

LOVE'S LABOUR UNLOST: WOMEN AND THE WORD

By CLARE AMOS

Biblical flower-arranging?

I DISLIKE FLOWER-ARRANGING: partly because I am not very good at it, partly because it is the kind of activity that women, and perhaps especially clergy wives, are expected to enjoy. So Richard Coggins' comment, near the beginning of an excellent article 'The contribution of women's studies to Old Testament studies: a male reaction' (*Theology*, January 1988, pp 5-16) gave me pause for thought:

It has become more and more apparent in recent years that there are certain angles (in biblical studies) which owe much to women scholars. At this point there is a tricky line to follow; on the one hand one mustn't be sexist in the sense of supposing that there are in biblical studies the equivalents of making the tea and arranging the flowers, tasks which can safely be left to the ladies, God bless them, on the other hand one must be prepared to be gender specific to the extent of saying that there are certain directions in which our study has been led which are due almost exclusively to feminine (and perhaps, but not necessarily feminist) insights.

Coggins suggests later in the same article that, even if it is coincidental, it is fortuitous that an interest in the literary and 'story' qualities of the text should have emerged at the same time as the development of women's studies. Is the link coincidental? From my own experience as a biblical scholar I suspect that there is more to it than the chance of history. Among the works that first led me to look at biblical texts more holistically, and take an interest in how they worked as literature is one of the 'classics' of feminist biblical scholarship, *God and the rhetoric of sexuality* by Phyllis Trible (1978). Both in this and her more recent work *Texts of terror* (1984) she marries together with considerable felicity a concern to hear women's voices, both happy and sad, in the Old Testament, alongside a care to let the power of the biblical stories speak their own message, with the minimum of

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interpretation and dissection. And it is a process that is facilitated by Tribble's own linguistic gifts: she writes with a sensitivity beyond the capabilities of most biblical scholars, seeming at times almost to caress the English language. I found her work and style a liberation. I would now wish to place some question-marks by some of her conclusions—I doubt, for example, that the linkage between the Hebrew word for 'womb' (*rahm*) can tell us as much about God's 'compassion' (which comes from the same Hebrew root) as Tribble would maintain, and she may well be over-optimistic at times, particularly in her reading of Ruth. Daphne Hampson's critical query in *Theology and feminism* (1990) also needs addressing: why should Tribble—or we—spend so much effort in attempting to re-read texts (e.g. the story of Jephthah's daughter or the Levite's concubine) which seem on the surface to be patently misogynistic? But I learned from Tribble a sense of freedom, a being allowed to read a biblical text without first reading what generations of biblical scholars had written about it, and in my own turn writing about a text without smothering it with a plethora of references and footnotes. And as I have followed this path I have become progressively more interested in 'story' in the bible, believing that a holy book in which stories are so prominent tells us something crucial (literally) about a God who so dialogues with humanity. So I have developed for myself a theological methodology that begins with concrete examples, often indeed stories. Nor am I now afraid of raising the question of relevance: for one of the reasons that 'feminist' biblical study is sometimes the focus of contention is precisely because it addresses issues which are so culturally pressing. Thus to be true to myself and to these insights, I cannot do better than devote the bulk of this article to a concrete example of a study by a woman—me—of a biblical text, the Gospel of John. It is probably no accident that I have somehow envisaged the gospel as a story.

A gospel of life

A quote from Logion 114 of the Gospel of Thomas discovered among the Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in Egypt: 'Simon Peter said to the disciples, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life" '.

If this shocks you, you may be glad to know that Jesus then steps in and saves (?) the day, for the Logion continues, 'Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven" '.

There has been set forward the view by certain scholars that Gnosticism, to which the Gospel of Thomas bears witness, became attractive to women because of their increasing marginalization in the 'Catholic' Church. Gnosticism, on the other hand, is held to have allowed women to continue to occupy an important place in the life of the religious community. Yet surely this outrageous statement in the Gospel of Thomas must put a question-mark over such a theory: however it may be understood—and there is scope for disagreement on this—such a form of 'liberation' is an offer that most women would refuse.

A counter-quote from the Gospel of John:

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away'. Jesus said to her, 'Mary', she turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni'.

