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Feminism and the major female characters of Exodus

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Introduction

Feminist criticisms and interpretations lay down the gauntlet against Scripture. Phyllis Trible states that "The Bible promotes the sin of patriarchy."[1] Danna Nolan Fewell proclaims that "The Bible has prescribed our [women's] gender, dictated our sexuality, and defined our social roles even to this day and this culture."[2] Many other feminists similarly accuse Scripture of oppressing women with patriarchy. This is a serious accusation, an accusation which not only challenges the Church to listen to feminist criticisms and interpretations, but also necessitates that the Church listen to Scripture and (positively and negatively) critique feminism itself and contemporary cultures and ideologies. One major purpose of this study is to attempt such a critique in a limited scope.

The scope of this thesis is feminist interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus: Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother (Jochebed), Moses' sister, Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam, and Zipporah.[3] I will demonstrate that feminists interpret the major female characters of Exodus in three general ways. First, some feminists interpret the major female characters of Exodus in proper contextual, grammatical fashion and end up with a more accurate portrayal of the women. For this thesis, the term "exegetical" will be the shorthand term for this type of interpretation.[4]

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[1] Phyllis Trible, "The Pilgrim Bible on a Feminist Journey," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 11.3 (1990): 233.

[2] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism," *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. eds. Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 239.

[3] "Major female characters" means those individual women who have active, recorded roles in the exodus. Also of note, Moses' sister (Ex. 2:7) is more than likely Miriam (Num. 27:59). Nevertheless, in order most clearly to discuss Miriam as well as the events of Exodus 2:1-10 it will be necessary to separate the discussion of Moses' sister from that of the later Miriam.

[4] Obviously by nature of how I have defined "exegetical" such interpretations will be the most textually accurate. The point is that textually accurate (exegetical) interpretations provide the best chance for historical accuracy since the Scriptural text is the only extant history of these women. This may seem like a moot point, but this is the point of contention for feminists, i.e. exegetical interpretations do not provide an accurate (historical) view of women because such interpretations accurately reflect a patriarchal text. Therefore feminists utilize exaggerated and eisegetical hermeneutics in the hopes of jettisoning patriarchal history from the text and (re)discovering the true history of these women behind the extant text.

Second, other feminists interpret the major female characters in exegetical fashion, but then exaggerate the point(s) beyond what context and grammar can sustain in order to make the characters fit into feminist ideologies. I will call this type of interpretation "exaggerated." Third, still other feminists perceive the text as so irredeemably "androcentric" that they ignore the text for the most part and, instead, simply read something into it that is neither contextually nor grammatically present, thereby conforming the text to feminist ideologies. I will call this type of interpretation "eisegetical." In short, I will demonstrate that sometimes feminist interpretations provide insightful and faithful exegetical interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus. At other times feminists force the text, either by exaggeration or eisegesis, into conformity with feminist ideologies–particularly in relation to their interpretations of liberation in Exodus.

A significant subtheme to this thesis is that when feminists textually and grammatically (exegetically) interpret the text they not only have an accurate portrayal of the major female characters of Exodus, but they also often grasp a complete interpretation of God and His liberation, i.e. they understand the God of Exodus as one who Himself alone promises and fulfills liberation for humanity.[5] On the other hand, when feminists force the text toward feminist ideologies (exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations) they end up with an unwarranted, elevated

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An answer to this feminist response is that one's experience (presuppositions) is not to be magisterial (authoritative) over Scripture. Instead, from a confessional Lutheran perspective, Scripture is magisterial over people's experience, reason, and presuppositions. Therefore, historical accuracy does not come by conforming Scripture to one's personal experience but through textually accurate interpretations (exegesis) of what Scripture addresses literally.

[5] This view includes God working through particular humans or using their efforts for His purposes. In this respect, Francis Watson, in discussing the women of Exodus 1-2, is more or less correct in saying. "It is inappropriate to distinguish too sharply between human acts and divine acts here. Yahweh is the author of the exodus event, but he accomplishes it through human agency....Correspondingly, the women's acts of resistance, which preserve the life of the primary human agent of liberation, derive not only from their own courage and compassion but also from the divine agency which is already securely at work for the ending of oppression." Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) 197. Nevertheless, because many feminist interpretations do not perceive God's hidden actions through the main female characters of Exodus, it will be necessary clearly to differentiate and define the (temporal and theological) actions and roles of the major female character of Exodus and God vis-à-vis liberation.

view of women's contributions to liberation in Exodus.[6] Even more importantly, such interpretations result in a deficient view of God, which is less than what Exodus offers the reader. Such interpretations lead to a view of a God who either does not or cannot fully liberate humanity on His own.

A variation on this subtheme will come in the chapters which discuss Miriam and Zipporah. There I will again demonstrate that those interpretations which end up with a more accurate and substantiated interpretation of Miriam and Zipporah are exegetical. In contrast, those feminist interpretations which create unwarranted, elevated roles for these characters are exaggerated and eisegetical. The difference from the above subtheme will be that, in elevating the roles of Miriam and Zipporah, feminist interpretations create a deficient interpretation not only of God vis-à-vis liberation but also of God's chosen leader (Moses) and God's covenanted means of grace (circumcision). This is at the expense of making Miriam's and Zipporah's roles more "fully human," greater, or different than is textually warranted. In contrast, I will also demonstrate that exegetical interpretations accurately portray not only these women's roles but also God's leader and God's covenanted means of grace.

The order for demonstrating this thesis will be as follows. First, I will present a discussion of feminist hermeneutics in order to provide the basic groundwork for understanding feminist interpretations, particularly concerning exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations. Second, I will offer a brief look at feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus, since this is vitally important for understanding the specific hermeneutical key which feminists most often use for interpreting the major female characters of Exodus. Third, I will present discussions of the major female characters of Exodus showing the three major feminist interpretive categories. Finally, I will provide an overall critique.

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[6] The same point applies generally as well. For example, in the chapter on feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus, I will show that feminists generally believe humanity to be co-creators with God in humanity's liberation from systemic sin.

Before proceeding, however, I must define the term "feminist" for this thesis. A basic definition of feminist is one which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gives: "those who seek to eliminate women's subordination and marginalization."[7] An even more specific definition for this thesis is Ellen T. Charry's definition of "feminist biblical theology," which "...assumes that both the patriarchal and androcentric underpinnings of the Bible call for a countervailing and decisively feminist hermeneutics that will replace a patriarchal view of reality with a feminist and perhaps gynocentric one."[8] Linking these definitions, "feminist" will refer to those who are self-avowed feminists or are widely recognized as feminists based on writing(s) which coincide with the above definitions. I will include other people in this thesis who are not explicitly feminist, but who show feminist sympathies, i.e. provide interpretations of a text which go beyond what the text legitimately allows in attempting to liberate biblical women from perceived androcentrism. Therefore, the term "feminist" will also designate one who actively or sympathetically seeks to eradicate androcentrism in Scripture and to liberate biblical women into "full humanity" by way of feminist hermeneutics.

With this definition established, I now turn to the question of feminist hermeneutics. This discussion, by revealing the methods behind feminist interpretations, will provide the foundation for later discussions on feminist interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus.

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[7] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Hermeneutics," *Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 2*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 783.

[8] Ellen T. Charry, "Female Sexuality as an Image of Empowerment: Two Models," *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 30.3 (1987): 201.

Chapter 1

Feminist Hermeneutics

Mary Daly: "To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God."[1]

One of the first things that a reader observes about feminist interpretations is that they are often radically divergent from traditional interpretations. In fact, even within feminism itself interpretations are quite diverse. Therefore, in order to understand how feminists arrive at their interpretive conclusions, specifically those dealing with the major female characters of Exodus, it will be helpful to touch on feminist hermeneutics.

Feminist hermeneutics is not a single theory of interpretation. Feminists use psychoanalysis, sociology, Marxism, narratology, rhetorical criticism, and sundry other analytical tools in practicing their hermeneutics. Diversity, in fact, is a prominent aspect of feminism in general and is true of feminist hermeneutics as well. Despite such diversity, feminist hermeneutics has the same underlying "political positions and strategies."[2] In other words, although feminists use various tools for interpretation and critique divergent objects, they use those tools for the same ideological presuppositions and goals.[3]

The feminist critique of mankind, of the world, and even of God contains four basic presuppositions: patriarchy, ideology, anti-objectivity, and women's experience. Patriarchy, in terms of feminism, means a society in which men are the sole rulers and the standard of normalcy.

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[1] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 8.

[2] George Aichele, et al, *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli, et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 234.

[3] An example of the singularity in presuppositions and goals for the feminist cause comes from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who says, "Yet feminist theologies introduce a radical shift into all forms of traditional theology insofar as they insist that the central commitment and accountability for feminist theologians is not the church as a male institution but to the women in the churches, not to *the* tradition as such but to a feminist transformation of Christian traditions, not to *the* Bible on the whole but to the liberating word of God coming to articulation in the biblical writings." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity*, ed. Judith L. Weidman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 35-36.

Adrienne Rich, a prominent lesbian feminist[4], describes patriarchy as follows:

> Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men–by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor–determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.[5]

The problem that feminists perceive with patriarchy is that it grants men the right to "name"[6] women, the world, and God according to their own self-serving political interests, a stolen "right" which makes the world androcentric, i.e. a world created by men and for men. For instance, men label women as "other" by virtue of being biologically different, exclude women from the normal pursuits of life, and thus keep women from becoming "fully human" by keeping women from functioning as men do. Or, patriarchy dictates women's lives as oppressed servants to male superiority by instilling in women the virtue of sacrificial love so as to keep women subservient.[7]

Building on the critique of patriarchy, the feminist use of ideology centers on the belief that all texts, interpretations, ideas, actions, and societies are products of political means. Thus, there is no such thing as neutrality or objectivity in life because all people, institutions, and texts are ideologically tainted. This is an ideological, relativistic theme, a theme adopted by feminists from liberation theology. For instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza applies ideology to theology in this way: "The basic insight of liberation theologies and their methodological starting-point is the insight that all theology knowingly or not is by definition always engaged for or against the

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[4] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *The SIGNS Reader: Women, Gender & Scholarship*, eds. E. Abel and E.K. Abel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 139-68. Akin to Rich's definition of patriarchy is her idea of "compulsory heterosexuality" which is the enforcement of the male, heterosexual ideology to make women become sexually, economically, and socially attached to men, i.e. marriage, in order to fulfill men's lust for sex and power. This is appropriate to keep in mind because lesbianism has had a profound influence on feminism, i.e. the feminist definition and view of patriarchy.

[5] Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976) 57-58.

[6] "Naming" basically means the power to define another for the purposes of self-interest. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) 114-15.

[7] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's*

oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historical world of exploitation and oppression."[8] For feminists, ideology connects to patriarchy and theology in that patriarchy is not a divine institution but a cultural and political phenomenon. More specifically, gender roles are not a part of God's created order but a cultural construction forged by those in power, i.e. men, for the purpose of maintaining their own power.[9]

Closely aligned with ideology is the general denial of objectivity. This encompasses the overall feminist critique of the male-centered enlightenment or "malestream" epistemology.[10] In short, since all ideas are politically biased there is no such thing as objectivity and absolute truth. Feminists apply this critique specifically to any and all patriarchal or man-centered knowledge.[11] The denouement of no objectivity is relativity and possibility. That is, no person has a foothold on truth and no interpretation is *the* correct interpretation. Ideologically speaking, this allows many possible interpretations because it allows many interpretive standpoints. What matters is not the correctness of an interpretation given its textual context, but the ideological adequacy or usefulness of different interpretations.[12]

First Story (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 18.

[8] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*, eds. Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richesin (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981) 93.

[9] Danna Fewell, "Reading The Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism," *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, eds. Stephen R. Hayes and Steven L. McKenzie (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 239.

[10] Rebecca Chopp, "Eve's Knowing: Feminist Theology's Resistance to Malestream Epistemological Frameworks," *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts*, eds. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) 117.

[11] As *The Postmodern Bible* explains: "Central to feminist critique is a critique of the humanist gesture that positioned 'man' at the center of subjectivity, discourse, and epistemology, a self-identical and ahistorical agent who occupies not merely a particular space, but the normative and universal position whose perspective is privileged and subsumes all others." See Aichele, *The Postmodern Bible* 235.

[12] This point is important enough to give an example of via an extended quote by Beverly Stratton on Genesis 2-3: "This rhetorical or hermeneutical task acknowledges the multitude of possibilities available in a text as rich as Genesis 2-3 and understands that a text's overall effect or an interpreter's reading is

The final fundamental feminist presupposition is that of women's experience. Given the presuppositions that patriarchy is an ideological power and that all ideas are merely cultural ideologies created for the purpose of maintaining the status quo of those in power, feminists feel they have the right to (re)claim the ideological power to name themselves, the world, and God according to their own experiences as women.[13] In other words, feminists understand that "naming" is powerful and so desire to name the world after themselves so that they might control their own lives and become what they will.[14] For example, feminists seek to interpret Scripture according to women's experience to counteract patriarchal oppression and to establish feminist equality, i.e. the "full humanity" of women.[15] Or, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states in terms of the "church of women":

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shaped to a large degree by ideological commitments of the individual interpreter and communities of which she or he is a part. The claim is not that scripture interprets itself, but that interpreters, shaped by ideological commitments (some of which may include listening for and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit), inevitably interpret within communities. Similarly, rather than asking 'Is Genesis 3 a fall story?' (which may sound as if a text's proper interpretation is inherent within a text itself rather than occurring between text and community), it may be more important to consider the ways in which reading Genesis 2-3 *as* a creation-fall story is appropriate for a particular interpretive community." Beverly Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric, and Ideology in Genesis 2-3* (JSOTSup 208; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 255. Plain in Stratton's statement is Stanley Fish's reader-response idea of the "interpretive community" as the determinative context, i.e. source and norm, of hermeneutics and exegesis. Telling is the direct statement against the traditional "hermeneutical circle" by which clearer passages of Scripture interpret more difficult passages of Scripture so that Scripture unfolds itself. See Stanley Fish, "Interpreting The *Variorum*," *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 164-84.

[13] For instance, Ruether says: "By women's experience as a key to hermeneutics or theory of interpretation, we mean precisely that experience which arises when women become critically aware of these falsifying and alienating experiences imposed upon them as women by a male-dominated culture. Women's experience, in this sense, is a grace event, an infusion of liberating empowerment from beyond the patriarchal cultural context, which allows them to critique and stand out against these androcentric interpretations of who and what we are... Women's experience, then, implies a conversion experience through which women get in touch with, name, and judge their experiences of sexism in patriarchal society." Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation" 114-15.

[14] So Ruether says, "The uniqueness of feminist theology is not the critical principle of 'full humanity' but that women claim this principle for themselves. Women name themselves as subjects of authentic and full humanity." Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation" 115.

[15] As Ruether explains: "The critique of sexism implies a fundamental change of judgment. This critical principle of feminism is the affirmation of and promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, to be appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, this means that whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be

> Taking as our hermeneutical criterion the authority of women's experience struggling for liberation, we must ask whether and how the Bible as the product of patriarchal culture and expressed in androcentric language can also be the sacred scripture for the church of women.[16]

In summary, women's experience, or the "women-church," which is "the movement of self-identified women and women-identified men,"[17] is the main artery of the feminist heart because women's experience is the source and norm of adequate feminist truth. The feminist presuppositions of patriarchy, ideology, anti-objectivity, and women's experience also all work together toward the feminist "political" goal: to unmask patriarchy and "depatriarchalize" the Scriptures, to interpret without sexism, and to re-interpret Scripture based on women's experience. The final goal is to liberate the Scriptures and women for an egalitarian world, a world in which women can name themselves and function equally with and the same as men.[18]

The presuppositions and goals of feminism also dictate the relative authority of Scripture. Feminism, because of its presuppositions and goals, does not consider Scripture to be inerrant or authoritative, but considers Scripture to be ministerial to their "personal integrity." Thus many feminists speak quite circuitously about Scripture's "authority." For these feminists Scripture functions as a "resource" for the advancement of feminist liberation.[19] Assessing this, David

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presumed not to reflect the divine or authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption." Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation" 115.

[16] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 40.

[17] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) 126. Mary Hunt's definition of women-church is "a *global, ecumenical movement made up of local feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in sacrament and solidarity*." Mary Hunt, "Defining 'Women-Church,'" *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, eds. Curt Cadorette, et al (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992) 207-8. So also Rosemary Radford Ruether defines women as the Church because women are the oppressed and thus have rightful claim to the Scriptural tradition of the exodus, liberation, and the formation of a new free community. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 56.

[18] Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of The Academy of Religion* 41.1 (1973): 31.

[19] Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose" 129.

Clines encourages them to discard all discussions about Scripture's authority over them, and instead focus on its "function" as a "resource for living."[20]

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza plainly speaks about Scripture in this way. Fiorenza judges that Scripture cannot be authoritative for feminism "because of its androcentric-patriarchal character."[22] Therefore, Scripture is to be understood as a "historical prototype" rather than as a "mythical archetype." In this understanding Scripture is not an absolute, unchanging authority but is a root-model of liberation, a root-model that contains God's Word within it but is not itself fully and completely God's Word. Consequently, feminism seeks to establish an adequate and usable "canon within the canon" based on contemporary feminist theory and women's struggle against androcentrism.[23] Taking Scripture as a historical prototype not only treats Scripture as a functional resource for the feminist cause but also allows other texts and experiences to have equal or greater authority.

All of this leads into the actual theory and practice of feminist hermeneutics. Although there have been various forms of and advances in feminist hermeneutics, and there continue to be so, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics capture the overall direction and flavor of

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[20] Clines proposes: "So why not say, Authority is not the point. The authority of a text has to do with its nature; we want to be saying things about the Bible that have to do with its *function*. We want to be saying, not so much that the Bible is right, not even that the Bible is wrong, but that it impacts for good upon people. Despite everything we might want to add, despite its handicaps, despite that fact that it has misled people and promoted patriarchy, it has an unquenchable capacity- when taken in conjunction with a commitment to personal integrity- to inspire people... Think of it rather as a resource for living which has no authority but which nevertheless manages to impose itself powerfully upon people." David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 48.

[21] Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose" 129.

[22] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 41.

[23] As Firoenza explains: "However, it derives such a 'canon' *not* from the biblical writings but from the contemporary struggle of women against racism, sexism, and poverty as oppressive systems of patriarchy and from its systemic explorations in feminist theory. It can do so because it does not understand the Bible as perduring archetype but as historical prototype or a formative root-model of biblical faith an life. Its vision of liberation and salvation is informed by the biblical prototype but not derived from it. It places

feminism. Fiorenza not only deals with the initial feminist steps of unmasking patriarchy, rejecting overtly patriarchal texts, and upholding texts that appear feminist but also reaches out to redeem maligned biblical women, create of a "canon within the canon," and re-write liturgies for the "women-church."[24] Fiorenza's hermeneutic breaks up into four interlocking and escalating parts: the hermeneutics of suspicion, proclamation, remembrance, and creative actualization.

