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# Influence of Feminist Scholarship on My Theological Work

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theology in our period. In that sense the debates within feminist theology (Christian or post-Christian; feminist or womanist; humanistic or theocentric; modern or post-modern; Anglo-American empirical, historical and ethical or French psychoanalytic, anti-empirical, and suspicious) are the most significant, even as they have become the most complex, for all serious theological reflection in our period.

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*Vincent L. Wimbush*

It is an honor for me to have been asked to be a part of this roundtable discussion. I join Francis Fiorenza in recognizing the enormous (that is, radical, disturbing) contributions that feminist scholarship (in all of its variety) has made to religious studies. I take special delight in having the opportunity to reflect upon the influence of feminist scholarship upon biblical studies and upon my own scholarly development and work.

According to many insiders and observers biblical scholarship in North America and in many parts of Europe has for many years been and is yet very much in a state of confusion. Such a state is thought to obtain because no one perspective, method, or "school" tradition absolutely commands the field. There has been an explosion of categories, a virtual intellectual coup of the hegemony of methods and theoretical perspectives of many decades past. The influence of feminist scholars must be recognized as a powerful contributor to this state of affairs.

Actually, several related but distinct areas of feminist influence upon biblical scholarship come immediately to mind; limited space permits only summary treatment of three.

First, there is no question but that feminist scholars have greatly affected not only the notions and assumptions about *how* the Bible and the worlds out of which it developed are to be studied, but also *what* areas of study are to be considered legitimate. One example is sufficient in this forum: Feminist scholars have in recent decades forced consideration of the roles of women in the development of ancient Israel and Judaism and early Christianity as both theoretical problem and substantive issue. Such consideration has raised explosive questions regarding the ramifications of recognizing the elite male perspective of biblical traditions: What methods now contribute to the continued obfuscation of the problem of such a perspective? Which ones aid the scholar in recognizing greater complexities in the perspective question? These and other such issues have added great complexity to all aspects of biblical studies.

The actual areas of study, the boundaries—external and internal—of biblical scholarship have also been greatly affected by feminist work. As

feminist questioning of traditional assumptions about methods continues, consensus on many issues has inevitably been affected. From the issue of the roles of women in different communities in different periods in history, to the problematization of the provenance of particular texts, traditions and rituals, to the ever-complex problem of origins and functions and relevance—rejection or engagement—feminist scholars have influenced reconsideration of what challenges must fall upon the biblical scholar's desk.

Second, and clearly related to the issues raised above, is the influence of feminist scholarship on the positive politicization of biblical scholarship. Only professors of the Rip Van Winkle mold remain comfortable today with the pursuit of "what it meant" as articulation of the task of biblical scholarship. And few are taken seriously when they complain about the imperative of avoiding the politicization of biblical scholarship. The emphasis of feminist scholars on text-perspective, on authorial motives and prejudices, on the political-economic and psychological consequences for women of certain religious and scholarly teachings and values and orientations has had an enormous impact in recent years on religious and scholarly discourse in a number of circles. Although it is not the case that all have been converted, it is nonetheless the case that few of the unconverted—including religious conservatives and the self-styled objective scientific scholars—remain seriously unchallenged or ignorant of types of feminist challenges. Almost everyone and almost every group in the guild of biblical scholars has been so influenced to some degree.

This leads to a third area of influence. A most important sign of the growing influence of feminist scholarship in biblical studies was the election of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as president of the Society for Biblical Literature in 1986. Hers is a career made, and the election an honor bestowed, not in spite of, but because of her pioneering *politically charged* scholarship. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible and a few others have modelled careers not only for feminist women, but also for so many others who had not before imagined it possible or politically feasible to do scholarship in a way that reflected not only a radical critical posture with respect to guild-respected and consensus positions, but also an honest and aggressive pursuit of one's own questions, questions that come out of recognition and acceptance of one's identity and place in the world.

My courage to attempt to do biblical scholarship in this key is clearly influenced by the intellectual work and institutional and guild-political support of feminist scholars. It is not yet clear to me to what degree I share the methodological assumptions, substantive positions and agenda of feminist biblical scholars, their diversity notwithstanding. But their scholarly works, their discourse, their political orientations have profoundly affected the intellectual and political world in which I am encouraged to pursue my own work and to develop as scholar. For this I am in their debt.