book to the time of that figure—whether Moses, or Joseph, or Ruth. Probably the most promising method for dating Qoheleth is through linguistic analysis. Even beginning Hebrew students can tell that the grammar and vocabulary in this book are noticeably different from what they learned in their first semester. A number of scholars have identified Qoheleth's writing as late, pre-Mishnaic Hebrew and thus place it in the Hellenistic period.[6] Similarly, the Hellenistic philosophical ideas Qoheleth suggests help establish it in this era.[7] Qoheleth has struck most interpreters as post-Persian, and many locate it in the Ptolemaic era.[8] Choon-Leong Seow notably departs from this dating of the book; he makes the case that it hails from the Persian period, largely due to word usage.[9]

6. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1987), 49; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 6 n. 10; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951), 60; Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1992), 221; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 2–7.

7. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World* (New York: Bloch, 1962), 30–34, 54, 63–68; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 115–30; Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 21–22.

8. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 19–21. See also Ora Brison's view on the canonicity and canonization of the book in chapter 1.

9. Seow argues that the book belongs "specifically between the second half of the fifth century and the first half of the fourth." Choon-Leong Seow, "Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qoheleth," *JBL* 115 (1996): 643–66. Also see Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 11–21.

In the end, there is no real scholarly consensus on a date for this book. If one date is more prevalent than others, it is probably a vague 250 BCE, but any scholar worth her salt will readily admit that is little more than a good educated guess and that other scholars have made decent arguments that place the book in a different time period. At the very least, the book was written after the monarchy, since it includes mention of a king. At the very latest, the fragments of Qoheleth found at Qumran (4Q109Qoh[a] and 4Q110Qoh[b]) date to 175–150 and even to the first century BCE, providing a *terminus ad quem*.[10] Additionally, the book seems not to reflect the violent conflicts of the Maccabees prompted by the abuses of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 BCE.

For the purposes of this commentary, what matters about Qoheleth's date has to do with how it may have affected women in its time. For instance, when Qoheleth discusses inheritance (2:18-19; 5:13-14 [12-13];[11] 7:11), to what extent did that relate to women, in terms of their ability to inherit land or other property? When Qoheleth invokes the *carpe diem*, some version of "eat, and drink, and enjoy your life" (2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19 [17-18]; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:8-9), who would have been preparing and serving the food and drink? Scholars have a limited ability to answer these questions, and the answers to these questions vary from one era and geographical setting to another. Nonetheless, feminist scholars in particular have produced volumes of research that can help us address these questions, and I will do my best to consult their research as appropriate. The key scholars I consult for these matters include: Phyllis Bird, Jennie Ebeling, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Rachel Hachlili, Tal Ilan, Carol Meyers, and Harold Washington.[12] Bird, Meyers, and Ebeling primarily

10. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 19.

11. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, including in Qoheleth, there are places where verse numbering differs between the Hebrew MT and most English translations. (A notable exception to this is Jewish Publication Society English translations, which use the MT numbering.) Usually, the numbering is off by one. When verse numbers differ, this volume will first note the English verse number(s); the Hebrew number(s) will immediately follow in brackets.

12. Phyllis Ann Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997); Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times* (London: T & T Clark, 2010); Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era," *JSOT* 17 (1992): 25–43; Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001); Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women*

address women in the Iron I and II eras. In all likelihood, some of what we can learn about women from these periods would have held true for at least some women (and perhaps most) for many centuries beyond, depending on setting, socio-economic status, and related factors. For instance, the archaeological record shows that the process for grinding flour changed over the centuries, while the domed, three-foot-across clay bread ovens continued in use in Middle Eastern villages into the 1900s of the Common Era.[13] Hachlili, Eskenazi, Ilan, and Washington address Second Temple women, primarily the early Second Temple period, while Ilan also differentiates some of the factors that affected women into the Greco-Roman Period. Unfortunately, even if we had a definitive date for the book of Qoheleth, that would not necessarily tell us what social and gender mores to apply—from marriage practices, to life expectancy, to inheritance rights, to division of labor—because those varied from one community to the next even in the same time period, depending on factors such as geography, socio-economic status, and external cultural influences, to name just a few.