The "hermeneutics of suspicion" centers on the belief that the Bible cannot be authoritative for truth because it is patriarchal and androcentric. In place of Scriptural authority the hermeneutics of suspicion posits the "feminist experience of the "church of women" as "central to biblical interpretation and theological reflection."[25] The goal is to search through the Bible and discard androcentric mistranslations, interpretations, and presuppositions. Sexism is to be eradicated from the biblical text and replaced by adequate translations and interpretations. For, as Fiorenza states:

> Sexist language creates the linguistic invisibility or marginality of women; it describes women as dependent and as derived from men; it characterizes women in stereotypical roles and images; it ridicules women and trivializes their contributions; it mentions women only when they are the exceptions or present a problem; and it singles them out from the collective, for example, blacks, Jews, and Third World peoples, as if women did not belong to each of these groups.[26]

Consequently the hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to determine which texts are patriarchal and which are gender neutral and then translate them accordingly so as to eradicate sexism wherever possible. In sum, the hermeneutics of suspicion uses suspicion, feminist experience, and anti-

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biblical texts under the authority of feminist experience insofar as it maintains that revelation is ongoing and takes place 'for the sake of our salvation.'" Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 46.

[24] Rosemary Radford Ruether also defines women as the Church because women are the oppressed and thus have rightful claim to the Scriptural tradition of the exodus, liberation, and the formation of a new free community. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 56.

[25] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 47.

[26] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 49-50.

sexism to produce an adequate translation and text for the foundation of the women-church.[27]

The "hermeneutics of proclamation" builds upon this foundation by determining which texts are usable for proclamation within and proliferation of the women-church. This overall approach follows liberation theology's "advocacy" stance which sees oppressed people as having special privilege to Scripture, its interpretation, and its application.[28] For example, some texts may be plainly patriarchal and thus destructive to women, but even "feminist-neutral" texts can be oppressive depending on the contemporary situation. For instance, telling physically abused wives to follow Christ's example and forgive their husbands would be to make them passively submit to male oppression.[29] Thus the goal of the hermeneutics of proclamation is to create a sacred text, or lectionary, that is feminist-affirming.[30] The central rule in this process is to exclude any and all texts which women deem to be sexist.[31]

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[27] Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose" 130-31.

[28] Fiorenza sees the "advocacy" stance functioning this way: "Instead of asking whether an approach is appropriate to the Scriptures and adequate to the human condition, one needs to test whether a theological model of interpretation is *adequate* to the historical-literary methods of contemporary interpretation and *appropriate* to the struggle of the oppressed for liberation." Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics" 100. In other words, the "advocacy" stance advocates the ideology of the oppressed as the dominant source and norm of truth over that of Scripture. Here Scripture is no longer the subject, i.e. doer, of questioning and answering the human condition, but becomes the object of scrutiny and a malleable resource unto the oppressed person's ideological privilege of adequacy and appropriateness.

[29] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 50.

[30] Although revelation and grace fall into the area of dogmatics, these topics help inform the discussion of the hermeneutics of proclamation. Many feminists believe that only those texts which speak for women's liberation can be called God's revealed word and only that which delivers women from patriarchal oppression can be called grace. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes this view when she says that the "locus" of "divine revelation and grace" is not the Bible but "the experience of women (and all those oppressed) struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression." Cf. Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose" 128-29. Rosemary Radford Ruether even goes so far as to say that "... if the cross of Jesus would be experienced by women as pointing them only toward continued victimization and not redemption, it would be perceived as false and demonic in this way, and women could no longer identify themselves as Christians." Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation" 112. Given this the hermeneutics of proclamation are quite clear: only proclaim those texts as revelatory which confirm and uphold feminist grace and liberation.

[31] So Fiorenza proposes: "Patriarchal texts should not be allowed to remain in the lectionary but should be replaced by texts affirming the discipleship of equals. An 'inclusive translation' can only be made of those lectionary texts which, in a critical feminist process of evaluation, are identified as articulating a

The third part of Fiorenza's hermeneutic is the "hermeneutics of remembrance." The central rule here is that "his-story" is androcentric and thus changes, obscures, and ignores women, who were at the center of all matters of life,[32] in order to fit male political goals. The goal, then, is to remember historical women and (re)claim "her-story" of pain, struggle, suffering, and centrality over against patriarchy; or, in other words, to bring solidarity between women from past to present to future and (re)claim Christian theology and history as women's own theology and history. The method, given the belief that men wantonly and willingly obscure and marginalize women, is to utilize "the subversive power of the 'remembered past.'"[33] In other words, the hermeneutics of remembrance seek to add to the foundational feminist texts garnered through the hermeneutics of proclamation by suspiciously and subversively reading biblical history to (re)discover and (re)claim the historical continuum of "feminist identity."[34] Fiorenza postulates:

> If feminist identity is not based on the experience of biological sex or on essential gender differences, but on the common historical experience of women as collaborating or struggling participants in patriarchal culture and biblical history, then the reconstruction of early Christian history in a feminist perspective is not just a historical-critical but also a

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liberating vision for women struggling for self-affirmation and wholeness,..." Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose" 132.

[32] As stated, one of the presuppositions in the hermeneutics of remembrance is that women have always been feminist in some form or another and have always been at the center of all matters of life. Fiorenza's reasoning for saying this is that Scripture only notes women when they are "exceptional or cause problems," and even then Scripture and/or patriarchy obscures their lives. Consequently, when one reads "women passages" one must realize the patriarchal dilution of women's lives and understand that these are most likely exceptional women who "were at the center of biblical life." Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose" 133.

[33] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 51.

[34] Probably here in the hermeneutics of remembrance more than anywhere else feminist "desire" manifests itself most boldly. For instance, Maria Clara Bingemer says, "The future of the female way of doing theology is therefore inseparably linked with desire. The primacy of rationality must be replaced by the primacy of desire....When we talk about desire we are talking about human beings at their deepest level, in their deepest and ultimate truth, in their vital force, and therefore in their most authentic and legitimate aspirations....The challenge is to *restore the primacy of desire within theological discourse*. The promise is that she will be enlightened and led by that desire toward the kingdom where liberation will be a full reality." Maria Clara Bingemer, "Women in the Future of Liberation Theology," *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, eds. Mark H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) 478-79.

feminist-theological task.[35]

In this way the hermeneutics of remembrance gives the women-church, or the feminist movement, a wealth of created "her-stories" about women's historic centrality in order to fuel the fire in feminism's continual struggle against patriarchy.[36]

The final step is the "hermeneutics of creative actualization." Whereas the first three steps seek to discover a "usable past" the hermeneutics of creative actualization seek to create an acceptable "usable future."[37] The method and goal is basically four-fold: reclaim, retell, reformulate, and create. The hermeneutics of creative actualization reclaim women's "imaginative freedom, popular creativity, and ritual powers" in order to "retell" biblical stories on the basis of feminist experience, "reformulate" biblical life into that of gender equality, or sameness, in both ontology and functionality, and "create midrashic amplifications" of those texts which the hermeneutics of suspicion, proclamation, and remembrance deem usable for the women-church.[38] The hermeneutics of creative actualization not only apply to the Bible but also to the liturgy, the Sacraments, and basic Christian doctrine as well.[39] The hermeneutics of creative actualization,

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[35] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 51. Ruether also agrees with this feminist continuum when she posits that "wherever women have heard the good news as the setting at liberty of those who are oppressed, they have applied it to themselves as women as well." Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation" 122.

[36] Mary Kassian connects feminist educement, or "consciousness raising" techniques, with a political technique that Mao Tse-tung used in the late 1940's. Kassian quotes Mao Tse-tung as saying, "Speak bitterness to recall bitterness. Speak pain to recall pain." The point is that bringing individuals together to speak about their pains and anger causes them to unite into revolutionary action against their oppressors. Feminism has adopted this technique and Fiorenza has sanctified this as a hermeneutical step toward liberation. Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism With the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992) 61.

[37] Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective- A Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974) 72-103.

[38] Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 53.

[39] As Fiorenza explains: "We rediscover in story and poetry, in drama and liturgy, in song and dance, our biblical foresisters' sufferings and victories. In feminist liturgy and haggada, women retell the story of the Passover or that of the 'last supper.' We re-vision the liturgy of Advent or the baptismal ritual. In ever new images and symbols we seek to rename the God of the Bible and the significance of Jesus." Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues" 53.

like the other three steps, seek to create a usable Scripture and church for the advancement of the feminist liberation.

Although Fiorenza's hermeneutic is a basic template of feminist hermeneutics, there are a few other current hermeneutical tools that feminists use which need to be discussed as well, namely, "reading against the grain," intertextuality, and *metissage*. First, reading against the grain entails ignoring basic context and authorial intentions in order to discover vagueness, doubts, and gaps within a text that might yield an alternate, contradictory, or ambivalent interpretation.[40] Put differently, reading against the grain looks for gaps of vagueness, indeterminacy, and multivalency within a given text in order to reveal alternative information with which to subvert traditional interpretations.[41] The ostensible purpose of this technique is to challenge readers to look at texts with fresh eyes so that a clearer and more complete (ideological) picture might become apparent.[42]

Intertextuality is similar to the hermeneutical circle of interpreting Scripture by means of Scripture, although the definition of "scripture" is radically different. Intertextuality aims at using various and sundry texts and analytical tools which the interpreter deems approrpiate to interpret a given text. Or, as Michael Riffaterre says: "Intertextuality is the perception, by the reader, of relationships between one work and others, which have [historically] preceded or followed it."[43] Intertextuality allows the reader to determine the source, norm, and interpretation of any given passage.[44]

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[40] Fewell, "Reading the Bible Ideologically" 246.

[41] Or, one might even say that reading against the grain seeks to interpret clearer passages of Scripture by means of more unclear passages, passages which have themselves been subjected to uncontextual interpretation.

[42] For example, Phyllis Trible reads against the grain when she posits that nature mourned Miriam's death by withholding water from Israel. See Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5.1 (1989): 23.

[43] As quoted and translated by Stratton, *Out of Eden* 184.

[44] For example, Ilana Pardes uses Egyptian myths of Isis and Osiris in order to interpret Zipporah's

Metissage is Francoise Lionnet's expansion of Edouard Glissant's term and theory for creating breathing space where two cultures or belief systems collide. The basic goal is to seek indeterminacy rather than essentialism so that the oppressed can fight the prevailing powers without becoming one of them.[45] Otherwise stated, *metissage* is a call to fight hegemonic powers, e.g. patriarchy, by means of creating multiplicity instead of seeking the correct and irrefutable interpretation of a text. This is closely akin to the deconstructionist dictum of "decentering" that purposefully avoids the one correct interpretation of a given text and focuses on multiple meanings and ideological deconstruction so as to critique culture and society.[46] In sum, the overall aim of *metissage* is to create counter-cultures as viable options eventually to relativize and replace the dominant and oppressive hegemonic powers.[47]

Reading against the grain, intertextuality, and *metissage* all propose the reader to be "magisterial" over the text, which is "ministerial." Even though reading against the grain focuses on the text itself and intertextuality focuses on the use of outside texts, both fall in line with *metissage* in that the reader has the privilege and right to create alternate realities for the purpose

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actions in Exodus 4:24-26 as being the apotropaic magic of a goddess. See Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 85-93.

[45] Lionnet says: "We can be united against hegemonic power only by refusing to engage that power on its own terms, since to do so would mean becoming ourselves a term within that system of power. We have to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility and thought, of "clarity," in all of Western philosophy. *Metissage* is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages." As quoted by Aichele, *The Postmodern Bible* 243. This idea is not completely new as Herbert Marcuse, an "intellectual godfather" of new left activism during the 1960's, proposed that fighting for liberation within or through the dominant system only causes one to become entrapped and a cog in the system. Therefore, Marcuse encourages people to "drop out" and fight the battle on one's own terms by creating a counter-culture of imaginative freedom. See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 247-57.

[46] Aichele, *The Postmodern Bible* 225-26.

[47] For example, Thomas Kuhn argues that dominant scientific theories are replaced, not by falsification or new data, but by means of observing data in a different way. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

of replacing the correct, dominant and oppressive interpretation with that of the reader's own discretion.

In conclusion, Mary Daly's statement that "to exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God"[48] is the precise premise and goal of the majority of feminist hermeneutics. Whatever the hermeneutical tools are, the premise and goal are the same: women's experience names all of creation and heaven in order to bring women into "full humanity." From here, the next question is how feminism and women's experience name liberation in Exodus. The answer to this question is important because it will dictate how feminists use their interpretations of liberation in Exodus to bring the major female characters of Exodus into "full humanity." That is, it will determine the relative roles of the major female character of Exodus and God vis-à-vis liberation.

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[48] Daly, *Beyond God the Father* 8.

Chapter 2

The Feminist View of Liberation in Exodus

Letty M. Russell: "...to be human is to take part in this historical process of transforming the world and shaping the future."[1]

Gustavo Gutiérrez: "The liberation from Egypt, linked to and even coinciding with creation, adds an element of capital importance: the need and the place for man's active participation in the building of society."[2]

The approach toward understanding feminist interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus is not complete without an understanding of feminist views concerning liberation in Exodus. Feminists use their interpretations of liberation in Exodus as a hermeneutical tool in interpreting the major female characters of Exodus. Consequently, understanding feminist hermeneutics gives a reader methodological insight for generally comprehending feminist interpretations of the major female characters in Exodus. Further, an understanding of feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus directly aids the reader in understanding how and why feminists interpret the major female characters of Exodus.

The general feminist view of liberation in Exodus is not greatly divorced from liberation theology's view of liberation in Exodus. Indeed, as Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho note, feminist liberation in general, as well as with specific reference to Exodus, partly developed out of liberation theology.[3] Accordingly, this chapter will first briefly deal with the commonalities between the feminist view of liberation and liberation theology, commonalities which will then better inform the latter discussion on feminist views of liberation in Exodus.

The first common trait between feminist liberation and liberation theology is the idea that

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[1] Letty M. Russell, "Liberation Theology in a Feminist Perspective," *Liberation, Revolution, and Freedom: Theological Perspectives*. ed. Thomas M. McFadden (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975) 93.

[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. eds. and trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973) 158-59.

[3] Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions," *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*. eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) 206.

theology comes "from below" or that theology comes from the experience of oppression.[4] This theme was partially picked up in the former chapter when dealing with the "advocacy" of the oppressed, i.e. advocating the oppressed as having special privelege to Scripture, its interpretation, and application. There the reason for theology "from below" is that, since God is on the side of the oppressed they have the privilege to interpret God's Word on their own behalf.[5] Rosemary Radford Ruether states another defense for feminist liberation:

> There is a sense in which those who are primarily the victims of an oppressive system are also those who can most readily disaffiliate their identities with it, for they have the least stake in its perpetuation. In their revolt against it, they can thus become the prophetic community, which witnesses against the false empire of the "beast" and points to "God's Kingdom."[6]

This theme of theology "from below" implies the second commonality.

The second common trait shared by both feminist and liberation theology is the "biblical promise of liberation" and "universality."[7] The belief here is that God, in both the Old and the New Testament, is a God who promises political liberation to all oppressed peoples. Gustavo Gutiérrez best summarizes this view when he says:

> The God of Exodus is the God of history and of political liberation more than he is the God of nature. Yahweh is the Liberator, the *goel* of Israel....The work of Christ forms a part of this movement and brings it to complete fulfillment....But the work of Christ is presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and all its consequences: despoliation, injustice, and hatred.[8]

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[4] See Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey: Perspectives on Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1986) 69-70.

[5] So Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says, "To truly understand the Bible is to read it through the eyes of the oppressed, since the God who speaks in the Bible is the God of the oppressed. For a correct interpretation of the Bible, it is necessary to acknowledge the 'hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed' and to develop a hermeneutics 'from below.'" Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*. eds. Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richesin (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981) 100.

[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972) 11.

[7] Russell, "Liberation Theology" 92-93.

[8] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 157-58.

The continuity and fulfillment of God's promises of "liberation" and "universality" are certainly true, but the next question is what "liberation" for all humanity means.

The third commonality between feminist liberation and liberation theology explains "liberation" as predominantly a sociopolitical event. As Letty M. Russell explains:

> Emphasis is placed on the longed-for eternal life as a quality of existence in the here and now. It is expressed through actions as we try to share God's gift of liberation with all people. Thus, salvation is not an escape from fate or nature; it is a transformation of the world, bringing a new creation, and seeking to overcome suffering. In this perspective sin is the opposite of liberation, sin is oppression; it is the situation in which there is no community, no room to live as a whole human being.[9]

This is not to say that "liberation" does nothing for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but these things are far out of view–*almost* to the point of extinction. Instead, "liberation" revolves much more around the temporal, political, social, and economical well-being of humanity. For example, the Hebrew word *shalom* is often used to signify this liberation because *shalom* is a word which includes both God's liberation of humanity and the blessing and fulfillment of God's creation. That is, *shalom* encapsulates the idea that the liberation of humanity is the temporal and social fulfillment of God's creation.[10]

The fourth point of comparison is that of "human worth." Here theology does not start from "the existence of the individual as a sinner," rather "the accent is on the status of being a child of God, a status which is lost in oppressive structures."[11] That is, this theology mostly emphasizes the self-restoration of one's original created goodness from the taint of systemic sin, e.g. participating in oppressive structures,[12] rather than humanity's complete redemption through

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[9] Russell, "Liberation Theology" 94.

[10] Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective- A Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974) 106-8.

[11] Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* 71-73.

[12] As Ruether says, "Repentance then is simply the power to disaffiliate our identity from the false and oppressive power systems of fallen reality. But the gift of liberation, although alien and transcendent to the situation of sin, is not alien to 'our natures,' but springs from the same 'ground' as man's original

Christ from deadly personal sin against God. The avowed effect and purpose of this emphasis is to make "human worth," e.g. the full humanity or total equality of all people, and "the possibility of being a person in a just order of society" theology's goal.[13]

Another purpose for this emphasis on the original, created goodness of humanity shows itself in the fifth common theme, namely, that humanity's original goodness, even though tainted with systemic sin,[14] still allows humans to be "co-creators" with God in an ever changing and changeable world. So Gutiérrez says:

> Man is the crown and center of the work of creation and is called to continue it through his labor (cf. Gen. 1:28)....Consequently, when we assert that man fulfills himself by continuing the work of creation by means of his labor, we are saying that he places himself, by this very fact, within an all-embracing salvific process. To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community.[15]

The result of this divine-human endeavor, though, remains open. The premise behind this belief is that God "initiates" an action or promises a future, but that humanity must "fulfill" this future in its own specific way.[16] In sum, the emphasis on humanity's original, created goodness and God's open, temporal future allows liberation theologians to support their supposition that humanity is co-creator, or (re)creator, of its own good temporal society.[17]

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foundation. So it is not properly seen as 'supernatural,' but as a restoration of man to his true self, and a reintegration of creation with its true identity as 'God's Kingdom.'" Ruether, *Liberation Theology* 9.