On a visit to the Middle East in 1987 I found myself reflecting on the gift and grace of tears—the intertwining of weeping and loving. My thoughts led me then toward's St John's Gospel—and the way in which in that Gospel tears seem to be able to raise the dead. Jesus wept for Lazarus his dead friend and loved him and Lazarus rose from the tomb. Mary wept and loved Jesus and suddenly a strange and elusive gardener stood before her and her tears were answered. Since that time that curious and daring parallelism has echoed around the recesses of my mind: in some sense Mary's love for Jesus doing what Jesus himself had previously done for Lazarus. Mary then, perhaps the pivot of the Gospel, the apostle to the apostles, Mary, the one addressed so simply and yet so intensely personally merely by the calling of her name. Mary, not desexed or turned into a pseudo-male as the Gospel of Thomas would have it, but a woman loved and comforted by a man who surely knew her love for him—but was not embarrassed by it nor scorned it nor shrank from it in fear.

Love's Labour Lost

Some time later I read *The scaffolding of Spirit*, by Alan Ecclestone, which contains his reflections on the Gospel of St John. I found that it resonated with the vision of the Gospel which was slowly forming in me: a Gospel, I have come to believe, in which Mary's encounter

with the resurrected Jesus is the goal and culmination towards which the Gospel steadily moves. And as it journeys towards that garden of the resurrection, having begun from Cana of Galilee, moving on through Samaria, then to the sadness, sudden joy and dangers of Bethany just outside Jerusalem, and pausing for the terrible hour of crucifixion and glorification, it makes at the same time another kind of journey. This is a journey in which women play a central part, for it is indeed a journey about women, about their capacity for love, for being the agents of new birth and life. It is a journey which is not afraid of sexuality, for it is a journey that will finally set right the curse of Eden where the first love story of all had gone so terribly wrong. In a garden woman and man had first embraced and cleaved to each other, but then the quest for power and human independence had distorted love and division, domination and death had resulted. Bone of bone and flesh of flesh united was how it was supposed to be, two becoming one in mutuality and interdependence, but instead the man and the woman had become alienated from each other, and sexual desire has been perverted, leading no longer now to unity and wholeness, but rather to imbalance, to the rule of the male and the subordination of the female. Then it becomes the time for the man to name the woman, as he had previously named all the animals, and with bitterest irony in this new epoch of death she is to be called the Mother of all Living, bringing forth in pain and travail a humanity suffering the curse of mortality.

But Genesis 2-3 is not the only story in the Old Testament which is set in a garden. For the two lovers of the Song of Songs tryst with each other in a verdant garden strangely redolent of Eden, but which is now a timeless paradise where love reigns supreme, where the partnership of woman and man, of bride and bridegroom, is not cursed but is once more one of equality and harmony, and where mortality is held in check by love, for love, as the song itself tells us, is as strong as death.

C. S. Lewis has a lot to answer for: his book *The four loves* is largely, even if unintentionally, responsible for the popular Christian assumption that agape and eros are poles apart—eros, a profane sexual desire, agape, a disinterested and supremely Christian altruistic giving of the self. The Song of Songs, indeed the bible as a whole, knows better: agape and eros should exist in a sort of continuum, not enemies of one another, but both needing each other to exist in their fullness. The word consistently used by the Greek translators of the Old Testament to describe the lovers' emotion in the Song is

'agape'—not 'eros': 'agape' for the biblical writers can include the welter of feelings that form part of our sexuality, 'agape' does not reject such feelings, but rather seeks to embrace them and use them to bring about a reverencing for the whole human person—rather than the imbalancing separation of sex from love which Eden's curse held to be a woman's fate—to draw bone back to bone, and flesh back to flesh in unity once more, for it is through the loving of one that perhaps we can learn more about the loving of many.

So it is with the garden of Eden and the garden of the Song in mind that I seek to understand the Gospel of St John: for life, the reversal of Eden's curse of death, is the supreme gift of the Christ of St John, and it is life made possible by agape, love: Christ's own, and that of the community that he calls into existence. Love here too is as strong as death. For St John, Christ is the bridegroom of humanity, and it is as men, and even more so women, respond to his love from the depths of their being that the life and love lost in Eden can be regained.

Wedding feasts

The ministry of Jesus in the Gospel begins with a marriage at Cana—something significant in itself, especially if Christ is indeed the bridegroom. But if Christ is the bridegroom, where is his bride? She is strangely absent from this tale: St John never mentions her, perhaps the ultimate statement of the invisibility of women in the old dispensation, where men dominated and a woman's marriage was seen as little more than the moment when, as a chattel, she passed from the custody of father to husband. The hour of change has not yet come. There is a woman playing a part in the drama, but she is mother, not wife, and addressed curtly by the title 'Woman'—reminiscent perhaps of the title the first Adam used for his first Eve as she was taken from his side. 'What have you to do with me?' Jesus demands harshly, in a phrase that is elsewhere typical of conversations with the demons—for the old secure relationships are a temptation to hold on to—and yet if this bridegroom wishes to enjoy with his bride the wine of new life, those old patterns must be superseded, for the truth eternal can only lead to life through change. One cannot enter into one's mother's womb and be born again, certainly not at one's wedding feast! Such an attitude would be characteristic of a refusal to accept new and adult relationships, relationships where men and women exist in equality and true agape with each other. It is only as Jesus distances himself from the maternal symbol of the old ways and attitudes that the good wine of marriage can begin to be served.