One argument about women's roles in biblical times suggests that women had more freedom, independence, and equality in the agrarian pre-monarchic settings than in urban ones during the time of the monarchy. Thus, during the time of the biblical ancestors and judges, women seem to have had a greater role in household leadership and decision making than would have been the case in the time of the monarchy; this may again have been true shortly after the exile, when a village-type setting was again the norm. Carol Meyers, however, helpfully provides nuance for this theory. She points out that, not only would the type of governance matter, but also the context in which a given woman was living. Thus a woman living within the city walls of Jerusalem during the time of the monarchy would have perhaps enjoyed less freedom or equality with her male counterparts than a woman living in a village some distance from the city, even during the same time period.[14]

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in Greco-Roman Palestine (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996); Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Harold Washington, "The Strange Woman (נכריה/ אשה זרה) of Proverbs 1–9 and Post-Exilic Judaean Society," in *Second Temple Studies*, vol. 2: *Temple Community in the Persian Period* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 217–42.

13. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 131.

14. Ibid., 117.

Chapter 1

Learning Qoheleth's Language (1:1-18)

Superscription (1:1)

Qoheleth's introduction in this opening verse invites a list of questions that we will struggle with throughout the book: superscription or frame-narrative; persona or person; female/feminine or male/masculine; monarch or sage; assembler or philosopher. As I detailed in my introduction, I will entertain a variety of these possibilities below, leaving room for readers to make their own conclusions by refraining from gendering Qoheleth, providing historical context from more than one time period, and digging around for hints on all of these issues. Knowing Qoheleth, the answers are not likely in an either/or but somewhere unknowable in between.

Qoheleth: Canonicity and Canonization

Rav Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in Rab's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Qoheleth, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching. (b. Šhabb. 30b)

All the Holy Scriptures defile the hands. The Song of Songs and Qoheleth defile the hands. Rabbi Judah says: The Song of Songs defiles the hands, but there is a dispute about Qoheleth. (m. Yad. 3:5)

Qoh 1:1

1:1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

In the Jewish Bible, the book of Qoheleth is included in the collection of the Five *Megilloth* (Scrolls) that has been traditionally associated with the annual Jewish holidays and is publicly read in synagogues on the feast of Tabernacles/Sukkot (a practice that probably began in the Middle Ages).

Qoheleth is also considered to be one of the biblical wisdom writings (together with Proverbs and Job), presenting philosophical/theological themes and questions regarding life's meaning, human suffering, and mortality, as well as God's sovereignty, divine justice, God's involvement in the world's order, and human behavior and destiny.[1] Nevertheless, Qoheleth is distinctly different from either Job or Proverbs and is considered to be a unique and unusual book within the Hebrew biblical canon. The book's tone as well as its content is as far removed from the usual biblical norms as can be. For example: Qoheleth 5:4-5 [3-4] criticizes the theological rationale of certain deuteronomistic laws (23:22-24) and reworks them.[2] The main theme of the Hebrew Bible, describing God's activity in history or his relationship with the people of Israel, is absent from the book, as is the Tetragrammaton (YHWH, God's name).[3] The book ignores almost completely the omnipresence of God, with which most of the biblical texts are suffused. Qoheleth projects an atmosphere of despondency and pessimism with the repeated refrain הבל. While the text verges on hopelessness on the one hand, there is at places a suggestion for possible individual contentment, but only through wisdom and

1. Jacob Klein, "The Book of Qoheleth: Introduction," in *Qoheleth, Olam Hatanach* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Divrei Ha'yamim Publication, 1999), 162–68.

2. See Bernard M. Levinson, "Better That You Should Not Vow Than That You Vow and Not Fulfill: Qoheleth's Use of Textual Allusion and the Transformation of Deuteronomy's Law of Vows," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 28–41.

3. See Michael J. Broyde, "Defilement of the Hands, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs," *Judaism* 44 (1995): 65–79; Megan Fullerton Strollo, "Initiative and Agency: Towards a Theology of the Megilloth," in *Megiloth Studies*, ed. Brad Embry (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2016), 150–60.

morality. In the epilogue (chap. 12) Qoheleth seems to return to the biblical norms that the most important thing is to fear God and observe the commandments (12:13-14). These two verses stand out in contrast to the rest of the book.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Qoheleth was one of the three books (with Esther and the Song of Songs) whose status within the canon has been disputed and discussed in the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud (m. Nez. Adayoth 5:3; b. Meg. 7a; Šabb. 30b). The dispute of the Jewish Sages (of the first and early centuries CE) concerning the canonicity of Qoheleth is formulated in the context of the halachic discussion concerning the "defiling of the hands" (m. Yad. 3:5 and b. Meg. 7a). Sacred writings are considered as "defiling the hands," that is, making them unclean for dealing with profane tasks: touching sacred objects, including sacred canonical writings, requires the hands to be washed in order to return to profane, mundane activities. In contrast, dealing with profane writings does not make the hands "unclean" and does not require washing. (As paradoxical as this may sound to the modern mind, this was presumably decreed in order to minimize the handling of Holy Writings.)