[13] Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* 66.

[14] Critically it is more correct to say "because humanity is only tainted with systemic sin." The point being that liberation theologies can posit that mankind's created goodness still qualifies us to create a truly good society with God because liberation theologies do not see sin as something that has truly deprived humanity of goodness and thus the natural ability to do good on our own or with God.

[15] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 158-59. Similarly, Ruether says, "We seek to become authentic co-creators with God, upon whose works God can look and declare, at last, that it is indeed 'very good.'" Ruether, *Liberation Theology* 22.

[16] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 159. Also Russell says, "The future is at the disposal of those who are aware of their own historical possibilities and seek out political, economical and social ways of planning for tomorrow. For Christians there is also a vision of a future that comes when God places it at our disposal. Through hope in God's future we find new courage and strength to enter into the difficult process of planning and enacting on behalf of human liberation." Russell, "Liberation Theology" 94.

[17] Words like "self-liberation" (Russell, "Liberation Theology" 89) and "self-creation" (Gutiérrez,

Finally, this leads to the sixth commonality, namely, praxis.[18] In brief, praxis means that theology is not predominantly a body of doctrines but is a continual process of action-reflection-action on behalf of the oppressed for creating a just society and full humanity. In this sense, liberation theology "does not place all its discoveries or conclusions into one over-arching system; instead, it concentrates on applying discoveries to bring about change."[19] Therefore, praxis continually changes in order to meet the changing situations and needs of oppressed people.

These six themes or methodologies provide the necessary background for understanding and fleshing out the overall feminist interpretation of liberation in Exodus. Many of the interpretations that feminists supply are, in general, the same as liberation theology. Nonetheless, feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus vary somewhat from other liberation theologies in terms of their emphasis by focusing on the liberation of women by women from social, economical, political, and religious sexism.

The first aspect of feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus is that this liberation is more temporal and social than spiritual; that is, a social salvation based on God's unqualified advocacy of all oppressed people rather than God, first and foremost, fulfilling His promise to Abraham (Gen. 17). Some feminists recognize the ultimate theological nature of the Exodus–namely, God fulfilling His promise to Abraham by bringing the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land[20]–but most feminists ignore this in favor of social liberation. For instance, Dianne Bergant says:

> The Exodus-symbol may well have had its roots in this historical experience of social revolt and religious rebellion. *However, within the biblical tradition its meaning is*

A Theology of Liberation 159) encapsulate and explain what "co-creators" means.

[18] Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* 73.

[19] Russell, "Liberation Theology" 92.

[20] For instance, Exum says, "As the book of Exodus opens, part of the promise to the patriarchs has been fulfilled (Israel has become a great nation), and interest is aroused concerning that part of the promise which has yet to reach consummation (that Israel will possess that land of Canaan)." J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10" *Semia* 28 (1983): 64.

> *principally theological*. Here it represents God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian oppression....God delivered Israel from foreign oppression and made Israel a "chosen people."[21]

What Bergant says is true to a point, but one notices that she ignores God's previous promises to Abraham (cf. Gen. 15) and, instead, interprets the theological character of liberation in Exodus as God choosing to liberate Israel from oppression and making Israel His people simply because they are oppressed. Consequently, one begins to see how feminism, in general, struggles in its perception of the exodus. Feminism perceives the theological or promise oriented nature of Exodus, but it still stands more upon social liberation from oppression here and now.

The second aspect of feminist views of liberation in Exodus is that liberation is an egalitarian endeavor against hierarchies. For instance, since liberation is from Egypt this means that liberation is not only from Egypt's physical oppression but also from the Egyptian religious and social structures as well, which Egypt viewed as divine and eternally valid. So Bergant proposes, "Rather than understand it [Exodus] primarily as deliverance from oppressive forces or structures, we might instead interpret it as the rejection of *any* force or structure, oppressive or benevolent, that claims for itself primordial origin."[22] In other words, liberation from Egypt entails liberation from any form of hierarchy and liberation for egalitarianism including liberation from gender roles. What replaces such "primordial orders" that are "divinely ordained and eternally valid" are "sociopolitical structures in favour of an *egalitarian confederation*."[23] For example, Israel, in its covenant and laws, did not seek to become themselves tyrannical and oppressive, but sought to establish justice, equality, and the mutual respect of all persons.

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[21] Dianne Bergant, "Exodus as a Paradigm in Feminist Theology," *Exodus- A Lasting Paradigm*. eds. Bas van Iersel and Anton Weiler (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark Ltd., 1987) 102. Cf. Drorah O'Donnell Setel, "Exodus," *The Women's Bible Commentary*. eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 30.

[22] Bergant, "Exodus as a Paradigm" 101.

[23] Bergant, "Exodus as a Paradigm" 101.

The third aspect is that this liberation from oppression is the ultimate theological paradigm and interpretive key for Scripture and life, and is also the key for interpreting the major female characters of Exodus.[24] One reason why liberation functions as a paradigm and interpretive key is because the Exodus "*stands in opposition to what is discriminatory and oppressive*; it affirms the promise of new and life-giving things to come..."[25] That is, liberation is the ultimate paradigm because it affirms justice, equality, and life.[26] Another reason why liberation functions as a paradigm and interpretive key is because, as Anderson and Gorgulho say, "It is there [in Exodus] that we see the presence of the God who comes to form a people free and united in solidarity."[27] Stated otherwise, Yahweh establishes liberation as paradigmatic by revealing Himself as the liberator of oppressed people.

Finally, the fourth general aspect of liberation in Exodus for feminism is that liberation is a synergistic work between God and people/women. Contrarily, some feminists acknowledge the overall role allocated to God as the true liberator. For example, J. Cheryl Exum says concerning the midwives' activities in Exodus 1: "...we should assume also the hidden activity of God."[28] Nevertheless, most feminist interpretations emphasize almost to the total absence of God the nearly autonomous roles that women play in being the initiators and preservers of the liberation

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[24] Feminists, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, see Exodus' liberation paradigm throughout Scripture in what Ruether calls the "prophetic-messianic tradition." Ruether explains: "...what I mean by the prophetic-messianic tradition is a critical perspective and process through which the biblical tradition constantly reevaluates, in new contexts, what is truly the liberating Word of God, over against both the sinful deformations of contemporary society and also the limitations of past biblical traditions, which saw in part and understood in part, and whose partiality may have even been a source of sinful injustice and idolatry." Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) 117.

[25] Bergant, "Exodus as a Paradigm" 106.

[26] One might say that the exodus is the ultimate paradigm for liberation theologies since liberation theologies interpret liberation in Exodus as advocating their particular desires in an unqualified way.

[27] Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 205.

[28] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 68.

movement. For example, concerning the midwives in Exodus 1 Anderson and Gorgulho say that the midwives acted and began the exodus on their own. They also say that only later did Levitical redactors give God a hand in the story, a hand which nearly erased the midwives' autonomous actions.[29] In this way, this feminist interpretation, as well as others, comes quite close to saying explicitly that in the early chapters of Exodus it is the women alone who cause the exodus to begin and keep the exodus from failing.[30]

In summary, the feminist views of liberation in Exodus are quite akin to liberation theology's view of liberation in general. Nevertheless, there are some differences, such as the egalitarian endeavor against any and all social orders. The most important point to remember for this thesis is the paradigmatic, interpretive key that liberation is a loose divine-human/women endeavor to (re)create a world of justice and equality.

Given this general understanding and critique of feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus, the following chapters will demonstrate how feminists apply this paradigm of liberation in Exodus to interpret the major female characters of Exodus. The questions to keep in mind are whether feminist interpretations liberate Exodus from Exodus. That is, do feminist interpretations lead the major female character of Exodus into the land of feminist liberation ("exaggerated" and "eisegetical" interpretations), and/or do they also apprehend the textual understanding of the major female characters of Exodus ("exegetical" interpertation)?

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[29] According to Anderson and Gorgulho: "Leadership and strength do not come from above or from individuals. Resistance comes from inside the households, where women have an irreplaceable role... The story (of the midwives) was taken up by the levitical circles and the rural prophetic movement. They introduced the notion of the "fear of God" as a dominant theme. The action of the midwives is now seen from a prophetic point of view. The midwives' action acquires overtones of the levitical and prophetic view of God's action in the history of the people." Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 213-14.

[30] For instance, Siebert-Hommes says, "Their active intervention ensures that history does not come to a fatal end." Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter...She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 65.

Chapter 3

Feminist Interpretations of Shiphrah and Puah

The examinations of feminist hermeneutics and feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus prepare the way for examining feminist interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus. This chapter focuses on the feminist interpretations of Shiphrah and Puah, the "Hebrew midwives" of Exodus 1:15-22.[1] In this chapter I will demonstrate that feminists interpret Shiphrah and Puah in three basic ways: exegetically, exaggeratedly, and eisegetically. Further, of these three interpretive patterns, the feminist interpretations which provide the most accurate view of these important women are exegetical interpretations.[2] Similarly, the most accurate and complete theology of God in terms of His relation to the beginnings of liberation in Exodus are also exegetical interpretations. In contrast, those interpretations which create an unfounded view of these women and a deficient view of God are exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations.

One of the important exegetical aspects of the story of the midwives, which many feminist interpretations are quick to point out, is that Pharaoh is left anonymous while the midwives are named: Shiphrah ("beauty") and Puah ("girl").[3] One probable reason why the names of the midwives are recorded and thus the midwives'importance is as Jopie Siebert-Hommes proposes: "They are the ones who ensure that 'the children live'. In contrast, the king 'has them killed'. At the same time he is shown to be powerless. His actions do not make his

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[1] The discussion of whether or not Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew women who are midwives, Egyptian women who are midwives to Hebrew women, or Hebrew women who are midwives to Hebrew women is not necessasarily answerable, and so it will not be a factor in the discussions. See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1974) 16.

[2] As noted before the point is not so much that exegetical interpretations are more textually accurate–for that is their nature by definition–but that they provide a more accurate historical view. One reason for this is that Scripture is the only extant history of these women so a textually accurate interpretation of this text will yield the most accurate historical portrayal of the major female characters of Exodus. Another reason is that Scripture is magisterial (authoritative) hence what Scripture addresses literally it also describes accurately.

[3] Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 88.

name. But the midwives make their name by dint of their deeds."[4] In other words, the text honors the midwives for saving the lives of newly born Hebrew male infants by recording their names. Such feminist interpretations cogently argue that the text records the midwives' names to show that they were important to Israel.

This leads to the question of *how* important or in what way the midwives were important to Israel. Some feminist interpretations stick close to the text in answering the question of the midwives' importance or their role in Exodus. These feminists answer that the midwives act out of "fear of God" and thus, while not diminishing the midwives' actions, such exegetical interpretations grasp the idea that the midwives act out of faithfulness toward God. For instance, Trevor Dennis says,

> The narrator does not underline their defiance or their heroism. But he does explain their motive: they 'feared God'....Twice we are told in the course of their short scene that Shiphrah and Puah 'fear' God. But their fear is unlike that of all the rest....It does not turn them to flight or feeble protest, nor to accusation or violence. It enables them to defy the pharaoh *without fear*....Because of their fear of God, they owe the pharaoh no allegiance and they show him none.[5]

In other words, the midwives do not resist Pharaoh because they seek liberation from Pharaoh but because they fear God by giving allegiance only to God's ways. The result of such an interpretation is that the midwives are important in that they were faithful to God's ways over against Pharaoh's edict by saving newly born Hebrew male infants.[6]

J. Cheryl Exum provides a cogent interpretation of the midwives' faithfulness by diagramming the chiastic nature of Exodus 1:15-22 and demonstrating that the midwives'

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[4] Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter...She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 66.

[5] Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* 91-2.

[6] There is the question of whether or not the midwives saved Moses from death at birth. The text does not explicitly say that the midwives did save Moses from infanticide, but the juxtaposition of the two stories certainly allows for such an interpretation. In fact, such a juxtaposition might strongly indicate such an interpretation and thereby give another view of the midwives' importance– they are God's means of beginning the exodus by saving Moses at birth.

motivation is the "fear of God." Here Exum notes that the two statements that "the midwives feared God" (Ex. 1:17,21) stand as the "motivating factor" and "attitude of faith" between the Pharaoh's desire to kill (Ex. 1:18) and the midwives' preservation of life (Ex. 1:19).[7] Exum explains the midwives' "fear of God" as meaning not "simply to be afraid of God or God's punishment; it is on the contrary, a far broader theological concept, having at its center the element of *mysterium tremendum* and extending to conduct which is guided by basic ethical principles and in harmony with God's will."[8] In other words, the midwives' "fear of God" is faithfulness to God's laws.

Exum further interprets the phrase "the midwives feared God" (Ex. 1:17,21) as indicating God's hidden activity through the midwives.[9] The text, I agree and will show, seems to indicate this. First, the phrases ותיראן המילדת את־האלהים ("and the midwives feared God") of Exodus 1:17 and ירא המילדת את־האלהים ("the midwives feared God") of Exodus 1:21 both seem to indicate the true God and not gods. This is so because in Exodus 1:21 God (האלהים) is said to bless the midwives for what they have done. Further evidence that האלהים refers to God comes in Exodus 3:6 where Moses fears האלהים who is the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," and who only eight verses later refers to Himself as יהוה. Finally, all the other verses in the Old Testament which speak of someone fearing (ירא) God (specifically in this form–את־האלהים) indicate or assume that this means יהוה.[10] Therefore, one can safely say that the midwives fear יהוה and not the *gods*.

The second point concerning these two phrases is that this "fear" means faithfulness toward God and His ways. For instance, Ecclesiastes 12:13b reads את־האלהים ירא את־מצותיו שמור ("fear God and keep His commandments") thus indicating faithfulness toward God and His ways.

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[7] J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semia* 28 (1983): 71.

[8] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 73.

[9] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 68.

[10] Cf. Gen. 42:18, 1 Chron. 13:12, Neh. 7:2, Ecc. 7:2, 5:6, 12:13.

Furthermore, passages such as 1 Chronicles 13:12, which speak of David fearing God, and Nehemiah 7:2, which speaks of Hanani's fear of God, also demonstrate this aspect of faithfulness toward God.[11] Consequently, the phrases in Exodus 1:17,21 can and should be seen this way also, i.e. the midwives remained faithful to God over against Pharaoh.

A third aspect of the phrase "fear of God" (ירא את־האלהים) reveals the nearness and active intervention of God. For instance, in 1 Chronicles 13:12 David fears God because He swiftly punished Uzza for touching the ark. Furthermore, the context of Ecclesiastes 5:7 (MT 5:6– ירא את־האלהים) also speaks of the nearness of God in terms of punishing sin. Therefore, this nearness and activity of God might be seen as well in Exodus 1:20-21. This time God's nearness and activity is His quick rewarding or blessing of the midwives for their faithful actions (Ex. 1:21).[12] The significance is that the "fear of God" indicates the nearness of God in terms of His dealings with mankind. In the case of the midwives God was, at the very least, cognizant of what the midwives were doing.

Given the points that fearing (ירא) God (specifically in this form–את־האלהים) refers to faithfulness toward Yahweh (יהוה), and belief in God's active presence or involvement in life, at least contextually if not connotatively, then one can substantiate the idea that God did, in some hidden way, use the midwives to begin fulfilling His promise to Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:6ff). In other words, the "fear of God" plus God's attentiveness to these events not only indicate that the midwives were faithful toward God but also that God was the main agent behind the midwives[13] and thus the real, albeit hidden, fulfiller of His promises to Abraham.

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[11] Here "fear" also means fear of God's wrath. And yet because those "fearing" God are also those who trust in and worship God "fear" includes the positive motivational aspect of faithfulness to God. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996) 26.

[12] The reason God blesses the midwives is because of Gen. 12:3 where God promises Abram that He "will bless those who bless you..."

[13] Let it be noted that Exum does not explicitly say this, but her interpretation moves in this direction.

The accuracy or substantiability of such an interpretation also comes by way of the fact that it follows the lead of Exodus 1:1-7 where God, via hidden action, fulfills His promise to Abraham by making the Israelites numerous (cf. Gen. 17:6ff).[14] In fact, God's hidden actions to fulfill His promise to Abraham continue through the midwives by saving Hebrew male infants and so ensuring the fruition of the Israelites (Ex. 1:20). Consequently, one of the main points about the midwives is that they are one of God's means for assuring that the Israelites multiply. In sum, both the text and connecting contexts indicate that God acted through the midwives to ensure that the Israelites multiply. Then, if contextual juxtaposition allows or makes this implication, they were also God's means of saving Moses from Pharaoh's edict of death at birth.

Other feminist interpretations grasp some of these exegetical points as well, but they tend to move beyond the exegetical into exaggeration. In fact, here one begins to see the general feminist view of synergistic liberation. For example, Alice Ogden Bellis says,

> Still, the most important story in the Hebrew Bible begins with women determining events. It begins with God using the weak and lowly to overcome the strong. It begins with women who act courageously, defying oppression. It begins with women who are life-affirming, women who are wise and resourceful in tough situations. Without these women, there would be no Moses to liberate the Hebrews from bondage.[15]

The reader can wholly agree that the midwives are "life-affirming" and "resourceful." The reader can also agree that God is acting in hidden ways among these women. Yet, there seems to be an exaggerated quality to the above interpretation, namely, the idea that these women "determine" the beginning of the exodus and that without them there would be no Moses. Granted Bellis here speaks also of Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter; nevertheless, Bellis includes the midwives in this point. Thus the import of Bellis' statement is that if the midwives had not spared Hebrew male infants, then Moses would not have lived to become Israel's liberator.

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[14] On the other hand, God's actions here are not all that hidden because the effect of His actions are quite visible–numerous Israelites.

[15] Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 101.

The first difficulty with this is that the text does not *explicitly* say that the midwives saved Moses, although the juxtaposition of texts (Ex. 1:15-22 and 2:1-10) would seem to indicate this. The primary problem with the above interpretation is that it exaggerates the role of the midwives at the expense of diminishing the role of God in fulfilling His own promises to Abraham. Such an interpretation implies that Moses, even despite God, would not have lived had it not been for these women. This goes against the text which indicates God's hidden activity (Ex. 1:7,20-21).

A further example of such exaggerated interpretations comes with Renita J. Weems. For instance, Weems says, "Finally, as modern readers and interpreters we appreciate the story or text for its illumination of the role of women in setting in motion the liberation of Israel, and for the fact that the women's efforts there function to set the tone and precedence for the confrontations between the powerful and the powerless."[16] Apparently Weems interprets the midwives as not only beginning the exodus on their own but also as determining how Israel will accomplish liberation.