But if St John refuses to let us meet the bride at Cana, with exquisite artistry—and irony—he introduces her to us in the shape of the raddled old whore that Christ encounters in Samaria. It is a story set in a traditional mould: there are tales in the Old Testament where a hero journeys to a foreign land, meets a beautiful virgin at a well, asks her for water, meets her people, and makes her his bride. So Jesus journeys to the alien territory of Samaria and sits down thirsty by a well and asks for water and there the story goes wrong. For the water is drawn not by a young and innocent maiden, but by a woman used and abused in a system in which men set the rules for ‘nice women’. Five husbands down she is now thoroughly soiled goods living with a protector—the only thing left for such a woman outcast from her society. Nice men don’t talk theology with a woman like that—bantering question and response almost as equals—they protect their own virtue and shun her—just like the Book of Proverbs dictates. Otherwise a man might leave himself open to misunderstanding, for Eden’s eventual narrowing of love and sexuality into sex has led to women being regarded as mindless objects, sources of potential danger. The disciples indeed, good Jews to a man, wondered that he was talking to a woman—for you can’t *talk* to women can you?—and their response hints at the undertone of sexuality that is implicit throughout the story. For by going wrong, by not quite running true to the old tales, John’s irony has indeed given us a love story, but one which is consummated for this bride not by the act of sexual intercourse, which for her had become merely a sign of dehumanizing subjection, but by her restoration to full personhood and her sharing of his love with others. ‘Woman’, he had called her, still with echoes of Eden revisited, but now he states that the hour of change is beginning to happen, and that the old ways of behaving will soon be redundant. She who had known the bitter agony of Eve’s curse, who had surely sorrowed greatly, becomes the one who sows the seed of new birth and eternal life for her people and will reap in joy.

Gradually as the bridegroom approaches Jerusalem the fullness of the image of womanhood is beginning to be restored. For Jesus was not afraid to love Martha and her sister Mary as well as their brother Lazarus: they are indeed the first people in the Gospel described as the personal recipients of Jesus’ love. Two women, no longer anonymous shadows, but central actors in the drama that restores life to their brother. Martha, the woman of sure faith, the one who without Thomas’s doubts, confesses Christ as Son of God, Mary, the

woman of love, whose grief for her brother moved Jesus's heart and acts as a catalyst of his own tears. Agape is returning to human history and bringing life in its train: it is because of the depths of grief and love that Jesus shares with the two sisters that the mechanism of mortality which has ruled the world for so many generations begins to be shattered. Mary and Martha can indeed be called, and without the bitter irony of Genesis, 'mothers of all living'.

Man and woman, restored to their total agape of Eden before love went wrong: it is surely time then for a wedding banquet, this time with woman playing her part—and yes, that is almost what we have, for there is a supper, and Mary shows her love in a gesture that brings together agape and eros, as she wipes the bridegroom's feet with her hair—and anoints him for his burial. For we know, as Adam and Eve in their first paradise did not, that love and suffering and death belong together: love in its sweetest and most intense form must invoke the thought of mortality. True love cannot avoid suffering and death even if it will eventually defeat it. And that is what Mary too must learn; not for her merely a return to Eden's childhood, but as a mature woman her love is consummated by her anguish. This pledge of new life and new birth of which the Gospel speaks must be born in pain and travail—as the Farewell discourses state in words that evoke yet revoke Eve's first curse. 'When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come'—but now that is not the end of the story, for pregnancy and birth lead on to the joy of new creation—'when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that new life is born into the world' (John 16,21).