As in many Talmudic debates, the issue of the reasons for Qoheleth's inclusion in the canon is left open. There are reasons for and against such inclusion. The fact of the matter is, clearly, that Qoheleth was indeed added to the canonized writings, probably because of its popularity at least in certain circles.

Another reason might have been the tradition of attributing the book's authorship to King Solomon, understanding literally the designation קהלת בן דוד מלך בירושלם ("Qoheleth son of David, king in Jerusalem") in the superscription of the book (1:1). For instance, the first *parasha* of Midrash *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* contains several references attributing to King Solomon authorship of three biblical books, in this order: Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Qoheleth (1:6, 7, 8). Finally, in 1:10, two opinions are cited in the name of two Jewish scholars. One, that Solomon composed the Song of Songs while young, Proverbs while a mature man, and Qoheleth while an old man. And the second, that when in old age Solomon received divine inspiration (רוח הקדש, literally "sacred spirit"), he composed all three together. The discussion is concluded by the statement that nobody disputes the Solomonic authorship for all three books.

At any rate, early hesitation about Qoheleth's canonicity was later forgotten and full acceptance followed, as evidenced by the adopted custom of reading the scroll at the synagogue on an important annual festival (Sukkot).

The scarcity of fragments of this atypical biblical text among the Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran) findings seems, however, to attest to its precarious standing in as much as the biblical canon was concerned. Only two fragments were discovered so far, both in Cave 4 of Qumran: 4Q109 Qohelet[a], dated between 175 and 150 BCE and containing Qoheleth 5:14-18 [13-17]; 6:1, 3-8, 12; 7:1-10, 19-20; and 4Q110 Qohelet[b], dated between 30 BCE and 68 CE and containing Qoheleth 1:10-14.

Ora Brison

Opening *hevel* (הבל) Statement (1:2)

This verse begins with a first-person quotation from Qoheleth reported by a third-person narrator, presumably the author of 1:1, though that could be a persona of Qoheleth.[4] The opening statement finds a fitting place just after the superscription, since it introduces a major focus of the book through a five-time repetition of the perplexing and elusive theme-word הבל, *hevel*, traditionally translated "vanity."

In a literal sense, *hevel* refers to a "breath" (Isa 57:13), which poses an interesting metaphor if one plugs it in for *hevel* throughout the book of Qoheleth. After all, a breath utterly sustains life, and the thought of being without it is enough to make any asthmatic break out in a cold sweat. Yet a breath also illustrates all that is insubstantial. A breath can scarcely be touched or seen or heard; it lasts only a moment and must be repeated continually to sustain life. A breath has its own life to the extent that it continues even in sleep and comatose states. Beyond the literal meaning "breath," *hevel* refers to that which is fleeting, whether the life of the biblical character who bears the term as his name (Heb. *hevel* = Abel, in Gen 4:2, 4, 8, 9, 25) or as a prophet's put-down to what he views as a useless idol (Jer 10:3).

The most convincing translation for *hevel* in Qoheleth that I have found is Michael V. Fox's "absurd/absurdity."[5] Fox describes absurdity in terms of Camus' explanation that it identifies the disjunction between what one expects and what actually occurs. This seems a remarkable match for what Qoheleth tries to describe throughout the book. Our best opportunity to understand what Qoheleth might mean through the repetition of

4. Michael V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83–106.

5. See discussion on this and other translations of *hevel* in the introduction to this volume.

Qoh 1:2

[2]Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

hevel, however, is to leave the word in Hebrew, even for English readers, and let them fill in the meaning based on the context. It is analogous to replacing *hevel* with a nonword—even a number string—and then allowing the rest of Qoheleth's writing to determine the meaning. Benjamin Sommer, professor of Bible at Jewish Theological Seminary, has suggested that Qoheleth's use of *hevel* has much in common with the way e. e. cummings uses words and gives them new meanings throughout the course of a poem.[6]

Aside from the narrator's inserted "says Qoheleth," the only word in 1:2 that is not *hevel* (or its plural, or the definite article) is כל, "all" or "everything." Thus,

הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הבלים הכל הבל,

and translated/transliterated, for the sake of illustrating the alliteration: "*havel havalim*, says Qoheleth, *havel havalim*, everything is *havel*." The grammatical construction ("vanity of vanities" in NRSV) indicates an absolute superlative. The same construction refers to the best poem in שיר השירים, "the Song of Songs," and to Canaan in Genesis 9:25 as an עבד עבדים, "slave of slaves, an abject slave."[7] The superlative communicates quality: "utter" *hevel*.[8] It does not necessarily express "a multitude of examples of *hevel*," although the repetition of the word both in this opening phrase and throughout the book effectively communicates quantity as well.