Weems defines the midwives' act of liberation when she interprets the midwives "fear of God" as the refusal to obey hegemony:

> The midwives do not lie, they simply do not tell the whole truth. It is the conventional weapon of the powerless, especially women in the Old Testament, against those in power: the weapon of deception where the 'truth' is not defined by the powerful, but becomes the priority of the underclass to interpret and shape according to their reality. The refusal to tell the 'truth' becomes tantamount to the refusal to obey. And refusal to obey is the refusal to adopt hegemonic assertions. The refusal to obey, therefore, proves to be a most effective counter to Egyptian ideology. Because the midwives feared God, and thereby disobeyed the Pharaoh, they are rewarded by the deity.[17]

Although Weems is correct in that the midwives did not "tell the whole truth" this is not necessarily the best definition of their "fear of God." What Weems would have the midwives' fear of God mean is "not telling the whole truth" before oppressors in order to counteract them

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[16] Renita J. Weems, "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1," *Semia* 59 (1992): 32.

[17] Weems, "The Hebrew Women" 29-30.

and liberate the oppressed. In other words, the "fear of God" is the refusal to obey hegemony. This definition comes more from liberation ideologies than from the text which indicates that the midwives' fear of God revolves around faithful adherence to God and His ways rather than any overt desire to start a liberation movement.

This idea about the midwives "determining events" becomes eisegetical with the interpretation of Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho. They propose that the midwives acted out their own "leadership" based upon their own "strength," performing a sort of monergistic liberation. Only later, they propose, do Levitical hands wrongly appropriate the midwives' actions and make God the doer of these actions through the midwives.[18] In other words, Anderson and Gorgulho interpret the midwives as acting autonomously and God as having no real part in beginning the exodus at all. This interpretation plainly uses the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance in order to read against the text and (re)claim the supposed actual autonomy of the midwives, who began the exodus on their own.

The question arises as to whether or not the text indicates that the midwives start a liberation movement. On the one hand, the text indicates that the midwives sought to save the newly born Hebrew male infants because they were faithful to God's ways over Pharaoh's (Ex. 1:17). On the other hand, the text might also contextually imply that the midwives began the exodus in saving the infant Moses from death at birth. That is, in being God's instruments to ensure the multiplication of Israelites by saving the male Hebrew infants the midwives saved God's future leader for the liberation of Israel. Consequently, this does not indicate or allow an interpretation which makes the midwives the progenitors of liberation in Exodus. Instead, such an interpretation continues the midwives' role of being God's faithful instruments, and accords well with the facts that God has previously promised to deliver Israel Himself (Gen. 15) and that

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[18] Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions," *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*. eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) 213-14.

Exodus later frequently speaks of God as alone delivering Israel (Ex. 3:8, 6:6, 7:4).[19]

Like those interpretations which seek to place the midwives as the sole progenitors of liberation, another point that one feminist interpretation brings to bear concerning the midwives is the idea that the midwives' wisdom is greater than Pharaoh's. Renita J. Weems notes that divine wisdom, authority, and power are the three tenets which support hegemony. The midwives, Weems claims, undermine the first of these by playing upon Pharoah's assumptions about differences between Egyptians and Hebrews. In this instance the difference is that Israelite women can give birth quickly and all alone. Thus, in the overall flow of the women's role in the exodus, this further shows how the midwives begin to topple Pharaoh. For as Weems says, "Because even women are superior to him in wisdom, the Pharaoh's presumption to rule over the Hebrews is absurd."[20]

The reader can agree that the midwives' "wisdom" appears to be greater than Pharaoh's since they get away with preserving the lives of the Hebrew male infants by telling Pharoah half-truths. Still there is the question of whether the midwives seek to overthrow Pharaoh's hegemony. Rather than describing the midwives' actions as resistance to hegemony the text only says that they are faithful to God's ways and so seek to save the lives of newly born Hebrew male infants. Therefore, it seems too much to speak about how the midwives begin to topple Pharaoh's reign by beating him in a game of wisdom when the real battle, for the midwives, is one of allegiance and faithfulness to God.

All of this leads up to the general feminist interpretation that the midwives show that women have power too. There is irony in the fact that, contrary to Pharaoh's fear, it was women (as God's instruments) and not men who began his downfall. For as Renita J. Weems notes, "At the story's end, the assumption that male children are more of a threat than female children, and in

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[19] Again, the point being that Exodus refers to God as the sole subject or doer of deliverance by using the *hiphil* (causative) form of יצא ("bring/lead out").

[20] Weems, "The Hebrew Women" 31.

turn that men pose more of a threat to an empire than women, is not only exposed but also ridiculed."[21] This is an insightful and important exegetical point. Here the midwives are more of a threat to Pharaoh than the Hebrew males, hence, this shows that (these) women also have power.

Nevertheless, most of these feminist interpretations ignore the hidden activity of God. Such interpretations move in the direction of making gender the real issue of Exodus 1. With such a focus, the main message of Exodus 1 for feminists is that women are just as powerful as men. However, a more exegetical interpretation sees Exodus 1 primarily as an account of God fulfilling His promises to Abraham through the midwives' allegiance and faithfulness to Him over against Pharaoh. In other words, although the text shows that (these) women have power, too, it might be better to say that the text shows that God ridicules Pharaoh (the "strong") by beginning to fulfill His promises through women (the "weak"). Therefore, one can say that God can and does use both men and women to fulfill His promises–the midwives are an example of this.

All in all the midwives provide some boon and bane for feminists. For instance, on an exegetical level the midwives are useful to feminists in that they are heroines who act on their own. That is, they act apart from or in defiance of men in resisting death over life.[22] Yet, as J. Cheryl Exum poignantly says later against her earlier exegetical article on Exodus 1:8-2:10 that the purely exegetical reading of their story should not cover up the androcentric motive behind the story.[23] Exum says:

> The approach I used to analyze the text in "'You shall Let Every Daughter Live'" was essentially that of close reading or rhetorical criticism, which "investigates the narrative in its present form on the premise that an understanding of its literary contours will aid us in perceiving its meaning." Such a literary approach was, and still is, very useful....The problem with this kind of literary analysis is that it places logocentric constraints on feminist criticism. By focusing solely on the surface structure of the text, on the ways

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[21] Weems, "The Hebrew Women" 30.

[22] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 81.

[23] J. Cheryl Exum's two articles on Exodus 1:8-2:10 are profoundly enlightening for understanding the difference between exegetical feminist interpretation, which can provide well founded and helpful insights into texts (her first article) and eisegetical feminist criticism, which manipulates texts to conform to feminist ideologies (her second article).

> literary devices and structures serve as guides to meaning, it limits us to describing, and thus to reinscribing, the text's gender ideology....But to see how the positive portrayal of women in Exod. 1.8-2.10 nevertheless serves male interests, we need to interrogate the ideology that motivates it...we need to ask, what androcentric interests does this positive presentation promote?[24]

Thus one feminist critical answer calls for going beyond exegesis and into feminist criticism.

Exum's later article makes this move from exegesis to feminist criticism. One of the conclusions that Exum comes up with is that the text, out of fear of women, praises women for acting as courageous "mothers," praise which thereby coaxes women to stay within their assigned gender roles.[25] In other words, the text, although it tells of women who are valiant in autonomous ethical action, propagandizes women to submit to patriarchal power and androcentric order. Consequently, J. Cheryl Exum says of Exodus 1:8-2:10:

> Sayings like "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" and "behind every great man is a woman" are meant to make women feel important, while in reality such sayings serve an androcentric agenda by suggesting that women should be satisfied with their power behind the scenes. Exod. 1.8-2.10, where women actively determine Israel's future, serves a similar agenda. It compensates women on the domestic front for the role denied them in the larger story of the exodus and journey into the promised land. But like modern counterparts in the saying above about women's indirect power, it has something to hide: its fear of women's power that makes it important to domesticate and confine it.[26]

In this way the midwives are both feminist boon, being autonomous and powerful founders and leaders of the exodus, and feminist bane, being the unwitting foils of further androcentric propaganda. Therefore, the usefulness of the midwives for feminist liberation through the hermeneutics of proclamation is rather unstable. Renita J. Weems claims:

> ...women do have their role to play, or so the story seems to suggest according to 1:15-2:10. But social roles are one thing, and social ranking another. Hence it seems safe to say that the narrator in Exodus 1 advocates a different social ranking for Hebrews (men), but not necessarily a different social ranking for (Hebrew) women. Can those involved in

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[24] J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 77-78.

[25] Exum, "Second Thoughts" 81.

[26] Exum, "Second Thoughts" 82.

> race, gender, and/or class struggles in modern society use this story as a positive example in the struggle for liberation? Not without due caution.[27]

In conclusion, although exegetical interpretations of the midwives may not be as conducive to the goal of the "full humanity" of women as some feminists would like, nevertheless, exegetical interpretations can be substantiated from the text and thus reflect a more accurate portrayal of the important role that these woman played in the beginning of the exodus. First, exegetical interpretations demonstrate that the midwives, by saving Hebrew male infants, were one of God's important instruments in fulfilling His promise to Abraham of numerous descendents (cf. Gen. 17:6ff). Second, this exegetical interpretation implies, via contextual juxtaposition, that in being God's faithful instruments for fulfilling the promise of numerous descendents they also (by possibly saving Moses at birth) were God's instruments in beginning His fulfillment of the other part of His promise to Abraham–the liberation from slavery and deliverance unto the promised land (cf. Gen. 15:13-14).

All of this not only highlights the midwives' importance in relation to the overall exodus, but also gives God His due as the actual, albeit hidden, expediter of His promises to Abraham. The more accurate and complete theology of God who can and does alone fulfill His promises of liberation comes with exegetical interpretations. Other exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations create a deficient view of God by unwarrantedly elevating the role of the midwives through the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance and so proclaim that the midwives themselves are really the ones who begin liberation in Exodus. Consequently, exeggerated and eisegetical interpretations promote an understanding of God who is less than fully involved in liberating humanity.

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[27] Weems, "The Hebrew Women" 33.

Chapter 4

Feminist Interpretations of Moses' Mother, Moses' Sister, and Pharaoh's Daughter

The focus of this chapter is the feminist interpretations of Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:1-10). As with the previous chapter, I will demonstrate that feminists interpret these women in three general ways: exegetically, exaggeratedly, and eisegetically. I will also demonstrate that those feminist interpretations which grasp a more accurate portrayal of these women and their importance to the exodus as well as a more accurate and complete interpretation and theology concerning God's role in liberation in this story are exegetical. In contrast, I will demonstrate that the feminist interpretations which create unsubstantiated, elevated views of these female characters, interpretations which also create a less than accurate and complete account of God's actions in relation to liberation in this story are exaggerated and eisegetical.

The first point of interest, in comparison to Shiphrah and Puah, is that these three women remain unnamed. In later texts the reader finds out that Moses' mother's name is Jochebed (Ex. 6:20) and that Moses' sister's name is Miriam (Num. 26:59). Pharaoh's daughter, though, remains unnamed throughout Scripture. The reason for this anonymity is agreed upon by all feminists. Drorah O'Donnell Setel sums up their view: "Here they (the three women) are of interest only in their relationship to the male protagonist (Moses)."[1] Or, as J. Cheryl Exum says, "It is a women's story in so far as their action determines its direction, but while narrative attention focuses on the activity of women, their attention centers on Moses. Referred to as a בן, a ילד, and a נער, at the end of the story *he* is given a name. Thereafter he becomes the central character of the exodus."[2] In sum, feminist interpretations explain the three women's anonymity

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[1] Drorah O'Donnell Setel, "Exodus," *The Women's Bible Commentary*. eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 30.

[2] J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semia* 28 (1983): 75.

on the basis that the text wants to draw attention to and focus upon the only named character– Moses.

The major deliberation for feminist interpretations is the importance or role of these women vis-à-vis liberation and God in this particular story of deliverance. Two feminists take the exegetical stance that God Himself orchestrates the deliverance of Moses. First, Jopie Siebert-Hommes notes that Moses' sister is said to have "stationed herself far off" (Ex. 2:4) to watch and see what would happen to Moses once he had been put onto the Nile. The Hebrew verb here for "stationed herself far off" is יצב, and it is in the imperfect *hithpael* form. Siebert-Hommes astutely notes that this is the same verb and form that Moses uses in speaking to the Israelites in Exodus 14:13 (" And Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, station yourselves [התיצבו] and see the salvation of Yahweh which He will do for you this day...'").[3] Given this, Siebert-Hommes concludes that Moses' sister also waits to see how God will deliver Moses.[4]

J. Cheryl Exum also sees the text as saying that "the deity" is responsible for saving Moses. Exum notes, "Indeed, by having the sister appear suddenly to put the idea of adopting Moses in the princess's mind, the narrator suggests that the deity, rather than any decision by women to work together, is responsible for the propitious outcome."[5] Furthermore, Exum states the same point in a negative fashion when she hesitates against presuming that the women have formulated a plan to save Moses on their own. Exum says:

> Amid her [Moses' mother's] activity, the text affords little psychological insight, and I should not wish to contribute to scholarly speculation at this point...whether she knows that habit of pharaoh's daughter to bathe in the Nile or simply hopes for a miracle to save her child are details which the text does not reveal. What it does reveal is her

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[3] The same form and similar meaning of יצב occurs in Ex. 8:16ff (MT) and 9:13ff (MT). Here Moses appears to be the doer of miraculous actions, but God, acting hiddenly through Moses, is the real doer.

[4] Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter" 69-70.

[5] J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 83.

determination to act rather than to leave things to fate (the deity)... "[6]

Thus both Siebert-Hommes and Exum view the text as indicating that God is the one who actually saves Moses while Moses' mother and sister wait upon God to act, an interpretation which is consistent with God's hidden activities in Exodus 1.

While I agree with the above exegetical feminist interpretations, I would also emphasize that Moses' mother's and sister's importance or role is seen partly in that they trust that God Himself will deliver Moses; they have faith in God to deliver Moses and so they place Moses into God's care. It must be granted that "faith" is not a word found in the text nor is it something that the above feminist interpretations dwell upon. Nevertheless, the *hithpael* form of יצב in Exodus 2:4 seems to indicate that Moses' mother and sister trusted God somehow to enact a plan to deliver Moses.

Contrary to the above exegetical interpretations, most other feminist interpretations minimize or ignore God's actions in Exodus 2:1-10 as well as exaggerate these women's roles. To wit, these interpretations focus exclusively upon the three women and interpret their actions as more or less autonomous actions which continue the work of the liberation begun by the midwives. For example, in one interpretation the three women continue the exodus and give definitive shape to it by their actions of compassion which reach beyond cultural boundaries, i.e. Moses' Hebrew mother and sister work together with Pharaoh's Egyptian daughter to save Moses. So Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho say: "The reciprocity of the women's actions show the direction and the means for escaping violence."[7] To be sure, these women reach beyond cultural boundaries to save an infant, yet these actions do not give the exodus its definitive shape. In other words, cultural harmony, compassion, or tolerance were not the actual "means for

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[6] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 76-77.

[7] Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions," *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*. eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) 215.

escaping violence." Rather, God's actions liberate Israel from violence.

Another reason for proposing that these three women continue the work of liberation is that they, apparently all by themselves, save Moses, the future liberator of Israel. For instance, Alice Ogden Bellis states, "Without these women, there would have been no Moses to liberate the Hebrews from bondage."[8] Even more radical and eisegetical[9] is the statement by Anderson and Gorgulho: "Without this action on the part of these women, the particular mediation which was to snatch the people from the pharaoh's violence and oppression would not have come into being."[10] A probable implication of this statement, especially considering how Anderson and Gorgulho previously attributed the midwives with monergistic actions and decisively excluded God,[11] is that the women themselves save the future liberator as well as the exodus.

In the same vein is another feminist interpretation which views the three women who save Moses' life as the ones who also make Moses into the liberator and "mediator" for Israel. Anderson and Gorgulho argue this point on the basis of the two parties of women involved, namely, a Levite Hebrew and an Egyptian. In brief, Moses' "mediation is legitimate," i.e. mediation between God and Israel, because he has a Levite mother who gives him the status of being a Levite while his Egyptian "mother" "integrates him among the Hebrews and among the

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[8] Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 101. So also Jopie Siebert-Hommes and Alice L. Laffey make similar statements. "The fate of the *twelve sons* of Israel depends on the one son who was born and remained alive thanks to the intervention of *twelve 'daughters'*. Literally and figuratively, the daughters hold the saviour's head above water." Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter...She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 74. "They [the women] are the people who save the child Moses who becomes Israel's deliverer." Alice L. Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines: The Old Testament in Feminist Perspective* (London: SPCK, 1990) 48.

[9] I say "eisegetical" here because Anderson and Gorgulho seem to read God completely out of the picture while reading the women completely into the role of liberator.

[10] Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 215.

[11] Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 213-14.

oppressors as well."[12] Consequently, these things which the women give to him make him a legitimate mediator and liberator for Israel.

The above interpretations also give rise to another major point for many feminists, namely, that this story (Ex. 2:1-10 particularly, but also Ex. 1:15-22) is a "woman's story."[13] The general view behind this statement is that these three women not only save Moses, but in so doing save Israel's future liberator as well as Israel's future exodus. So Anderson and Gorgulho stress that this text's role is not to draw attention to Moses, but "its principal role is to highlight *the role of women in the creation of this mediation and the unity of the people*."[14] In other words, viewed through the hermeneutics of remembrance and proclamation, the text's role is to instruct the reader that these women alone caused Moses the liberator, the exodus, and Israelite unity to come into being.

Now it is true enough that these three women are crucially important. Like the midwives, Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter have the important role of being God's means of not only ensuring that Israel grows by saving a Hebrew child, but also in saving Israel's future liberator. Second, in being the means of God's delivering Moses they are also one of God's means of fulfilling His promise of liberation and land for Israel. Nevertheless, despite these roles, the text does not indicate that these women saved Moses all by themselves. Rather, the text indicates that Moses' mother and sister trusted that God Himself would deliver Moses, a deliverance which at its most crucial juncture largely occurred outside of themselves, thereby indicating God's hidden activity in delivering Moses.

Support for such an assertion comes first from the *hithpael* form of the verb יצב ("station

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[12] Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 214-15.

[13] J. Cheryl Exum calls Ex. 1:15-2:10 a "woman's story" in that women determine its events; although she acknowledges that the text has "as its goal the birth of a *son* who will become the leader of his people" as well as reaches back to God's promises to Abraham in Genesis. Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 64.

[14] Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 214.

oneself") in Exodus 2:4.[15] Additional support comes in view of the fact that God has been active in hidden ways in Exodus 1 and thus one would expect Him to be active similarly here as well–especially considering the future importance of the infant involved.[16] So too Exodus explicitly speaks of God as the doer of liberation from Exodus 3 onward, i.e. the *hiphil* of יצא ("cause to bring out") in Ex. 3:8. Finally, a case can be made by comparison that, whereas Ex. 1:15-22 notes God's intervention, names the midwives, and twice records them as fearing God–thereby pointing toward God's hand, Ex. 2:1-10 keeps Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter anonymous in order to point implicitly to the real actor in the story–God. In other words, when the text points toward God's intervention the text allows the midwives to be named, but where the text does not directly speak of God's intervention the text keeps the three women unnamed in order to lift the readers' eyes toward God. Thus the force of this contrast or comparison is not merely to highlight Moses but to indicate God's hidden activities.