Called by name

And in the final chapters of the Gospel it is women above all who love and sorrow and bring new life: at the cross where four women stand vigil along with the beloved disciple, and at the tomb where the evangelist makes his daring analogy between Mary and Jesus, as Mary's tears seem even to raise the dead. Surely love *is* as strong as death. At the very least St John seems to be saying that the love of a woman, this woman for the man Jesus, is the truest sacrament there can be of the love of God for his human creation. And at last the love story of the Gospel can reach its completion and fruition, for at last a woman is known to the very core of her whole being. 'Mary' he said, for the very first time in the Gospel calling upon a woman by her name. In this garden man and woman recognize each other once again as lovers in a love that does not seek to dominate or depersonalize. Once more they

embrace and cling to each other. But this love relearned so hardly through the pages of history and the chapters of pain has learned too to eschew power and possession: Mary's wedding feast is one that she will share with all humanity. Do not continue to embrace me, asks Jesus, or else my love cannot embrace the whole world.

Why St John's Gospel?

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in an important and seminal study of women's roles within the early Church, *In memory of her* (1983), suggests that the Johannine community (and its Marcan counterpart) included women as well as men among its leadership. She also points out that it is these two Gospels that seem to be most critical of authoritarian and hierarchical models of leadership. There is probably a connection! As I have implied in my comments on the Gospel of Thomas, it seems that such comparatively liberal attitudes to women were gradually submerged under the weight of church structures—whereas in heretical and sectarian groups, such as Gnostics or Montanists, women were able to continue to play a more creative and influential role in the religious community. Elaine Pagels' *The gnostic gospels* (1983) is a particular exponent of such views. Yet the price to be paid by women for such comparative power was perhaps too high: an ambiguity about sexuality within Gnosticism seemed to swerve wildly between the overly libertine and overly ascetic—and as Logion 114 from the Gospel of Thomas might suggest, it was (and is!) women who ultimately pay the price when a community is uncomfortable about sex!

Why women?

The question may seem obvious: but do 'feminist' perspectives on the bible necessarily focus only on women? And can 'feminist' biblical scholarship also be undertaken by men? The answer to the second question seems to be a clear 'yes': there are a sizeable number of male scholars whose work and insights repay attention; we have thankfully moved beyond the days when an (unnamed) male Old Testament scholar felt able to describe the horrific and sordid rape and murder of a woman, the concubine of a travelling Levite, in Judges 19, as 'the story of the unfortunate Levite'. *Till the heart sings: a biblical theology of manhood and womanhood* by Samuel Terrien, is a formative and sensitive treatment of the subject; since it was only published in 1985 and yet feels a 'classic', this is indicative of the veritable explosion of interest there has been in very recent years.

From around the same time comes *Woman: first among the faithful* by the Salesian Francis Moloney (1984) which concentrates on the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels. Both writers are quite deliberately concerned to 'recover' the significant roles women played in the biblical story, which may have been overlaid by the prejudices of later tradition or even the biblical writers themselves. My own thoughts on John's Gospel owe something to both these writers. The recent hymns of Brian Wren marry a love of the bible, the art of a word-smith and a quest for religious metaphors and symbols that can speak particularly to women as well as men; in his book *What language shall I borrow?* (1989) he gives a theological justification for the paths he has trodden in his poetry. The linking of 'women's concerns' with an interest in the literary qualities of the text comes across particularly strongly in *Women recounted: narrative thinking and the God of Israel* by James Williams (1979) and in the very recent and quite delicious *The feminine unconventional: four subversive figures in Israel's tradition* by André Lacoque (1990) which looks at Ruth, Esther, Susanna and Judith as examples of protest literature. In fact one of the most unsatisfactory examples of feminist biblical scholarship that I have recently come across is by a woman: Alice Laffey's *Wives, harlots and concubines* feels, in more than one sense, a very sad book. It reads as simply a fairly arid recounting of the incidents in which women appear in the Old Testament and a cursory look at the attitudes expressed towards the feminine by the various biblical writers. Laffey has not got Phyllis Tribble's intuition and innate sensitivity towards the text: a comparison of Tribble's reflections on the creation story with those of Laffey makes salutary reading. Somehow Laffey doesn't delve deep enough to make one feel that she cares: perhaps she doesn't, for her hostility towards the Old Testament world and its outlook comes across quite strongly. I may be biased against Laffey, for I accidentally bought two copies of her book! Some years ago (1988) the work was published in the United States by Fortress under the title *An introduction to the Old Testament: a feminist perspective*. I did not realize when it was published last year in this country with the distinctly juicier heading of *Wives, harlots and concubines* that it was the identical book. However, the work, under whichever title, does at least provide useful and detailed bibliography for further study.