Qoheleth's addition of the word "everything" adds another level of emphasis to Qoheleth's already redundant use of *hevel* in 1:2. Qoheleth has crafted a phrase that accentuates what is already a superlative! Furthermore, this construction prepares us for Qoheleth's frequent use of *hevel* to evaluate myriad life situations: כל, or "everything," foreshadows Qoheleth's sweeping use of that term throughout the book in making broad generalizations about, of course, everything. The use of "everything" in this verse also serves as a fitting introduction for the rest of

6. Personal conversation, July 2002.

7. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 267.

8. Ibid.

the book; W. Sibley Towner points out that כל, "everything," "occurs in 41 percent of the 222 verses in the book."[9] Thus it is indeed fitting that "everything" would stand alongside *hevel* in order to open the book.

As we will see, Qoheleth does not hesitate to criticize either individuals or groups, from women (7:26, 28) to royalty (4:13). But in 1:2 Qoheleth's proclamation does not devalue one particular group or situation over another; Qoheleth truly deems everything *hevel*, invoking this word (in the singular or the plural) a total of thirty-eight times. The five-time repetition of *hevel* in 1:2 is unprecedented elsewhere in the book, though 12:8 has it three times, and 8:14 and 9:9 contain the word twice. Because this second verse of the book consists of 63 percent *hevel*, and since the meaning of the word itself defies a single translation, it is as though the book opens with a riddle.

While verse 2 effectively introduces the book by stating this refrain, the verse does not obviously connect either to verse 1 or verse 3. Only the mention of Qoheleth, who was introduced in 1:1, recurs in 1:2, thus minimally linking verses 1 and 2. Nonetheless, 1:1 certainly stands alone as the superscription. In 1:3 the author launches into a poem that arguably illustrates the point of verse 2, though not blatantly. Thus 1:2 serves as a bridge between 1 and 3, with connections to both; yet it also uniquely announces the word-theme of the book.

Poem on Circularity (1:3-11)

Natural imagery dominates this poem. Verse 3 focuses on humanity and its concerns (אדם), which leads into "generation" (דור) at the beginning of verse 4. In verses 4-7 the emphasis is on the rest of the created

9. W. Sibley Towner, "Ecclesiastes," in *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 5:278. Indeed, Eric Christianson cites John Jarick as saying that "the choice of placing הבל ['absurdity'] and הכל ['everything'] together may be purposefully to portray a visual word-play. They occur together only in Ecclesiastes and the only visual (and minimal) difference between them is a serif-mark." Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSup 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 88 n. 39. While that theory would depend on the script in use in the first Qoheleth manuscript, according to Ada Yardeni the *bet* and *kaf* letters at stake in this proposal were formed similarly from the late third century BCE through mid first century BCE. Ada Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script: History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy and Design* (London; New Castle, DE: The British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2002). Also see discussion of this in Huang Wei, "*Hebel* and *Kong*: A Cross-Textual Reading between Qoheleth and the *Heart Sūtra*," in *The Five Scrolls*, Texts@Contexts 6, ed. Athalaya Brenner-Idan, Gale A. Yee, Archie C. C. Lee (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2018), 138.

Qoh 1:3-11

3What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
4A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
5The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.
6The wind blows to the south,
and goes around to the north,
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
7All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
8All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
9What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
10Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.
11The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come
by those who come after them.

order: "earth" (ארץ) in verse 4, "sun" (שמש) in verse 5, "wind" (or "spirit," רוח) in verse 6, and "streams" (נחלים) in verse 7.