I also agree that Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter give Moses some preparation for becoming God's future leader for Israel by virtue of his Levite blood and an Egyptian background. Nevertheless, Moses' father, who is himself a Levite (Ex. 2:1), does the same thing for Moses as Moses' mother.[17] Ignoring this information is a form of exaggeration on behalf of the women–especially since the text lists the father first and this is the only thing the text mentions about him, which indicates the importance of this information to the story. Furthermore, and most importantly, the text makes it perfectly clear that it is God who makes Moses the leader of Israel because God is the one who calls and gives him this role (Ex. 3:10ff). Therefore, although

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[15] Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter" 69-70. Also note Exodus 8:16ff and 9:13ff where Moses is to "station" himself and apparently perform miracles, but actually God, acting hiddenly though Moses, is the doer of the miracles.

[16] See Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (NewYork: Schocken Books, 1996) 27.

[17] In fact, the father's lineage probably means more to Moses since the Israelites traced priestly lineage through the males (cf. Ex. 6:16ff).

Moses' parents and Pharaoh's daughter are instrumental in giving Moses his important background God is the one who is most responsible for Moses becoming Israel's leader.

Another area which the reader may question is whether or not these women intended to continue the work of liberation and give it definitive shape. I agree that the text indicates their involvement in the continuance of liberation by being God's instruments, but the text does not indicate that these women acted in order to advance and define Israel's liberation. Instead these women wanted to save this Hebrew male infant, an infant whom, unbeknownst to them, God would later choose to be Israel's leader in liberation. Therefore, the interpretation exaggerates, placing too much weight upon these women's motivations, cognizance, and autonomy in relation to the liberation movement. This story is not a "woman's story" in the sense that women, all by themselves, determine its events or knowingly continue the work of liberation. Nor, in this sense, is it a man's story. Rather, it is a story of God's fulfillment which He works, albeit in hidden ways, through these women.

An important "gap-filling"[18] instance that further illustrates the difference between interpreting this as a "woman's story" rather than "God's story" is the feminist view that these women fully plan the deliverance of Moses. One assumption behind this view is that the Hebrew women were not blind instruments of God but knew that Pharaoh's daughter opposed her father's edict of genocide and so planted Moses right in front of her so that she might deliver him. As one interpretive Asian feminist skit based on Exodus 1:8-2:10 reads:

> LEAH: I was thinking about the Princess. How different she is from her father.
>
> SHIPRAH: Yes, I heard she is very kind and very good to her Hebrew slaves. I also heard rumors in the palace that she isn't pleased with Pharaoh's decree.
>
> LEAH: Yes, that's true.

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[18] "Gap-filling" is information which the story does not explicitly provide, but which the author expects the reader to know or determine and insert. See Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 50-69.

PUAH: I have an idea. The Princess comes to the river to bathe every Thursday, does she not?

LEAH: Yes.

PUAH: You are very close to her Leah. She loves you because you have been her nurse since she was young. You can influence her, can't you?

LEAH: Into what?

PUAH: Into saving Jochebed's baby if he is a boy.

LEAH: I can try.[19]

The idea of a fully planned deliverance by these women gains additional support because the events occur so quickly and seamlessly. So Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn say:

> What did the mother expect to happen? Obviously something of significance, since the sister is stationed so that she can observe "what would be done to him" (2:4). The rapid sequence of events may give us a clue. The child is hardly there in its basket any time before *Pharaoh's daughter* and her entourage come down to the river to bathe. It is highly doubtful, considering the young woman's elevated station, the presence of crocodiles in the water, and the contours of any river bank, that the daughter of Pharaoh would bathe at just any place in the river. More likely the young woman had a favorite bathing spot which was no secret to Moses' mother. Moses' mother, in a sense, places the fate of her baby at the feet of Pharaoh's daughter, somehow trusting that this young woman could never carry through the brutal policy of her father.[20]

These feminist assumptions concerning the women's knowledge of the Pharaoh's daughter's feelings toward her father's edict, her routine bathing spot, and the rapid sequence of events also push toward the idea that Pharaoh's daughter, although not a part of this plan, quickly figures out what is going on and joins in on the plan. Fewell and Gunn further propose:

> Is she so slow to be unable to connect the woman who instantly materializes, her breasts filled with milk, with the child's mother? Rather, one can easily imagine this daughter of the court ascertaining in silence all the dimensions of this desperate attempt to save a baby's life. One might hear in the interchange carefully avoided questions and

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[19] An Asian Group Work, "An Asian Feminist Perspective: The Exodus Story (Exodus 1.8-22, 2.1-10), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World.* ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991) 272-73.

[20] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 93.

> painstakingly controlled understatement. One might visualize the exchange of knowing looks even as infant and money changes hands.[21]

In sum, to varying degrees the implication is that God's plan and hand, visible or hidden, is not present. Rather, Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter all plan, in one way or another, and save Moses, Israel's future liberator, on their own. Thus Eileen Schuller says, "Here, as throughout the whole story, when we look for God's providential action, it is to be found not in direct divine intervention but through the sagacity and resourcefulness of these women."[22] That is to say, God does not act directly or even so much indirectly act through these women. Rather, these women do God's work themselves.

Such gap-filling interpretations, although somewhat tempting in view of the text's relative silence on the whole matter of who planned what, exaggerate by speculatively elevating the role of these three women in relation to the exodus to the detriment of God's textually given role. In fact, this is a good example of the feminist hermeneutics of remembrance because this general interpretation reads into the text's relative silence in order to create a larger and more important role for these women in relation to the exodus. Specifically, the hermeneutics of remembrance have here made the women the ones who determine the events of Moses' deliverance and have thereby stripped God of His role as the fulfiller of His promises.

But there are textual clues for determining that God is the main planner and enactor of Moses' deliverance. First, J. Cheryl Exum notes that the text does not explicitly state that Moses' mother and sister planned the deliverance for Moses.[23] Furthermore, expanding upon Jopie Siebert-Hommes' point, Exodus 2:4 (*hithpael* form of יצב) indicates that the answer to who plans and acts the deliverance of Moses is to be sought in the direction of God. Therefore, on the basis

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[21] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise* 93.

[22] Eileen Schuller, "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 180.

[23] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 76-77.

of the text's silence concerning any fully fashioned plan by the women and the text pointing toward God's action, the more substantiated conclusion is that God is the one who actually plans and enacts Moses' deliverance.[24] This view, I believe, is at slight variance with Exum who also thinks that the text does not explicitly indicate that Moses' mother "hopes for a miracle to save her child," but instead only shows her as determined "to act rather than to leave things to fate (the deity)..."[25] Rather, Moses' mother may have been more than determined to act herself, but also determined to act in faith upon God's miraculous deliverance.

Even in terms of subjective reasoning or speculation any plan of placing Moses at Pharaoh's daughter's feet seems shaky. First, Moses' mother and sister would not likely be privy to know what Pharaoh's daughter thought of her father's edict to kill Hebrew male infants. Maybe the midwives heard rumors, but the text does not say or hint at this, nor does the text make a personal connection between the midwives and Moses' mother and sister. There is no direct link between them such as the midwives knew information concerning Pharaoh's daughter which they passed on to Moses' mother and sister. Second, even if Moses' mother and sister had heard some rumors concerning Pharaoh's daughter's feelings toward all of this it still seems unlikely that they would risk putting Moses, whom they wish to save, right at the doorstep of death–Pharaoh's daughter. Trevor Dennis supports this point when he states:

> She is, after all, the daughter of the pharaoh. All the Egyptians we have heard about so far in the book of Exodus have been willing parties to the persecution. We have heard nothing to make us think this princess and her maids will be any different. Indeed, with them coming from the palace, we can surely expect them to be particularly decisive and ruthless in their disposal of the child. Unless, of course, they think he is Egyptian.[26]

This is not to say that Moses' mother and sister did not plan to place Moses in a basket among the reeds of the Nile and wait for God somehow to act, but that the plan beyond this point was purely

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[24] One might even say that everything they did was God's own plan to begin with. That is, God gave Moses' mother the idea to place Moses in a basket on the Nile.

[25] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 76.

[26] Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* 100.

faith in God's deliverance.

What can and should be said about Moses' mother and sister is that they planned an act of courageous faith, an act which was instrumental in God's movement to fulfill His promises to Abraham. Moses' mother and sister, in faith, place Moses in a basket on the Nile (Ex. 2:3–אי). Thus, they did not try to save Moses solely by their own ingenuity, power, or devices.

Yet this might not preclude another partial answer as to why Moses' mother and sister place Moses amongst the reeds of the Nile. Being women, Moses' mother and sister knew that women came to the Nile all the time to work, e.g. gather water and do laundry, thus the text, by recording that the women placed him at the Nile, may be implying that Moses' mother and sister placed Moses there in a planned hope that some woman might come along and be able to protect Moses from Pharaoh's edict. But even if they purposefully placed Moses in an area frequented by women, Moses' mother and sister still trusted God to deliver Moses. They had no knowledge or assurance of *when* a woman might drop by and *who* this woman might be. They had no knowledge or assurance that Moses would not drown before a woman came by and when, and if, a woman did come by that she did not sympathize with Pharaoh's edict and would be able to counteract the edict. Therefore, a planned hope may be implicit in the text and yet the primary idea is that Moses' mother and sister fully trusted and expected God alone to deliver Moses.

The force of this act of faith, as well as the power of their object of faith, is momentous: Moses' mother and sister placing Moses on the Nile indicates that they have given up their role as protector of Moses and entrusted him to God's care. It is as if they say, "Lord, we cannot save this infant from death so we place him in a basket on the river, a place where only you can save him from a watery death if you so desire to save him." The merits of this interpretation, as opposed to the above feminist interpretations, rest not only on the illumination that it brings forth concerning the great tension and substance of Moses' sister's and mother's courageous faith in God (Ex. 2:4), but also because it accords well with Exodus' overall view that God alone saves Israel from death

(cf. Ex. 12:12-13, 15:30).

Most other feminist interpretations concerning Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter are both fairly exegetical and rather insightful. For example, it is possible that Moses' mother does not speak to her husband about what she is doing or what should be done.[27] Further, the text does not indicate that any man has a hand in these actions. Even more importantly, Pharaoh's daughter does not seek her father's advice or endorsement but, knowing what he has decreed, defies her father's edict in order to save Moses' life. As Trevor Dennis says,

> Her adopting the child amounts to treachery. Let us be quite clear about that....She is defying the pharaoh, as Shiphrah and Puah did. Unlike them, she is defying her own father, but she still does it with the same impudence that they showed. Not content with saving the Hebrew child from drowning, she brings him into the palace as her own son, and there brings him up right under the tyrant's nose, and keeps him there for years![28]

One significance of these exegetical feminist interpretations is that they demonstrate that Scripture shows women not only acting on their own apart from men but also acting against a man, Pharaoh, who opposes God's ways. Therefore, in what might be called "Yahwistic patriarchy," as opposed to a general feminist definition of patriarchy which revolves around total male domination and female subordination, women by themselves can and do act in faith as God's agents.[29]

Another emphasis of some feminist interpretations is that Moses' mother is a type of Noah who saves human life. For instance, Moses' mother, in preparing a basket/ark in order to keep Moses safe from the deadly waters of the Nile, is like Noah who built an ark to save the future of humanity. The connection between Moses' mother and Noah is further tightened by the

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[27] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 76.

[28] Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 102.

[29] Feminist interpretations, up to this point, have not explicitly said that these women attempt to subvert patriarchy by acting on their own. Nevertheless, considering the general feminist antipathy toward any patriarchy a tempering statement is due. The text does not indicate that these women act on their own in order to subvert any or all patriarchy. Instead, the text shows women acting on their own in faithfulness to God's way for life over against Pharaoh's edict of death.

fact that תבה ("ark") only occurs here and in Noah's account.[30] Consequently, Moses' mother is like Noah in that by using a basket she "saves the future deliverer of Israel."[31]

Still, caution is needed to assure that God is the one who actually delivers Moses. For, although Noah built the ark which "saved humanity," God is the one who before the flood came and told him to build the ark (and how to build the ark) which was going to save humanity (Gen. 6:13ff). Thus the text gives God much more credit for saving humanity than Noah, who is really God's faithful servant for deliverance. Similarly, even though Moses' mother built the basket which was to save Moses, God was the one who actually saved him.

Another exegetical highlight is the fact that Moses' sister is the crucial link in Moses' deliverance. As Drorah O'Donnell Setel says of Moses' sister: "The relationship between these two mothers (Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter) is mediated through the sister."[32] Or, as J. Cheryl Exum unfolds the situation:

> Without hesitation the infant's sister addresses the royal bather. Her daring proposal, ostensibly offered as a helpful suggestion, affords in fact the perfect solution to her brother's plight....By suggesting a nurse from the Hebrews, she prepares the reunion of mother and child. Her careful phrasing, "shall I call for *you*...to nurse for *you* the child," provides the idea that the princess keep the infant, and the repetition of "for you" creates the impression that she makes the proposal for the sake of the princess. By virtue of her quick-thinking and persuasive recommendation..., the sister deserves as much credit for saving Moses as her mother or the princess.[33]

Certainly, from a human perspective, the text does indicate that Moses' sister is the crucial link in Moses' deliverance by displaying her quick-thinking to skillfully entreat Pharaoh's daughter to take Moses as her own son and to take Moses' mother to be his nurse.[34]

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[30] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 76.

[31] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 76.

[32] Setel, "Exodus" 30.

[33] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 77.

[34] The heavenly perspective slightly differs. God is *the* crucial link in Moses deliverance because He orchestrated the "happen-chance" of Pharaoh's daughter's arrival. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the important and crucial temporal role that Moses' sister plays.

The last major emphasis of feminist interpretations places Pharaoh's daughter parallel to God because her compassion motivates her. First, Pharaoh's daughter, in "coming down," "seeing" Moses, "hearing" him cry, having compassion on him, drawing him out of the Nile, and providing for his needs, is like God who later does the same things in delivering Israel from Egypt (Ex. 2:5ff).[35] In this way, Pharaoh's daughter, as much as Moses' mother and sister, is Moses' savior as well.[36] Furthermore, as J. Cheryl Exum so carefully points out:

> Just as the midwives' fear of God provides the explanation of their conduct, so the princess's compassion furnishes the motivation for hers. She is not *duped* but simply *prompted* by the sister's recommendation. Her acceptance is made possible by her compassion, without which it is unlikely that any amount of persuasion on the part of the sister would have accomplished the desired result.[37]

Thus Pharaoh's daughter, with her great compassion, is an example of a "righteous gentile."[38]

Finally, just as with the midwives, these three women are feminist boon and bane. As before, there is much that feminism can use. For example, in J. Cheryl Exum's earlier article on Exodus 1:15-2:10 she concludes:

> What are we to make of the considerable role given to women in the prelude to the exodus? To say that the story shows that God uses the weak and lowly to overcome the strong is to give only a partial answer....Exodus begins with a focus on women. Their actions determine the outcome. From its highly positive portrayals of women to its testimony that the courage of women is the beginning of liberation, Exod 1:8-2:10 presents the interpreter with powerful themes to draw on: women as defiers of oppression, women as givers of life, women as wise and resourceful in situations where a discerning mind and keen practical judgment are essential for a propitious outcome...[39]

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[35] Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 38. Another possible interpretation is to see this not only as foreshadowing of God's deliverance but also as an implication of God's present hidden actions through Pharaoh's daughter. This would be a counterbalance to some feminist statements which might imply the exaggerated idea that Pharaoh's daughter also sets the course for God later to follow. "What she does for Moses, God is soon to do for Israel." Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise* 93. "The reciprocity of the women's action shows the direction and the means for escaping violence." Anderson and Gorgulho, "Miriam and Her Companions" 215.

[36] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 77.

[37] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 80.

[38] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 80.

[39] Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'" 82.

Later, in her other article, Exum has some reservations concerning her former conclusions, namely, that this text praises these women for playing the role of mothers to Moses, a role which patriarchy gladly praises in order to keep women submissive to men and keep them from becoming angry over their negligent role in the larger Exodus story.[40] Therefore, Exum, if not feminism in general, again proceeds with caution in using this text in its hermeneutics of proclamation for the purpose of bolstering feminist liberation.

In conclusion, some feminist interpretations of Exodus 2:1-10 fall into the trap of liberating Exodus from Exodus by providing unwarranted views of these women and God in relation to liberation. To wit, they lead Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter into the land of feminist liberation by asserting that these women alone save Moses and the future exodus, making them more than "co-creators" of liberation with God. These are the exaggerated and eisegetical feminist interpretations.

However, there are also more than a few exegetical feminist interpretations which apprehend Exodus' own understanding of these women and God vis-à-vis liberation. These interpretations see these women as vastly important to the deliverance of Israel's future leader but do not accord them the status or role of intentionally, knowingly, or autonomously executing the liberation of Israel. Instead, they move in the direction of Moses' mother and sister ultimately and intentionally acting upon faith in God's ability to deliver Moses. Consequently, the importance of Moses' mother and sister is that, like the midwives, they act as faithful servants and instruments of God's deliverance. Likewise, Pharaoh's daughter is important as a compassionate gentile whom God uses in His overall plan of deliverance. Finally, God, as in Exodus 1, is the actual, albeit hidden, expediter of liberation.

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[40] Exum, "Second Thoughts" 81.

Chapter 5

Feminist Interpretations of Miriam

This chapter focuses exclusively on feminist interpretations of Miriam. Since I have already dealt partly with Miriam when discussing Moses' sister in Exodus 2:1-10,[1] this chapter will address Miriam's other activity in Exodus (Ex. 15:20ff) as well as a few other texts outside of Exodus which also record her activities during the exodus. As before, I will demonstrate that feminists interpret Miriam in three general ways: exegetically, exaggeratedly, and eisegetically. What will be different about this chapter is that the major question does not concern the roles of women vis-à-vis God in relation to liberation. Instead, the question concerns Miriam's role vis-à-vis Moses, God's chosen leader, in leading the people of Israel. Similar to the previous chapters I will demonstrate that those interpretations which provide a more substantiated and accurate account of Miriam's importance or role of her "leadership" vis-à-vis Moses are exegetical. In contrast, I will also demonstrate that those interpretations which often create a Miriam whose role as "leader" rivals Moses' role as leader of Israel are exaggerated and eisegetical. In other words, the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance diminish Moses' textually attested role in order to create a Miriam who is more equal with her brother Moses in terms of leadership.