Laffey's work clearly raises the question I posed above, Should feminist perspectives on the bible concentrate only on women? Most do, almost inevitably. My own reflections on St John's Gospel focus

on the presence, or absence, of women in the story, and it is certainly true that feminist scholars want to hear such voices that were always there but were previously unheard or at least muted. Yet once again there may be some connection between interest in 'literary qualities' and the development of feminist scholarship. Structuralist analysis of written texts draws attention to 'binary polarities': the great contrasts of existence such as death/life, male/female, fertility/sterility, wealth/poverty that surface so often in literature and whose conflict and possible resolution go to make up the story. So often it is precisely the dynamic interplay between men and women that makes a thumping good tale, and a tale that deserves to be heard from more than the traditional male perspective. But, and this may be a view not shared with other women scholars, I would find a narrow concentration *only* on women's issues an unhelpful path for feminist biblical scholarship to tread. Should not those engaged in an exploration of the bible from a woman's perspective also be concerned to hear other marginalized voices: the poor, the stranger, the unclean? Ideally liberation perspectives can stand alongside and mutually inform the work of those who are pursuing the study of scripture from a woman's viewpoint. This is a point well made in the useful exploration by Sandra Schneiders: *Beyond patching: faith and feminism in the Catholic Church* (1991). The question must also be raised as to how large the specific experiences that differentiate women from men should loom in women's studies. Fairly frequently such studies have paid particular attention to stories, images and symbols of maternity. The experience of giving birth and breast-feeding is patently unique to women. Yet while rescuing 'birthing' from the negative perception or oblivion to which much of male scholarship had consigned it, an over-concentration on such particular experiences of women can be unhelpful or even oppressive. I suffered the pain of infertility for several years; although that is no longer the case, I am still acutely aware how hurtful any suggestion can be that the special particularity of women resides in their capacity to bear children. Similarly, especially in view of the number of single women who are to be found in the Christian community, undue attention to the theme of marriage within scripture is not necessarily a useful way forward. I could critique my own writing on St John's Gospel from this perspective: though I believe it has spoken to both single and married women, nonetheless it feels like the thoughts of someone who is herself happily married. Women are more than wives or mothers and it is necessary for feminist study to find a way forward to value women in less gender-specific terms.

Women and the word

This article appears in a journal that is not primarily concerned with women, nor with biblical studies, but with spirituality. Do feminist perspectives on scripture have any particular contribution to make to 'spirituality', however that term may be understood? I believe so.

First, they have both implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, widened our vision of God. Ranging from detailed studies of the Hebrew language or specific texts such as Genesis 1,26, through a rediscovery of non-hierarchical metaphors for the divine, we have learned more about the God who is 'I Am who I Am': the one who transcends all the categories with which human beings seek God's imprisonment.

Second, and a necessary development from the above, they have widened our vision of the Church. Feminist scholars are not afraid to speak of human relationships, to envisage human beings as people of heart and flesh as well as mind. Such insights must have their implications for the ordering of the Christian community. And surely non-hierarchical metaphors for God must also speak in turn to God's people?

Third, women studying the bible can share something of the dialogue with the text in which they inevitably engage. It is not easy to be a woman biblical scholar: one is aware how even after one has discounted various misogynist misinterpretations of biblical passages that previous generations have made, there is still an irreducible, and perhaps irredeemable, core of the bible that looks at the world from a male, patriarchal viewpoint. From my own studies I have learned something about holding on to what I do not find easy, or necessarily agreeable. I have learned too to treat the biblical tradition in an 'adult' way: as a challenge and resource rather than a crutch.

Finally, my end leads to my beginning. Not the least gift of women's studies to spirituality are the issues raised at the commencement of this article. Points such as relevance to current concerns, such as the attention to the story quality of the text and the ability not to get bogged down in the intricacies of historical-critical questions, are places where a feminist reading of scripture can help scripture itself to become a tool for prayer or even vision. Several years ago I set an essay title: 'What insight do the creation stories of Genesis 1-11 shed on the nature of humanity?' I had intended my students to look at the dialectic that exists between the two creation narratives, with the 'image of God' of Genesis 1 responded to by 'the dust of the earth' of Genesis 2. But an unusually perceptive pupil (male) saw

something in the title that I had not been aware of or even intended. He answered the question by focussing on the word 'story', and went on to suggest that there was something important in the fact that the creation stories were *stories* rather than say a philosophical treatise. For stories speak of dialogue and of concreteness. Creation stories tell us of human beings who exist in relationship with God, and with each other. In my own thoughts on the story of the Gospel of St John that was the hope for the re-created humanity which I believed the ministry of Jesus was inaugurating. I am sure that story and spirituality belong together, and though I would not as a woman wish to restrict myself to biblical flower-arranging, it is a bouquet which should not be despised.