While verses 2-3 worked together to set up two of Qoheleth's major themes—*hevel* and יתרון/עמל, "gain and toil"—the emphasis in verse 3 is on the unreliability of toil. At the same time, mention of "under the sun" (תחת השמש) in verse 3 helps connect it to verses 4-7 since "sun" reappears in verse 5. Verse 3 in the NRSV reads, "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" In contrast, a wooden rendering of the Hebrew would be, "What advantage [יתרון] is there for a man [אדם] in his toil [עמל] in which he toils under the sun?" This translation better illustrates the emphasis on advantage and toil based on word order and repetition in the Hebrew; it also reveals that the NRSV translation has made the reading gender-inclusive where the Hebrew has masculine pronouns. The NRSV presents a possible but perhaps wishful reading of the verse. This translation should raise questions about the decision to translate Qoheleth's book as gender-inclusive.[10] This involves the tricky

10. For further discussion on this topic, see Phyllis A. Bird, "Translating Sexist Language as a Theological and Cultural Problem," *USQR* 42 (1988): 89–95; Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 281–89.

business of speculating about authorial intent. We can only hypothesize about that, based on Qoheleth's cultural context and the rest of the book.[11] The rest of the book suggests that Qoheleth objectifies women (7:26-29; 9:9) and otherwise mostly ignores them. Thus Qoheleth would not seem to have considered their "toil," even as they served him food and drink (2:24 and the other *carpe diem* passages) or labored as servants (2:7) or sexual playthings (2:8). In that sense, we would be most accurate to translate אדם as "man" (as in "male," not in the so-called generic sense) and to render the pronoun here male rather than making it plural (contra the NRSV's "they"). We cannot, however, be sure of this. It seems that Qoheleth must have acknowledged, at least to some extent, that women toiled along with the whole of creation whose repetitive cycles of work Qoheleth sketches in the following eleven verses.

In any case, for women who read this book, the toil Qoheleth points to in 1:3 is real, weighty, and of questionable gain. Thus, even if "Qoheleth" (whoever that is) did not "intend" (however we are to access that) women as toilers, we *are*, every bit as much as men, and when it comes to certain spheres such as childbearing, child care, and housework, even more so. Because of that, this book is relevant to women readers as well as to men; women may take it for what it means to us regardless of what Qoheleth may have intended or acknowledged. And we women need at least as much reflection and critique on the topic of toil and its outcomes as do men.

The repetitions of *hevel* and "all" in verse 2 fittingly introduce the repetitions that will follow in the poem of 1:3-11. Verses 5, 6, and 9 have two words that repeat: verse 5, זרח, "rise," and השמש, "the sun"; verse 6, the root סבב, "go around" (appears four times), and רוח, "wind"; verse 9, היה, "to be," and עשה, "to make" or "do." Verses 11 and 7 contain three words that repeat: verse 11, זכרון, "remembrance," אחרנים, "yet to come," and יהיה, "will be"; verse 7, נחל, "stream," ים, "sea," and the root הלך, "run, go, flow," which repeats three times. Verses 3, 4, and 8 contain at least one word that repeats (not including prepositions, pronouns, or particles): verse 3, עמל, "toil"; verse 4, דור, "generation"; verse 8, (דבר(ים, "thing(s)" and "speak." Furthermore, the verb הלך appears six times throughout the passage, with increasing frequency: once in verse 4, twice in verse 6, and three times in verse 7. While 1:10 does not contain its own repetition, it closely links to the previous verse as they both make the point

11. See the author's introduction to this volume.

that there is nothing new (חדש). The repetition of these words mimics and reinforces the point of the poem, which is that movement does not go anywhere other than back to where it began; there is no real progression, only stuttering.

Verse 4 arises from a biblical tradition that enlists the phrase לדור ודור, "from generation to generation." This indicates "a long time" or even "forever" in terms of human history, often referring to God's eternal care of the people of Israel, Israel's unending devotion to God (Ps 119:90, among others), or even to God's apparent abandonment of Israel (Ps 77:8 [9]).[12] In Judaism the *Kedusha* prayer of holiness (part of the Amidah or standing prayer) is also referred to as the *Le-dor va-ador* prayer, based on the incorporation of Psalm 146:10 in the prayer, which reads, "The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, *from generation to generation* [דור ודור]. Praise the Lord!" With a probable nod to this Psalms passage, Qoheleth invokes a theology of omnipotence—or at least a strong sense of eternal divine care.

While verses 4-7 evoke a sense of longing for completion, their juxtaposition with verses 2-3 suggests that longing will be forever unfulfilled. Ironically, the repetition in verses 4-7 ultimately describes movement—ironic because it is movement that ends where it began and then begins again. Thus the passage may conjure, on the one hand, Sisyphus eking out his life's punishment from Zeus of pushing a massive boulder uphill, only to always have it roll back down where he has to start again.[13] On the other hand, it may call to mind a Zen-like oneness with the moon, tide, and life cycle, or finding joy in a never-ending task like tending a garden. Such openness to interpretation invites us to read into the book our own experiences in order to determine its tone. For instance, when the death of a beloved and quite elderly grandparent coincides with the welcome birth of a healthy child, one may hum Harry Chapin's "All My Life's a Circle" or "The Circle of Life" from *The Lion King* while weeping bittersweet tears.[14] If that same death coincides with the birth of an unplanned child for whom one has little capacity to support, while also

12. The phrase appears fourteen times in the Hebrew Bible (in both *plene* and *defectiva* forms), primarily in the Psalms.

13. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Complete and Unabridged Edition in One Volume* (Mount Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell, 1988), 216–20.

14. Harry Chapin, *Sniper & Other Love Songs*, Audio CD (Wounded Bird Records, 1972). Elton John, *The Lion King / Soundtrack Version* (Walt Disney, 1994).

being saddled with an unpaid-for funeral and sudden lack of a helpful grandparent, then Sisyphus comes to mind. Yet Qoheleth offers us more than our own experiences as interpretive cues here. While לעולם, "forever" (v. 4, and in the plural in v. 10), may offer hope or devastation, toil without gain (v. 3) more likely leads to lethargy than joy. An unremembered life provides depression rather than solace (v. 11). The cyclical movement that goes nowhere in verses 4-7 and Qoheleth's comments in verses 2-3 and 8 lend themselves more to Sisyphus than Zen. From the repetitions of *hevel* in verse 2 to the apparently unproductive work (עמל) in verse 3 to Qoheleth's summary statement—"all things are wearisome (יגעים)" in verse 8 (in Deut 25:18 and 2 Sam 17:2 this word refers to being exhausted)—Qoheleth would presumably add a "damn" before "circle" in Chapin's folk song title.

Notably, these "wearisome" cycles are not just any cycles but those of nature. Women embody those natural cycles in gestation, birth, feeding, and cleaning their babies for about the first year of their lives (more exclusively so in biblical times); women's typical roles as gardeners, gatherers, and food preparers underscores the linkage with creation in the poem. The cycles of women's bodies, whether that of pregnancy or menstruation—presumably the former was more common in the ancient world while the latter is more common in contemporary times—would be a fitting addition to this poem. Surely women vary as to whether they view such cycles as Sisyphean or Zen-like.

We might assume that for the ancient Israelites, the power for those cycles rested squarely with YHWH, but the evidence for ancient Israelite worship of other Gods and Goddesses, particularly those associated with creation and nature, complicate that picture.[15] In our own time, we might colloquially personify these cycles as "Mother Nature"; for Qoheleth's audience, perhaps this imagery evoked El Shaddai, the name for the nurturing—arguably feminine—"God of the breasts" in passages such as Genesis 28:3 and Ruth 1:21.[16] Yet Qoheleth does not mention God at all here. Qoheleth seems more interested in pressing the questions "Is there any gain?" (v. 3); "Is there anything new?" (v. 10); "Is there any remem-

15. Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Phyllis A Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 91–92, 102.

16. For the association of Shaddai with breasts, see Harriet Lutzky, "Shadday as Goddess Epithet," *VT* 48 (1998): 16.

brance?" (v. 11). While those questions surely had—and have—theological implications, Qoheleth leaves those to the audiences' own imaginations.

In verses 9-11 we find additional opportunities to understand the poetic images of verses 3-8. The sentiments of verse 9, "what has been is what will be," echo throughout history and even into contemporary popular culture, such as Doris Day's performance of "Que Será Será" ("and whatever will be, will be; the future's not ours to see") in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew too Much*, or U2's "Acrobat," "What are we going to do? / Now it's all been said / No new ideas in the house / And every book has been read."[17] Doris Day's playful vocals liltingly mock the dire tone of the film's circumstances, and Bono's lyrics transcend the Edge's wailing riffs with the resolution: "And I know that the tide is turning 'round / So don't let the bastards grind you down."[18] Qoheleth could have similarly undermined the Sisyphean effect of 1:3-11 by placing the *carpe diem* here, but we have to wait until 2:24 for the first "eat, and drink, and enjoy." Even there the admonition is to "enjoy your toil," which sounds like more of a challenge than a relief.