The first point to make is that feminists uphold the idea that Miriam is a prophetess–מרים הנביאה ("Miriam the prophetess"- Ex. 15:20). Feminist interpretations have difficulty advancing much further than this point, however, because Miriam's activities apparently do not seem to fit any typical prophetic roles for women.[2] One answer to this problem may be that Miriam did act in ways typical of prophetesses, but the text simply does not record such

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[1] Exodus identifies Miriam as "Aaron's sister" (Ex. 15:20) and Aaron as "Moses' brother" (Ex. 7:2). Given this connection Miriam is more than likely Moses' sister in Exodus 2:1-10.

[2] Setel says, "Although she is called a prophet, her actions do not follow the patterns of oracular speech generally associated with Israelite prophecy. However, they suggest ritual, perhaps ecstatic, dance and song." Drorah O'Donnell Setel, "Exodus," *The Women's Bible Commentary*. eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 32.

instances.[3] Given this apparent silence, Phyllis Trible initially concludes that "the title remains undefined and its meaning open," but then formulates one possible answer: "After all, as 'the prophet,' she has already spoken for God at the sea, even though the Mosaic bias would drown her voice there."[4] In Trible's view, if Miriam does not sing first, but merely repeats Moses' words, then she cannot be a true prophetess.

As the text relates, Miriam is indeed a prophetess. Many feminist interpretations, specifically Brenner and Bellis, come close to defining Miriam's role as prophetess, but, unfortunately, pass by the important connections. For instance Alice Ogden Bellis says, "Miriam is also called a prophet. Indeed, she is the first person–not the first woman, but the first person–in the Hebrew Bible given this title in its general sense. Aaron is earlier called prophet but only in the sense of spokesperson for Moses."[5] One of the most crucial connections that Bellis misses here is that Aaron, and not Miriam, is the first person that the text calls a prophet (Ex. 7:1ff). As I will discuss shortly, Aaron's role is one of the ways in which the text explains how Miriam is actually a prophetess.

Another difficulty, which in this case needs to be avoided, and which feminist interpretations do not avoid, is judging Miriam's title as prophetess on the basis of other later prophetesses. The reason this is problematic is that Miriam is the first woman ever called a prophetess, so she is not likely to have exactly the same functions as later prophetesses. In other words, her role as prophetess may be a "rudimentary" or specialized role and thus not as expansive or formulaic as later prophetesses. Instead, Miriam's role as prophetess needs to come through the texts and contexts which concern Miriam.

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[3] As Athalya Brenner says, "Nevertheless, no hint as to the nature of Miriam's prophetic activity has been preserved in biblical sources. In contrast, more is known about Aaron's prophecy; for instance, he aids Moses in performing miraculous acts (Exodus 7.19 onwards). How, then, is the application of the attribute 'prophetess' to Miriam to be explained?" Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (The Biblical Seminar 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 61.

[4] Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," *Bible* Review 5.1 (1989) 18, 21.

Although it is true that Exodus 15:20-21 does not explicitly state how Miriam is a prophetess and other texts do not show her speaking God's word like other later prophetesses (cf. Judg. 4:6ff, 2 Kings 22:15ff), it is still possible to demonstrate that Exodus 7:1, 15:20-21 and Numbers 12:2-8 provide a rudimentary picture of Miriam's role as prophetess. I propose that the text shows Miriam as a prophetess who acts as a mouthpiece for Moses, and thereby for God also, to the women of Israel.

The first clue for defining Miriam's role as prophetess comes from the place where the text gives her this title. Exodus 15:20-21 not only introduces Miriam as a named character for the first time, but also gives a sketch of who she is, namely, "prophetess" and "Aaron's sister." Normally the text, when introducing people for the first time–women included–defines people's familial relationships (cf. Gen. 12:5, 2 Sam. 13:1). But more than merely introducing Miriam, the text also intends to define *how* Miriam is a prophetess. In other words, the question may be asked, why does the text also call her a prophetess? The answer is that the text intends to use the following verses to define how Miriam is a prophetess. Proof for this view comes in Judges 4:4-5 where the text introduces Deborah as a prophetess and then describes an event which defines her role as prophetess. 2 Kings 22:14-5 does the same thing for Huldah as well. Therefore, most likely Exodus 15:20-21 does the same thing for Miriam: she is a prophetess in that she responds to Moses' song/words by singing/speaking them to the women of Israel.

The second clue for defining Miriam's role as prophetess comes from Exodus 7:1-2. Here God tells Moses that Aaron will be his "prophet" and defines this in terms of being Moses' vicarious voice. Aaron will repeat before the Pharaoh what God tells Moses to say. Aaron's type of prophecy also enlightens and supports Miriam's role as prophetess. As Aaron is a prophet by being Moses' vicarious voice before Pharaoh, so Miriam is Moses' vicarious voice before the women of Israel in the Song of the Sea.

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[5] Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 102.

Finally, Numbers 12:2-8 further defines Miriam's role as prophetess and supports the idea

that she is a vicarious voice for Moses.[6] In short, God says that Moses is His unique prophet because He speaks directly to Moses, while only speaking to others indirectly. This not only shows that Miriam does not have the same prophetic role as Moses, but that she, as well as Aaron, are prophets who indirectly speak God's Word. So even though Numbers 12:2-8 defines Miriam's prophetic role as being less authoritative than Moses' role, still her role is no less authentic. She is an authentic prophetess who receives God's Word indirectly. Therefore, Numbers 12:2-8 defines Miriam as prophetess along with Exodus 7:1-2 and 15:20-21. Miriam is God's indirect, vicarious voice by being Moses' vicarious voice to the women.

Taken as a whole, Exodus and Numbers not only introduce Miriam as a prophetess, but also define her role as prophetess. Miriam is a prophetess by virtue of being Moses' vicarious voice to the women of Israel, and as such is most likely God's indirect vicarious voice to women as well. Specifically, the text only describes Miriam acting this way once during the Song of the Sea, yet, that the text defines Miriam as a prophetess while defining her as "Aaron's sister" (something which is constant) might very well indicate that she functioned this way on other unrecorded occasions as well. There is, of course, no way of telling, but it seems somewhat unlikely that the text should define her as a prophetess if she only functioned as such once.

Feminist interpretations which uphold this exegetical description of Miriam, while they may not understand what "prophetess" means for Miriam, stand on more solid ground than other feminists who use this difficulty in defining her role to assert other unsubstantiated interpretations for Miriam. For instance, one of the most prominent feminist interpretations of Miriam is that she, and not Moses, is the original composer and leader of the Song of the Sea. Feminists identify various reasons for this belief. First, to many feminists the redundancy of Exodus 15:19-

21 in comparison with Exodus 14-15:18 suggests that there is androcentric tampering with the whole of chapter 15. They argue that androcentrism would not allow Miriam to precede or supersede Moses in song so male redactors made Moses the composer of the song. Phyllis Trible explicates this view quite well:

> Divergent in length, content and emphasis, the two endings work in tension, not in tandem. The Mosaic conclusion so overpowers the Miriamic as to raise the question of why the latter ever survived. Ironically, scholarly answers to this question (and they cannot be accused of a feminist bias!) diminish Moses and highlight Miriam. They hold that the very retention of a Miriamic ending, in the presence of a Mosaic avalanche, argues both for its antiquity and authority. So tenacious was the tradition about Miriam that later editors could not eliminate it altogether. In fact, once upon an early time, before editors got jobs, the entire Song of the Sea, not just the first stanza, was ascribed to Miriam and the women of Israel. Later, redactors (editors) who were intent upon elevating Moses took the song right out of her mouth and gave it to him–to Moses, the inarticulate one- in company with the sons of Israel. Thus they constructed an ending for the Exodus story that contradicted the older tradition. Unable to squelch the Miriamic tradition altogether, the redactors appended it in truncated form (Exodus 15:20-21) to their preferred Mosaic version.[7]

A second reason for supposing Miriam to be the song's original singer and author is the idea that the Song of the Sea is a less ancient song than Miriam's song (Ex. 15:21). As Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes notes: "According to Cross and Freedman, the Song of the Sea is indeed very old. However, there are arguments for a (much) later dating of this song. Hence it would be

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[6] What is interesting, and important, here is that God's judgment in terms of prophecy applies both to Miriam and Aaron. This shows that God considers their roles as prophets to be similar to each other, a point which further supports the connection between Exodus 7:1-2 and 15:20-21.

[7] Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," 18-20. The scholars to whom Trible refers are Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman, and their article entitled "The Song of Miriam." There Cross and Freedman argue that the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-18) is ancient as seen by its archaic language and its vagueness as to the exodus events in comparison to the narrative account in Exodus 14. Based on this they conclude that the song is earlier than the narrative, which is a later literal interpretation of the Song of the Sea. As far as Miriam goes they do not argue that her song (Ex. 15:21) is older than the Song of the Sea, but that she is in fact the singer of the Song of the Sea, which, they state, does not necessarily mean that she is the author of the song. Their reasoning is twofold: first, the ascription of the song to Miriam is harder to understand than the ascription to Moses thus Miriam must be the original singer by virtue of being the harder reading, and, second, the tradition which associates the song with Miriam is superior than to the tradition which associates the song with Moses. No explicit reason is given as to why the tradition concerning Miriam is superior to the one concerning Moses, although one may assume from other discussions that if the narrative of Exodus 14 is later than the Song of the Sea and that this narrative includes the ascription of the song to Moses (Ex. 15:1), then this tradition would be less superior. Nonetheless, they do not say this, nor do they explain how the narrative surrounding Miriam (Ex. 15:19-20) would fare any differently. See Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14.4 (1955): 237-50.

Sea is a later amplification thereof."[8] Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes does not provide an argument for this conclusion, but Bernard W. Anderson's argument for a later dating of the Song of the Sea might be akin to what she means. Anderson argues that the Song of the Sea is later than Miriam's song since it moves beyond the exodus event and includes scenes from a conquest of the promised land that seem already to have occurred (cf. Ex. 15:13-17). Anderson concludes that originally the narrative of Exodus 14 moved straight into Miriam's song with the Song of the Sea being a later intrusion, a conclusion which Anderson believes to mean that Miriam and the women "inaugurated a liturgical tradition in which other poets and singers stood, including those who have given us the laments, thanksgivings and hymns of the Psalter."[9]

A third reason, proposed by J. Gerald Janzen, is that Exodus 15:19-21 is an "analepsis," meaning a literary device which withholds a section of vital information until later for literary effect. The signal or marker of an analepsis is the word "for" (כי), a marker which Exodus 15:19 contains (cf. Gen. 20:18).[10] In Janzen's view, since Exodus 15:19 begins with "for" (כי) and is similar to the last verses of Exodus 14, especially verse 29, then Exodus 15:19 is an analepsis for Exodus 14 and not the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-18). Included in this analepsis is Miriam's song. The reason for this is that the consecutive flow of action from the narrative of God's actions to Miriam's actions necessitates the inclusion of Miriam's song.[11] Thus Exodus 15:19-21 is an analepsis which draws one back to the last verses of Exodus 14 and posits Miriam's song right

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[8] Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Some Recent Views on the Presentation of the Song of Miriam," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 202.

[9] Berhnard W. Anderson, "The Song of Miriam Politically and Theologically Considered," *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*. ed. Elaine R. Follis (JSOTSup 40; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 288, 291.

[10] J. Gerald Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who is Seconding Whom?" ," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 191.

[11] Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam" 191.

after Exodus 14:29. Here Miriam's song/singing in response to God's actions provides the vital information needed in order for the Israelites (cf. Ex. 14:30-31), and the reader, to understand God's actions in Exodus 14. Therefore, Miriam's song actually precedes Moses' song, thereby making Miriam the originator of the song and Moses the one who responds, an inversion of the textual record.[12]

Finally, there are two other feminist reasons for seeing Miriam's song as prior to Moses' song. First, is the textual recognition that Miriam's song starts out with the imperative "sing" (Ex. 15:21) whereas Moses' starts out with "I will sing" (Ex. 15:1) thus making it more likely that Moses sang in response to Miriam.[13] Second, Athalya Brenner notes that, just as other women in the Old Testament composed victory songs, e.g. Judges 5:29-30 and 1 Samuel 18:7, so Miriam could have composed this song as well. As Brenner says:

> The fact that women did compose victory poems with which they greeted returning military heroes or armies is beyond dispute. Two relevant examples are the premature victory poem attributed to the princess who attended Sisera's mother, which is to be found within the Song of Deborah (Judges 5.29-30, where the Hebrew verb introducing the poem–'*nh*–is the same as the one used to describe Miriam's poetic and musical activity); and the poem sung by the women to celebrate David's victory over the Philistines (1 Samuel 18.7, also referred to in 1 Samuel 21.12 and 28.5, again with the same Hebrew verb, and to the accompaniment of music and dancing). In both cases it seems quite safe to assume that the female singers are the authors of the poetic sayings as well as their performers, or that they are responsible for the application of well-known formulae to a specific heroe–as they probably did in David's case.[14]

In other words, since these women composed their own songs, despite what the verb ענה ("answer, respond") might indicate, Miriam, whom Exodus 15:20 also describes in terms of ענה, could have been the original composer of the Song of the Sea.

The first problem with the above interpretations is that they lack the textual, exegetical understanding of Miriam as "prophetess." If the above feminist interpretations understood that

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[12] Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam" 190-92.

[13] van Dijk-Hemmes, "Some Recent Views" 200.

[14] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 52.

Miriam's role as prophetess means that she is Moses', and indirectly God's, vicarious voice, then these interpretations could not have any difficulty with Miriam, being Moses' vicarious voice to the Israelite women, following Moses in song. But because these feminist interpretations do not understand Miriam as "prophetess," and because of the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, the above interpretations both exaggeratedly[15] and eisegetically[16] create a Miriam more equal with Moses. The result is an usurpation of Moses' role as God's chosen leader and leader of the Song of the Sea.

There are many other serious flaws in the above feminist interpretations which do not allow Miriam to sing prior to Moses or be the composer of the Song of the Sea. I will not critique all these interpretations, but will primarily focus on J. Gerald Janzen's "analepsis" interpretation. For, in critiquing this view and examining the text itself, I will indirectly provide critiques of many of the components of the other interpretations.

There are many problems with Janzen's interpretation, the first of which is whether, according to Janzen's own definition, Exodus 15:19-21 is an analepsis, i.e. provides delayed vital information for Exodus 14:29ff. First, Exodus 15:19, even though it has כי (which supposedly marks an analepsis), cannot be an analepsis because it provides redundant rather than delayed vital information. The text itself indicates the vital information needed by twice saying that what the Israelites "saw" (ויראו) caused them to understand and believe (Ex. 14:30-31). As such, the vital information needed in Exodus 14 is God's actions, which the text already relates, and not

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[15] For instance, the exaggerated conclusion that Miriam leads Moses in song since Miriam speaks the imperative "sing" (Ex. 15:21) and Moses says "I will sing" (Ex. 15:1).

[16] An example of an eisegetical interpretation is Phyllis Trible's unfounded suspicion and conclusion that the two songs do not work in "tandem" but are in "tension." In brief, there is no obvious problem with how the two songs stand in relation to one another, but because Trible desires Miriam to be the original singer and composer she reads difficulties into the text. An even greater example of an eisegetical interpretation comes from Trevor Dennis who, after merely stating that the only difference between Miriam's song and Moses' song is that Miriam says "sing" and Moses says "I will sing," somehow simply concludes: "The conclusion to be drawn from that seems quite clear. Miriam was the composer of the larger song, but a later hand ascribed it to her brother." Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 110.

Miriam's song. Second, if, as Janzen proposes, Miriam's song, and not verse 19, is the vital information that Exodus 14 needs, then one would expect that Exodus 15:20 to begin with כי, but it does not. Third, even though the Massoretic text shows continuity in action from verses 19-21 by beginning verse 20 with a *waw* consecutive, yet, by placing a *Sillûq* at the end of verse 19 there is discontinuity in purpose and subject, a discontinuity which prevents verses 20-21 from being transposed. Therefore, Exodus 15:20-21 is not a part of an analepsis (Ex. 15:19) nor is Exodus 15:20-21 itself an analepsis.[17]

What Janzen refers to as examples of analepsis are actually elliptical causal clauses which place a/the cause or reason for a speech or action at the end. This clause often occurs with כי but also with ו and (possibly) by the simple juxtaposing of two clauses.[18] At a basic level, then, Janzen's definition of an analepsis concurs with an elliptical causal clause in that it provides some sort of delayed information. Still, Janzen's analepsis fails as a literary device because elliptical causal clauses do not always provide delayed *vital* information, rather only information which is delayed and not necessarily new or vital. For instance, Genesis 20:18 provides delayed *vital* information whereas Exodus 15:19 certainly does not. The validity of Janzen's interpretation breaks down even further when he goes on to propose that an analepsis is to be transposed back

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[17] Another problem with Janzen's view is the idea that כי is the marker or signal of an analepsis. Janzen provides support for this idea by referring to Genesis 20:18 where, after the word כי, the text gives vital information which it has previously withheld.[17] True, Genesis 20:18 provides vital information which has been withheld and כי begins this verse. Nonetheless, there are other places in Scripture where כי is not present and yet the delayed giving of (vital) information comes. For example, Genesis 6:17 and Psalm 60:13 (MT) provide delayed information and begin the verse with ו ("and") whereas Genesis 17:14 possibly provides delayed information by simply juxtaposing two clauses. Thus it is more correct to say that כי can be *a* marker or signal for an analepsis. This point does not disprove Janzen's theory, but it shows that Janzen's definition of an analepsis is lacking.

[18] As Paul Joüon says, "In some cases what follows כי is not a logical cause of an event or circumstance, but evidence of, or an argument, for the preceding assertion: 1 Kg 1.24f..." Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, Vol. II: Part Three: Syntax, Paradigms and Indices*. trans. T. Muraoka (Subsidia Biblica-14/II; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991) §170.da. And, as Wilhelm Gesenius says, "A complete clause, assigning the reason for statements, demands, threats, &c., sometimes follows with the simple *waw copulative*, e.g. ψ 60.13...or even without *Waw*; e.g. Gn 17.14." Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Emil Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2nd ed. (Clarendon: Oxford, 1910) §158.a.

into the text. Although this is true in terms of real time or actual historical chronology, nevertheless the assertion ultimately runs counter both to literary usage and to the proposed definition. For instance, Janzen says that Exodus 15:19-21, because of its similarities to Exodus 14:19ff, should be placed right after Exodus 14:29.[19] But based on other examples, an elliptical causal clause must not be moved back into the text because the clause is meant to explain the immediately preceding speech or action. This is true even if this information has in terms of real time actually occurred earlier in the overall story. Thus the vitality of the clause comes from what precedes it in the current narration and not what was its actual historical context.

A clear example of this comes in Genesis 20:18, Janzen's own example, where the information concerning God having closed the wombs of Abimelech's house is important and withheld until the end. Yet this information is vital only because of Genesis 20:17. Verse 18 explains why Abraham prayed for Abimelech and why God healed Abimelech's wife and female slaves. Therefore, even though Genesis 20:18 contains information which occurred earlier in the real time of the story, verse 18 cannot grammatically speaking move up in the text because it is vital information for verse 17 and as such must remain where it is in order to explain verse 17.[20]

Similarly, if Exodus 15:19-21 is to be an analepsis in any sense, then it must be so for the preceding speech or action–namely, Exodus 15:1-18. And if any verse may move back up in the text on the basis of actual historical chronology, then it is only verse 19. For only this verse has what might be called an analepsis marker (כי) and is similar to preceding material. Verses 20-21, on the other hand, have neither of these attributes. In fact, verses 20-21 only functions as vital

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[19] Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam" 190.

[20] Another example for this grammatical principle come from Exodus 23:9 where God uses two elliptical causal clauses when speaking, one a ו and the other a כי. The text reads: "A resident alien you will not oppress, "because" (ו) you know the soul/heart of the resident alien, for (כי) you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt." The importance of this passage is that it is not a narrative where questions of narrative time versus real time can come into play. That is, should the reader transpose the text back up for the sake of real time? Instead, as an example of actual speech this shows that the speaker purposefully uses elliptical causal clauses rather than placing the information further above in the text, even though the situation has actually occurred earlier in the real time of the story.

information if used contrarily to an analepsis. To wit, verses 20-21 only become vital–for the feminist hermeneutics of remembrance–if removed from their preceding context (Ex. 15:1-19) and placed into a foreign context (Ex. 14:29) where Miriam now precedes Moses in song.

I agree with Janzen that Exodus 15:19 provides some sort of vital information. Yet I propose that this verse is an elliptical causal clause for Exodus 15:1-18. Verse 19 both recounts the reason Moses sings the song and gives an idea as to the nature of the song. Verse 19, by quickly recounting the historical situation for the reader, interprets the song as a praise to God for delivering the Israelites from Egypt and fulfilling part of His promise to Abraham (cf. Gen. 15:13-14). This information is not vital in the sense of new, but it re-explains or reminds the reader as to the purpose, nature, and meaning of the song. The validity of this interpretation, as opposed to Janzen's analepsis, is that it not only concurs with standard grammar of an elliptical causal clause, but it also makes sense of the extant text by explaining why this "redundant" verse exists.[21]

Finally, there are some other textual points in Exodus 15:19-21 which direct the reader to see that, even in terms of real time or actual historical chronology, Miriam follows Moses in song. Not the least of these is the received order of the text. First, Rita J. Burns appropriately notes that Exodus 15:21 relates the verb ענה to Miriam, which, though often translated as "sing," specifically denotes "to answer, respond" as in responsive, antiphonal singing.[22] Athalya Brenner counters that both the "poem attributed to the princess who attended Sisera's mother" within the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:29-30) and the women's song of 1 Samuel 18:7 use ענה and yet these women still probably composed these songs–or at least applied the well known song to the specific

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[21] This textual, grammatical view even dovetails into another textual possibility for Exodus 15:19, namely, that this verse is intentionally placed so as to resume the narration/story in the readers' mind. In other words, the purpose of this verse is to recapitulate Exodus 14 in brief so that after the "interruption" of the songs both the narrative story and the reader can more easily resume at Exodus 15:22. This idea also provides a textual answer for the "redundancy" of Exodus 15:19 which does not warrant the transposing of Exodus 15:19.

[22] Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (SBL Dissertation Series 84; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 12-13.

situation. Therefore, Brenner proposes that even though Exodus 15:20 describes Miriam's action in terms of ענה, this does not, in view of Judges 5:29-30 and 1 Samuel 18:7, necessarily negate the possibility that she composed the Song of the Sea.

Unfortunately, these examples do not necessarily translate into the probability that Miriam composed the Song of the Sea. For, as Brenner herself says, 1 Samuel 18:7 is most likely an application of a well-known song rather than an original composition.[23] Thus this passage is not a supporting example for the idea that Miriam composed the Song of the Sea. And yet, even if she did compose the song, the ענה still indicates that the women "respond" to the situation by singing. Furthermore, the use of ענה in Judges 5:29-30 clearly refers to "answer, respond." Consequently, ענה, whether it be attached to original response or not, denotes a response of some sort. Therefore, as Burns notes, the ענה of Exodus 15:20 rather explicitly shows that Miriam responds to Moses, especially since the Song of the Sea precedes Miriam's singing.

Second, as Burns again notes, Miriam most likely leads only the women of Israel in song even though Exodus 15:21 uses the third masculine plural pronoun הם ("them") and the second masculine plural imperative שירו ("sing").[24] The explanation for this comes from the fact that the nearest and directly previous contextual subjects are כל־הנשים ("all the women") in Exodus 15:20. Furthermore, since verse 21 does not indicate any change in the subjects one can only conclude that the women are still the intended subjects of הם- and שירו. Lastly, Exodus 1:21 provides textual precedent and support for the unusual use of masculine plural endings to refer solely to women. There the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are definitely the main subjects of Exodus 1:15-21 and, yet, without changing the subjects to men or including men, Exodus 1:21 uses the third masculine plural pronoun הם- ("them") to refer to the Shiphrah and Puah. Therefore, this demonstrates the

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[23] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 52.

[24] Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only through Moses?* 12-13. See Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* §135.o.

likelihood that Miriam leads only the women in song, a point which mitigates against seeing Miriam as the original composer and leader of the song.

In conclusion, the grammar and words of Exodus 15:19-21 neither intend nor allow Miriam to sing prior to Moses. Consequently, Miriam was not the composer of the Song of the Sea nor did she lead all of Israel, i.e. both men and women, in the Song of the Sea. Instead, Miriam leads the women of Israel in antiphonal response to Moses' song. This is not meant to downplay Miriam's role in Exodus 15 but to be textually accurate and truthful in what the text reveals about Miriam's role vis-à-vis Moses in relation to the Song of the Sea. In fact, far from destroying the "historical" Miriam, this textual interpretation of Miriam again illuminates and defines how Miriam is in fact a "prophetess" for Israel: Miriam is Moses' vicarious voice (and so God's indirect vicarious voice) to the women of Israel.

There are other feminist interpretations which exaggeratedly and eisegetically create still other unwarranted roles for Miriam. Many feminist interpretations, partly because of the difficulties in defining Miriam as "prophetess," but also because of the general feminist goal of creating women's "full humanity" through the hermeneutics of remembrance, reach out to define Miriam in terms of the public, cultic, and priestly realm. For instance, Athalya Brenner, having defined what she calls an "Ideal Leader,"[25] proposes that the designation of Miriam as prophetess might be a "stereotyped description" of a public figure.[26] In other words, those people like Miriam who had some or most of the qualities of an Ideal Leader were given the general title of "prophet," a title which is not specific of prophetic duties per se but a general indication of being an Ideal Leader or a public figure.

Drorah O'Donnell Setel in a similar vein appears to adopt Rita J. Burns's conviction that

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[25] An "Ideal Leader" for Israel has at least some of these characteristics: "military, priestly, juridicial, prophetic, rhetorical, and literary abilities." cf. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 55.

[26] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 61.

Miriam is not a prophetess but more of a priest(ess) or cultic official.[27] Setel says, "Although she is called a prophet, her actions do not follow the patterns of oracular speech generally associated with Israelite prophecy. They do, however, suggest ritual, perhaps ecstatic, dance and song."[28] Setel then goes on to propose:

> Since there continued to be female prophets in Israel (e.g., Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14; Noadiah, Neh. 6:14), the title "prophet" applied to a woman would have been acceptable to later editors of the text in a way that the designation "priest" would not. Thus, it may have been that Miriam's title was changed at some point in the transmission of the traditions concerning her.[29]

In other words, Setel argues that because Miriam does not appear to function in the same way as later prophetesses, but instead acted in seemingly cultic ways, Miriam may have actually been a priest(ess) of some sort whose title later (male) editors changed in order to expunge her from priestly circles and keep within the realms acceptable for women.

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[27] Burns does not think that Miriam was a prophetess because the Old Testament never depicts Miriam acting in prophetic ways. First, Burns posits that there is no difference in gift and function between prophets and prophetesses, i.e. Deborah (Judg. 4:6ff) and Huldah (2 Ki. 22:15ff) both prophecy in such a way that Burns views them as "duly authorized to articulate matters of national and sacral concern to the whole body of the people." Second, Scripture does not record Miriam as prophesying God's Word to the whole people concerning national and sacral matters. The closest she comes to being a prophetess is in leading a victory hymn, i.e. akin to Deborah (Judg. 5). Consequently, given the textual evidence that Miriam only sings a hymn and does not give oracles concerning God's will, Burns argues that Miriam's title as "prophetess" is either an anachronistic title given to her by later editors as a loose definition concerning her role, a role which earlier editors did not exactly know how to entitle because she did not fit under any standard titles, or that there are actually lost textual traditions which would support her title. Based on Burns's rejection of Miriam as a prophetess, Burns then has to provide another role for Miriam. For example, because she cannot accept Miriam's activities in Numbers 12 as revolving around the issue of prophecy, Burns posits that the issue is a later priestly battle over oracular authority in which Moses is an eponym for the Levites and Miriam and Aaron stand as eponyms for the Aaronites. Burns's further evidence for Miriam's cultic or priestly associations and duties comes from her understanding in Exodus 15:21 of the designation "Aaron's sister" as being more of priestly indicator than a familial description, i.e. later priests claimed priestly status by claiming to be "Aaron's sons." Another argument comes from her interpretations of the genealogies of Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 5:29 as priestly genealogies which include Miriam. Finally, Burns adopts both Martin Noth's idea that "grave traditions" provide probable indications of where a person comes from, and Gerhard von Rad's idea that Kadesh once had an important shrine around the time of the exodus. Taken together, Burns proposes that Miriam, whom the text records as dying at Kadesh (Num. 20:1), originally came from Kadesh and was therefore associated with the priesthood at Kadesh. Burns readily recognizes that Miriam is never called a priestess and that Yahwism never allowed priestesses. Nevertheless, this does not stop her from interpreting Miriam in cultic or priestly ways. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only through Moses?* 40-100, 116-22.

[28] Setel, "Exodus" 32.

[29] Setel, "Exodus" 32.

Still other feminists interpret Miriam as a cultic leader of Israel based on the view that Miriam is the original composer and leader of the Song of the Sea. For instance, Exodus 15:21 contains a third masculine plural pronoun "them" (-הם) and the second masculine plural for the imperative "sing" (שירו) thus showing that she leads Israel, and not just the women, in cultic song. As J. Gerald Janzen says in connection with the supposed analepsis of Exodus 15:19-21:

> The plural imperative that opens Miriam's song likewise is masculine in gender, normally signifying that the people thereby summoned to worship are either male, or male and female... If 15.19-21 is indeed an analepsis, positioning us at 14.29, then the people's response in 14.31, and especially in 15.1-18, suggests that it is the people as a whole to whom Miriam sings and whom she bids sing.[30]

Or, as Drorah O'Donnell Setel, who again appears to be speaking on the basis of Rita J. Burns,[31] says, "Vocal and instrumental music, in addition to ritualized dance, may have re-created the

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[30] Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam" 193.

[31] Burns's argument concerning Miriam's dance and song as cultic re-presentations of God's battle against the Egyptians is often times rather loose. The first problem is that the Hebrew word for Miriam's "dance" (מחלה) in Exodus 15:20 is not the same word as "to play" (צחק) in Exodus 32:6. Even though both texts deal with a cultic event, the key words that might solidly connect these two passages are not readily connected at all. Second, Burns attempts to connect "to play" (צחק) of Exodus 32:6 with "to play, hold a contest" (שחק) of 2 Samuel 2:14. Burns legitimates this connection by means of Judges 16:25 where שחק is interchangeable with צחק. The importance of this connection is that since שחק in 2 Samuel 2:14 refers, in a sense, to fighting, and is interchangeable with צחק, then Exodus 32:6 most likely describes a cultic event where the people re-present God's fighting. If this is true, then Exodus 15:20 might also be a cultic re-presentation. The problem with these links is that צחק is only interchangeable with שחק in terms of "play" since, based on Judges 16:25, the meaning of "to hold contest" for שחק does not connect with or transfer itself over to צחק. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that צחק has overtones or undertones of battle. Thus Burns cannot rightly say that Exodus 32:6 is a re-presentation of battle nor can she say the same for Exodus 15:20.

Burns's argument for Miriam's song being a cultic re-presentation of the sounds of God's battle has more solid grounding, yet still does not solidly prove her interpretation of Exodus 15:20. Burns argues that in Exodus 32:17-18 Joshua mistakes the sounds of the people celebrating as sounds of war thus indicating that the people are cultically re-presenting the sounds of God's war against Egypt. Further proof comes from Isaiah 30:32: "And every stroke of the staff of punishment that the Lord lays upon him will be to the sound of timbrels and lyres, battling with brandished arm he will fight with them." In other words, this indicates that the sound of timbrels and lyres re-presents the sounds of God's war. The first problem this argument is that since Burns cannot solidly connect Exodus 15:20 with Exodus 32 she cannot very readily posit what she believes to be going on in Exodus 32 over into Exodus 15. Another problem with Burns's view is that Exodus 32:18 itself records Moses as correcting Joshua's interpretation of the sounds that they hear from the camp. Whereas Joshua thinks he hears the sounds of war, Moses corrects him and says that it is the sound of "those responding/singing" (ענות). Granted, this may indicate that *these* sounds of singing are similar to sounds of war, and thus re-presentative song; nevertheless, this is not for sure. Since Moses could tell the difference between the two sounds this indicates that, from a distance, Joshua was mistaken and that this singing might not have been re-presentations of the sounds of war. In the end, Burns does not

sensations as well as the oral images of battle."[32] If Setel is indeed referring to Rita J. Burns, who sees Miriam's dance and song as cultic re-presentation of God's war, then Setel also interprets Miriam as a cultic leader for all of Israel.

Carol Meyers takes a similar route as Setel in order to show Miriam's cultic leadership role in Israel. Meyers, by examining terra-cotta figures from the Iron Age, posits that women predominantly appear to have been the ones who led people in music and song.[33] Meyers then turns to Biblical evidence, pointing out that "the biblical women singers/drummers were part of a composition-performance tradition in which small groups of performers did in fact sing, dance and drum, using traditional choruses or refrains and also developing texts in response to the specific occasion."[34] Based on this Meyers says that Miriam is in this tradition of East Mediterranean "drum-dance-song" women's groups that lead the people in cultic victory songs. Meyers then suggests that the nature of these "drum-dance-song" groups sheds light on the role of Miriam. In short, Meyers proposes that this tradition has its own female hierarchy, that through song these women have significant "control" and "prestige" over themselves and others, and that they thus have the possibility to subvert "existing hierarchies," which is the traditional patriarchal hierarchy.[35] In sum, Miriam's leadership role may be seen not only as one which leads people in song, but also which subverts existing hierarchies.

A final feminist point concerning Miriam's role as cultic leader of Israel comes from J.

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solidly prove that Miriam's dance and song are re-presentations of God's war, nor does she prove that this is cultic or that Miriam is a cultic leader of Israel. This does not take place at a shrine, rather, Miriam leads the women in response to Moses' spontaneous song. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only through Moses?* 11-39.

[32] Setel, "Exodus" 31.

[33] Carol Meyers, "Miriam the Musician," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 218.

[34] Meyers, "Miriam the Musician" 223.

[35] Meyers, "Miriam the Musician" 229-30.

Gerald Janzen.[36] Assuming, via repositioning the analepsis of Exodus 15:19-21 to the end of Exodus 14:29, that Miriam precedes Moses in song, Janzen proposes that Miriam's song is in fact part of God's saving action/event. In other words, as Janzen says, Miriam's song "...gives Israel's eyes their discernment (contrast Isa. 6.9), so that, seeing the Egyptians dead on the seashore, the people see this as the great work that the LORD did, fear the LORD, and believe in the LORD and his servant Moses" (cf. Ex. 14:30-31).[37] In this way, the "saving event and its cultic celebration" come together as one action or meaning while Miriam stands forth as the cultic leader whose song "give[s] redemption its revelatory voice."[38]

The first problem with the above interpretations is, again, the fact that an exegetical understanding of Miriam's role as prophetess directs one to define "prophetess" in terms of being Moses' vicarious voice to the women of Israel. In other words, understanding the nature of Miriam's role as prophetess argues against seeing her title as a general title for a public figure or a title that later redactors use to cover up her priestly connections as a cultic leader of Israel. Furthermore, the fact that Miriam only leads women in song disallows an interpretation which seeks to create a public, cultic, leadership role for Miriam.[39] Finally, the fact that neither Miriam nor any woman within Yahwism had either the title "priest(ess)" or performed cultic duties mitigates against any cultic interpretation of Miriam.[40] In sum, those feminist interpretations which create a cultic role for Miriam either exaggerate what the text will substantiate, being the

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[36] Feminists also interpret Miriam's role in Numbers 12 as having priestly connections as well. This will be discussed later with the issue of Numbers 12.

[37] Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam" 195. Similarly, Gail O'Day supports the idea that Miriam's song has revelatory voice, a revelatory voice which celebrates a God who liberates the oppressed. Gail O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12.4 (1985) 203-10.

[38] Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam" 196-97.

[39] Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only through Moses?* 12-13.

[40] Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only through Moses?* 122.

idea that הם- ("them") in Ex. 15:21 includes men and women, or eisegetically create a cultic role for Miriam through loopholes of suspicion and speculation, being the notion that "prophetess" is a later (male) redactor's effort to cover up Miriam's cultic role.

Even though many feminist interpretations see Miriam as a cultic leader of Israel, they also view her as a victim of Israel's patriarchy. This point reaches beyond Exodus to Numbers 12. Yet, in considering Miriam during the exodus, this text is important as well. The major question for feminists here is, why is Miriam punished with a skin disease while God leaves Aaron unscathed (Num. 12:10-11)? Generally speaking, feminist interpretations answer this by saying that Numbers 12 records how God, synonymous with patriarchy, punishes Miriam, who as a woman seeks equal footing with Moses–a man. For instance, Naomi Graetz says, "I suggest that Miriam was punished with leprosy because women in the biblical world were not supposed to be leaders of men, and that women with initiative were reproved when they asserted themselves with the only weapon they had, their power of language..."[41] Again, Alice L. Laffey says, "Viewed from a feminist perspective, the text is one more incident of prejudice against women."[42] Furthermore, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn propose two answers. First, "It is possible that she is struck just because she is a woman. Perhaps she embodies feminine concerns ('feminine,' that is, as expressed in this particular construction of gender) for contiguity over against separation, for equality over against hierarchy, values which God is in no mood to adopt."[43] Second:

> Aaron is not punished with leprosy because he is the high priest. Such an affliction would render him unclean, unable to perform priestly duties....On the other hand, Miriam, as a woman, spends much of her time unclean anyway....As a woman and a non-priest, and

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[41] Naomi Graetz, "Did Miriam Talk Too Much?" *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 233.

[42] Alice L. Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines: The Old Testament in Feminist Perspective* (London: SPCK, 1990) 55.

[43] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 115.