Qoheleth's use of עולם (NRSV translates "forever" and "the ages" in vv. 4 and 10, respectively) might once have provided a reassuring sense for the passage through the sustaining role of nature. Yet a contemporary ecofeminist perspective must assert that Qoheleth's idea, "the earth remains forever [עולם]," has been rendered dubious in light of human destruction of creation. Ironically, the idea that the earth would last forever may have contributed to human abuse and neglect of it. Similarly, the ongoing lack of remembrance (v. 11) engenders human disregard for creation, as well as other humans.[19] For Qoheleth, nature goes on while

17. Alfred Hitchcock et al., *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (The Criterion Collection, 2013); U2, *Achtung Baby*, Audio CD (Island, 1991), permission requested.

18. Robyn Brothers, "Time to Heal, 'Desire Time': The Cyberprophecy of U2's 'Zoo World Order,'" in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 237–67. On pp. 250–51 Brothers discusses Bono's (the lead singer of U2) stated association of the Zoo TV tour and the book of Qoheleth, and points to the song "Acrobat" as a clear statement of the "ennui" associated with technology that the tour critiqued. Brothers's discussion of irony in the *Achtung Baby* album also has much in common with the book of Qoheleth. Just as Qoheleth may be viewed as an ironic persona in order to mock culture, Bono's personae of the Zoo TV tour took on that very task. In both cases, the effect may well have been lost on the audience (243).

19. See Marie Turner, *Ecclesiastes: An Earth Bible Commentary; Qoheleth's Eternal Earth* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 30.

humans come to a final end.[20] The dilemma of our time is that some people of faith believe humans do not even affect nature, a view that likely contributes to our very demise.

Overall Reflections on Finding Wisdom (or Not) (1:12-18)

This passage opens with a clear assertion of Qoheleth's royal autobiography mode.[21] The traditional association of Qoheleth with Solomon becomes clear in 1:12-13a, which identifies Qoheleth as "the king over Israel in Jerusalem" who sought out "wisdom" (חכמה) with his "heart" (לב; NRSV "mind," since in the Bible the heart is the seat of intellect, not emotion). In King Solomon's famous prayer of 1 Kings 3 he asks YHWH for a לב שמע, "hearing heart" (3:9; NRSV "understanding mind"), and YHWH in turn gives him a לב חכם, "wise heart" (3:12; NRSV "wise . . . mind").

By verse 13b Qoheleth has changed course from the fictive identity of Solomon and returns to the emphasis on work, which first appeared in 1:3 (NRSV has "toil" in 1:3 and "business" in 13). This time Qoheleth uses ענין, a word for "task" that we find only in Qoheleth's book (here and in 2:26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:3 [2]; and 8:16). Qoheleth harshly declares God's designated work for humans "bad" (רע; NRSV "unhappy"). Solomon's assessment of life's work differed greatly from this: the biblical narrator closely associates Solomon's wisdom (חכמה) with his wealth (1 Kgs 4:20-34). Notably, that same section on Solomon's divinely granted, wisdom-infused leadership opens with the *carpe diem* (1 Kgs 4:20), which we see repeated seven times throughout the book of Qoheleth, but not here.[22]

Starting from the evaluation of life's work as "evil" in 1:13, Qoheleth piles on the negative adjectives as the passage continues. In 1:14 Qoheleth deems all the "deeds" on earth *hevel* and "chasing after wind."[23] From there, the author moves to irreparability ("what is crooked cannot be made straight"; see 7:13, in which the responsibility for this brokenness is blamed squarely on God) and incomprehensibility ("what is lacking

20. James L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink*, Studies on Personalities in the Old Testament (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 81. He points out that Job and Ben Sira shared this view.

21. On royal and fictional autobiography see Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 122–23; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 99–106.

22. See introduction and the discussion of 2:24 below.

23. See the discussion in the introduction about how *hevel* and this phrase work together to express Qoheleth's views.

Qoh 1:12-18

[12]I, the Teacher, when king of Israel in Jerusalem, [13]applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. [14]I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

[15]What is crooked cannot be
made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be
counted.

[16]I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." [17]And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is a chasing after wind.

[18]For in much wisdom is much
vexation,
and those who increase
knowledge increase
sorrow.

cannot be counted"). Verses 16 and the first half of 17a move back—with renewed zeal—to the Solomonic fiction for the wisdom quest, but before completing 17a, Qoheleth again makes a surprise turn—this quest is not just for wisdom but also for הוללות ושכלות, "madness and folly" (also see 2:12, the conclusion of the "test of pleasure"). Whether satirical or pessimistic, "madness and folly" sully a commendable quest for "wisdom" in a truly disconcerting manner. It would be fair to ask whether one could possibly embark on a quest for wisdom with such an attitude.

Qoheleth 1:17b concludes by returning to the phrase of 1:14 (and a frequent theme in the book): this is "a chasing after wind." In the end (1:18), Qoheleth poetically eviscerates the concept of Solomonic wisdom: "in much wisdom is much anguish, and increasing knowledge increases distress." Qoheleth has turned Solomonic wisdom on its head. This is only the first time Qoheleth will make that point, and we are not yet out of the first chapter of the book. Qoheleth's radical rhetoric here invokes the "golden boy" and "golden age" of Solomon's early rule, only to turn around and persuade the audience of the view that the "business" of life and even "wisdom" is "unhappy" (v. 13), *hevel* (v. 14), irreversibly "crooked," utterly "lacking" (v. 15), worthy of pairing with "madness and folly," akin to "chasing wind" (v. 17); it is "anguish" and "distress" (v. 18), and all of this—given by God (v. 13). Qoheleth does not hold back for the sake of propriety, tact, or piety! This exaggerated challenge to tradition suggests the possibility of a satirical genre. Could Qoheleth be making fun of Solomon and his "golden age," or at least be ridiculing those who would retell the early monarchy in that way?

In this forthrightness that flies in the face of theological tradition, Qoheleth may serve as inspiration for feminist hermeneutics, which privileges experience over traditional doctrine: feminist readings rely on challenges to the (male-dictated) status quo. While the book of Qoheleth poses much difficulty for women (see the *Malleus Maleficarum* insert below), it also serves as a canonized model for reading suspiciously, a central tenet of feminist hermeneutics.[24] And perhaps this is a good time to turn Qoheleth's suspicion back on Qoheleth. Is it true that "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted"? While it may seem that way, history does prove otherwise. Change can occur. Of all people, women have seen that even though certain situations have seemed Sisyphean—from women's suffrage to equal pay—the work toward change of those situations has not ultimately been fruitless. Yet if we take Qoheleth's proverb in 1:15 to heart, we might never try to effect change. The resignation to "what is crooked cannot be made straight" does not lend itself toward social change—certainly not to the kinds of social change that have created liberation and opportunities for women in the past century. Qoheleth's resignation may result in dangerous skepticism, immobilizing pessimism, the unwillingness to work toward change.

While, on the one hand, we must question and be willing to reject what Qoheleth says in this book, we must also consider the truth of Qoheleth's statements. If the quest for wisdom only shows us "unhappy business," *hevel*, crookedness, anguish, and distress; if the quest for wisdom is akin only to "chasing after wind"—why do it? Why does Qoheleth? Why do we? Could it merely be because it is the "unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with" (1:13)? If that is the case, then we are Sisyphus, and God may as well be the Greek Judges of the Dead meting out our punishment. Surely, Qoheleth's critique of wisdom in 1:12-18 plays an important role in the book and more broadly. It may be an "unhappy business," but evaluating claims to truth and wisdom plays a crucial role in philosophical and theological reflection.

Evaluating the fruitfulness—or fruitlessness—of seeking wisdom has become ever-more relevant since the time Qoheleth wrote up till now. Phyllis Tickle has identified the late twentieth and early twenty-

24. See the author's introduction and afterword in this volume; also Lisa Michele Wolfe, "Seeing Gives Rise to Disbelieving: Experiences That Prompt a Hermeneutic of Suspicion in Ecclesiastes and Wendy Farley's Theodicy of Compassion" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2003), 158–95.

first centuries as "The Great Emergence," which has been significantly created by the rise of the internet. Tickle compares this period to "The Great Reformation" of the sixteenth century CE, propelled forward in part by the Enlightenment. One distinguishing feature of "The Great Emergence" consists of the enormous mass of information calling for our constant attention. The quantity and quality of this "wisdom" (if we can categorize this information glut in that way) beg for evaluation in terms of their effect on culture, religion, and our very psychology.[25] Furthermore, the genocides of the last century proved that even the wisest thinkers cannot solve the world's problems; education does not immunize us from committing atrocities. George Steiner laments the reality that neither great education nor the presence of high culture prevented the Holocaust: "Why did humanistic traditions and models of conduct prove so fragile a barrier, or is it more realistic to perceive in humanistic culture express solicitations of authoritarian rule and cruelty?"[26] The latter part of Steiner's crucial question aligns well with Qoheleth's final statement in chapter 1: "For in much wisdom is much anguish, and increasing knowledge increases distress."

25. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 103–7; Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 151–56.

26. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 30 *et passim*, ch. 2, "A Season in Hell," 29–56.

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