> therefore as a "lower class" citizen, Miriam is "unnecessary" and becomes the scapegoat of Yahweh's indignation.[44]

In sum, many feminist interpretations view Miriam's punishment as another instance of patriarchy punishing a woman for seeking equality with men.

Other feminists answer the question a little differently, focusing on the idea that Miriam is not just punished because she is a woman, but because she is a woman acting in a cultic manner. For instance, Phyllis Trible sees Numbers 12:1,10-15 as revolving around a priestly matter and Numbers 12:2-9 a prophetic matter. Trible does not explain why the former text "implicates" Miriam in a priestly matter, but merely states that the questioning of Moses' Cushite wife criticizes Moses' cultic purity.[45] Trible recognizes that "nowhere in the received tradition does Miriam, or any other female, hold the title 'priest' or perform cultic duties." Nevertheless, this does not stop her from asserting that "a few clues scattered in the Book of Numbers attest to priestly connections for her."[46] Trible goes on to state that Miriam's punishment relates to this priestly matter where she is the leader and Aaron is her supporter. Miriam's leading role is not Trible's answer for Miriam's solitary punishment. Patriarchy is the answer.[47] Finally, although Trible concludes that Miriam's punishment of skin disease is a judgment which "irreparably" severs her from cultic or priestly duties she also sees the people of Israel as having the greatest honor for and allegiance to Miriam because they wait for Miriam's return.[48]

Similarly, Athalya Brenner appears to indicate that Miriam is punished because she is a

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[44] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise* 115-16.

[45] Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 21.

[46] Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 21.

[47] As Trible says, "The male is spared; the female sacrificed." Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 22.

[48] As Trible says, "Those whom she served do not forsake her in her time of tribulation. They wait. Never do they assail her, as on various occasions they attack Aaron, Moses and God. And their allegiance survives unto her death." Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 23.

woman who tried to act in a cultic manner. Brenner notes that King Uzziah was supposedly smitten with leprosy for trying to "officiate in the Temple" (2 Chronicles 26:18-21). This gives a clue that Miriam's leprosy is also connected to wrongfully attempting to act in a cultic way. What is wrong with Miriam's cultic act, and the reason why she is punished, is the fact that women are "excluded from officiating in the cult."[49]

Despite all the interpretations which accord patriarchy a heavy hand upon Miriam, most feminist interpretations of Numbers 12 are quick to point out, and rightly so, that God does not deny Miriam's prophetic role.[50] Here is where feminist interpretations need to start in order to grasp an accurate and substantiated understanding of Miriam in Numbers 12:1-5. Miriam's actions and punishment revolve solely around the issue of prophecy and not gender, priestly, or cultic issues. For instance, contrary to Trible's fracturing of the text, there is no real difficulty in understanding Numbers 12:1 as part of the larger "prophetic" event of Numbers 12:2-15. For even though Numbers 12:1 only specifically records Miriam as speaking (ותדבר) this does not indicate two relatively separate challenges but, instead, shows that Miriam is the (main) speaker and the main instigator against Moses.[51]

As for Trible's idea that Numbers 12:1,10-15 is of a cultic nature, the text does not support this. The problem, or loophole, which Trible encounters in verse 1 is its relative obscurity. The reason for the confusion is that Miriam's (and Aaron's) argument in verse 1 is not their main contention. Thus Numbers 12:1 is not likely to make clear sense because it is not Miriam's (and Aaron's) main point. Instead, Numbers 12:1 is more of a curt, jumbled attempt

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[49] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 54.

[50] And yet, Phyllis Trible sees God as both denigrating women in general and denying Moses' aspiration for egalitarianism in prophecy (Num. 11:29). As Trible says, "While not denying a prophetic role to Miriam, it undercuts her in gender and point of view. It also undermines Moses' wish for egalitarian prophecy." Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 22.

[51] A further point to back this up is the irregular textual order of Miriam preceding Aaron (cf. Num. 12:1). See Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93.

somehow to demean Moses' character or provide a bridge into the real issue.[52] Trible apparently comes close to realizing this connection. Nevertheless, she seemingly disregards this in her interpretation because she views the passage as cultic in nature.[53]

Based on the textual reasons that Numbers 12:1,10-15 is indeed a single unit together with verses 2-9, and that verse 1 is a segue, albeit jumbled, into the main contention, then verse 1 is more than likely not cultic in nature. What the text does show is that verse 1 leads into a prophetic matter. Therefore, the only thing that one can say with any certainty is that verse 1 is somehow connected, as a segue, to a prophetic controversy. If an educated exegetical guess be allowed, then verse 1, as a segue and given its context, may have some veiled prophetic matter in mind which would diminish Moses' prophetic character and provide support for prophetic parity. In conclusion, the text does not cast Miriam in any sort of cultic light, and quite importantly, does not thus indicate that Miriam is punished because she is a woman acting in a cultic manner. Instead, the text indicates that Miriam is punished for her role in a prophetic matter.[54]

Still, as many feminists note, Miriam's solitary punishment sounds unfair. Yet the text gives clues as to why God only punishes Miriam. The first clue comes from Numbers 12:1 where the text indicates that, even though both Miriam and Aaron stood against Moses, Miriam alone

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[52] As Gordon Wenham says, "The text does not explain why Miriam and Aaron objected to this woman, because in reality their objections to her were only a smokescreen for their challenge to Moses' spiritual authority." Gordon Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981) 111. And, as Timothy R. Ashley says, "The connection between v. 1 and what Moses' siblings say in this verse is not clear. This issue here seems to be a different one, unless one assumes that Moses' unique status was threatened because of his foreign wife (the text draws no such conclusion), or, as mentioned above, that the issue of a foreign wife was a subterfuge." Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993) 224.

[53] Trible says: "If the cultic purity of Moses can be criticized, then his supreme authority can be disputed." In other words, Trible views the argument of Numbers 12:1 as an attempt to besmirch Moses' cultic purity while viewing verses 2-9 as a following, and relatively unrelated, attempt to gain parity with Moses in prophetic authority. Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," *Bible* Review 5.1 (1989) 21.

[54] Yet even if one could prove that verse 1 is cultic in nature that would still not demonstrate that Miriam is punished because she acted in a cultic manner. For the text gives no indication that the punishment of vv. 10-15 is in fact a result of verse 1 rather than a continuation of vv. 2-9.

spoke against Moses (ותדבר).[55] The text further indicates this point by listing Miriam before Aaron.[56] Second, if Gordon Wenham is correct in interpreting את־במשה דבר of Numbers 12:2 as "speak *with* Moses," the same phrase that God uses in verses 6 and 8 when defining His relationship with Moses, instead of "speak *through* Moses," then Miriam's (and Aaron's) challenge is terribly egregious.[57] For this phrase shows exactly what they are grasping for, namely, the unique prophetic privilege which God has graciously given to Moses only.

Third, the text does not explicitly say nor even seem to imply that Miriam is punished because she is a woman. Evidence that Miriam's gender is not an issue in this case of divine punishment comes in the fact that Aaron, even after Miriam is punished, wholly associates himself with Miriam in culpability (Num. 12:11). In other words, if Miriam's punishment were on the basis of her being a woman, then it would not seem likely that Aaron would associate himself with her in culpability. Therefore, Aaron placing himself in the same spot as Miriam indicates that this punishment is based on instigation rather than on gender.[58]

In conclusion, if Miriam is the main instigator of an attack on Moses' unique prophetic authority, then the above points are reasons enough not only for understanding why God punishes Miriam but also why God punishes Miriam only. In this way, Miriam is not a victim of patriarchy

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[55] Dennis T. Olson answers the question of "why Miriam and not Aaron too?" by saying that Aaron possibly averted an impending punishment by asking for forgiveness. The problem with this idea is that if God was going to punish Aaron one would expect God to have punished Aaron at the same time as Miriam. Dennis T. Oslson, *Numbers* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996) 74. R. K. Harrison answer the same question by saying that Aaron is punished by having to see his sister's punishment. This idea is weak–especially since the text seems to give a more substantial answer. R.K. Harrison, *Numbers: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) 197.

[56] As Jacob Milgrom notes, "The verb *va-tedabber* is in the feminine singular, indicating that Miriam was the principal instigator of the gossip (also note that Miriam is mentioned ahead of Aaron, the reverse of the normal order; cf. vv. 4,5). This would therefore account for the fact that she and not Aaron was punished." Milgrom, *Numbers* 93.

[57] Wenham, *Numbers* 111.

[58] This same argument can be made from the cultic angle. Aaron would not place himself together with Miriam in cultic culpability because he was the high priest. That Aaron does place himself together with Miriam shows that the punishment and issue is not cultic in nature–it is prophetic.

for seeking parity with men. That is not the real issue. Instead, Miriam receives due divine punishment for leading an usurpation to gain prophetic parity with Moses.[59] Still, as feminist interpretations rightly note, God does not deny (or denigrate) her role as prophetess nor, as Trible proposes, do the people reject Miriam.[60]

And yet, there is the distinct possibility that the text may be saying something completely different. For instance, Jacob Milgrom notes that God may have made Israel wait for Miriam's return because "...all of Israel pays a penalty for Miriam's sin: Their march to the promised land must be delayed a full week." In other words, Miriam is the cause of collective punishment because God punishes all of Israel for Miriam's act. In fact, this interpretation may be the most accurate since it fits with the whole of Numbers: God punishes the people for their acts of disobedience by keeping them from entering the promised land (cf. Num. 14:22-23, 34).[61]

The next text is the record of Miriam's death (Numbers 20:1ff). Many feminists, Phyllis Trible included, interpret Numbers 12:1-15 as a patriarchal attack on Miriam. Trible takes a very critical feminist eye to the text by interpreting the record of Miriam's death as a verbal vendetta against her by patriarchs who record her death as a poignant and joyous farewell because they feared "her prominence, power, and prestige in early Israel."[62] Continuing with the theme of Miriam's power, Trible proposes that Miriam "symbolized life." Trible gains this view by interpreting Numbers 20:2 ("and there was no water for the congregation...") to mean that nature mourned Miriam's death by refusing to yield water for Israel. Trible gleans her other example of

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[59] In fact, one might even emphasize the fact that Miriam's punishment is rather merciful compared to the punishments of death that God gave some Israelites in Numbers 11:1,33-34.

[60] There is the question of whether or not Trible intends this to mean that the people honor Miriam more than God as their preferred leader–an exaggerated reading which would not only go against the grain of this covenantal relationship (cf. Ex. 19:5-6, 20:1-6) but ultimately pit Miriam against God as the object of Israel's faith. If this is Trible's direction, then I do not follow, although I tend to agree that the people may be showing honor to her.

[61] Milgrom, *Numbers* 99.

[62] Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 23.

Miriam symbolizing life from the fact that after Miriam died both Moses and Aaron ran into trouble with God and themselves died.[63] In other words, for Trible, Miriam's death demonstrates that Miriam was the leading life force that held things together for Moses, Aaron, and Israel.

On the other hand, other feminists see Miriam's obituary as proof of her leadership and importance in Israel, even though she was of lesser status than Moses and Aaron. So Katharine Doob Sakenfeld says:

> Its [Miriam's obituary] very brevity, with the absence of detail and no reference to a period of mourning, indicates her lesser status in the tradition in comparison with her two brothers. On the other hand, that her death is reported at all suggests her importance, and the location of her death geographically and narratively functions to raise her status closer to that of her brothers.[64]

This, I agree, is the more likely textual meaning of Numbers 20:1ff. For instance, if the (patriarchal) editors had wanted to besmirch Miriam, then most likely they would *not* have recorded Miriam's death. Yet they did. Furthermore, the text did not forget about Miriam's death despite its proximity to Aaron's death (Num. 20:22-29). Aaron's death could have overshadowed Miriam's death, but, that it does not shows that this record of her death is an homage to her memory. Consequently, Trible's interpretation of Miriam's obituary as a patriarchal attack does not work, unless one holds the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance above the extant text.

Similarly, Trible's idea that Miriam "symbolized life" is also eisegetical. The fact that Aaron and Moses have to die after Miriam because Miriam dies first does not mean that she was the glue that held everything together between Moses, Aaron, and God. The "glue" of this relationship is patently, first and foremost, God, His words, and His will (cf. Num. 14:20-3, 20:12). Furthermore, the text does not in any way indicate that nature "mourned" over Miriam's death; there is no explicit or implicit cause and effect connection between these two verses.[65]

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[63] Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 23-24.

[64] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Numbers," *The Woman's Bible Commentary*. eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 48.

[65] Result clauses often do come by way of ו consecutive clauses, e.g. 1 Kings 12:13 reads וימת

Instead, the text simply, and most intelligibly, moves from Miriam's death to the next subject, which is that the "desert, wilderness" (מדבר) in which the Israelites had no water (Num. 20:1-2). Therefore, I agree with feminists like Katherine Doob Sakenfeld that the record of Miriam's death is not only an honor to her memory, but also indicates her importance to Israel.

The final exaggerated feminist point concerning Miriam is that she, along with other women, are the beginning and end of the exodus. Just as the feminists argue that women began the exodus from Egypt, so Miriam's song ends the flight from Egypt.[66] As Phyllis Trible says:

> Like the beginning, the ending of the Exodus story belongs to women. They are the *alpha* and *omega*, the *aleph* and the *taw* of deliverance. Providing continuity between the two groups and times is the figure of Miriam. At the bank (*sepat* [she-PAHT]) of the river we first meet her (Exodus 2:4); at the shore (*sepat*) of the sea we find her again (Exodus 15:20-21).[67]

In sum, Trible uses feminist liberation in viewing Miriam and the other women of Exodus 1-2 as being "co-creators" with God, if not monergistic liberators without God.

Another view of Miriam's important role in relation to the exodus vis-à-vis God is Jopie Siebert-Hommes' statement that "Moses' sister is witness to both the beginning and end. At the beginning she *stations herself*, to know what would be done to him (2.4). At the end we find her yet again, on the opposite shore of the Sea of Reeds. Now she *knows* what has been

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וסקלהו באבנים ("...they stoned him with stones so that he died"). Nevertheless, Numbers 20:2 is not explicitly a result of Numbers 20:1. The Massoretic text separates these two verses with a *Sillûq* thereby indicating that the ו of Numbers 20:2 is not a result clause but merely a resumptive conjunction ו ("and, now"). Furthermore, any cause and effect connection is not strongly implicit. There is nothing other than grammatical possibility (in the hands of the hermeneutics of remembrance) to suggest a cause and effect connection between Miriam's death and the lack of water. See Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* §166.

[66] This, of course, assumes that either Miriam sings after Moses, which contradicts most feminist interpretations, or that only Miriam sings and that Moses does not follow or respond to Miriam, which again contradicts other feminist interpretations. The only way this point works is with those who would claim that Moses never sings in Exodus 15.

[67] Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows" 20.

accomplished."[68] So whereas Trible emphasizes Miriam and the women as autonomous creators of liberation from beginning to end Siebert-Hommes emphasizes that Miriam is a witness who forms an inclusio to God's acts of deliverance. Given God's hidden activity through these women to fulfill His promises to Abraham, this seems more textually and theologically accurate.[69]

In summary, most feminist interpretations see Miriam as continuing the feminist liberation ideal of female leadership. Miriam, however, unlike the previous women, has two men (Moses and Aaron) with whom to share the functions of leader. Still, feminist interpretations generally see Miriam as a leader who is similar to if not roughly equal to Aaron and Moses.[70] But many of these interpretations come from an incomplete understanding of Miriam's role as "prophetess," a void which most feminists fill with feminist liberation through the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, i.e. exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations. The result is a Miriam who is not only different than what the text warrants, but also often has a greater role at the expense of Moses's textual role(s), such as in the Song of the Sea.

There is no question that the text records Miriam as an important leader of Israel (cf. Micah 6:4). The question is what *kind* of leader. On the basis of exegesis I conclude that Miriam was God's prophetess, similar to Aaron, who antiphonally responded to Moses and vicariously sang for Moses by leading the women in dance and song. Possibly Miriam spoke for Moses before the women on other occasions as well. Finally, there is also warrant for saying that because Miriam was Moses' vicarious voice (who was God's direct, vicarious voice) Miriam was also, in effect, God's indirect, vicarious voice to the women of Israel. In this way, Miriam was an

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[68] Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter...She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 70.

[69] Further, the exodus does not end at Exodus 15 since Israel has not entered nor gained the promised land. Therefore, Miriam and the other women are not the exodus's beginning and end.

[70] Alice Ogden Bellis concludes: "Miriam emerges from the bits and pieces as a multifaceted character: mediator, cultic figure, prophet, musician, beloved leader, strong, even threatening personality." Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes* 106.

iimportant leader to Israel by being a prophetess *through* whom God had spoken.[71]

[71] As distinct from Moses *with* whom God spoke–פה לא־פה ארבר־בו (Num. 12:8- "Face to face I speak with him").

Chapter 6

Feminist Interpretations of Zipporah

The final, major female character in Exodus is Zipporah. Zipporah is an enigmatic figure in that the text twice refers to her in passing (Ex. 2:15b-22, 18:1-9) and once in a rather obscure passage (Ex. 4:24-26). Nevertheless, Zipporah is a major female character in Exodus, whom feminists also interpret in three basic ways: exegetically, exaggeratedly, and eisegetically. As before, I will demonstrate that feminist interpretations which grasp a more accurate and substantiated view of Zipporah, her actions, and importance are exegetical. I will also show that the femininst interpretations which tend to adequately represent God and His covenanted means of grace through circumcision, are exegetical as well. In contrast, I will demonstrate that the feminist interpretations which create an unwarranted picture of Zipporah and thus ignore God and His covenanted means of grace are exaggerated and eisegetical.

There are not many feminist interpretations that deal with the meager references to Zipporah in Exodus 2:15b-22 and 18:1-9, but those that do mostly see Zipporah as another case of a woman being "written out of history."[1] On the other hand, Jopie Siebert-Hommes argues for Zipporah's importance in Exodus 2:15b-22. She points out that for the twelve sons of Israel (Ex. 1:1-4) there are also twelve daughters of Israel who play an equally significant role in the exodus: Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, Zipporah, and Zipporah's other six sisters- all daughters of Reuel.[2] These seven daughters, like the other women, play a significant

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[1] Trevor Dennis comments on Ex. 2:15b-22, "This is not a woman's story... We have here several stereotypes that are clearly the product of a male mind. The women are weak and cannot defend themselves. They need to be rescued by a man. They are silly and impetuous..." Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 109. Furthermore, Alice Laffey says of Zipporah in Ex. 18:1-9, "From a feminist perspective, the narratives are another example of writing women out of history. By seeing to Moses' circumcision, Zipporah has made a significant contribution to the success of the exodus. But she is excluded from the victory. Irony of ironies! A Midianite male makes Moses a better conversation partner than his wife." Alice L. Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines: The Old Testament in Feminist Perspective* (London: SPCK, 1990) 50-51.

[2] Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter...She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist

part in Moses' life, namely, they introduce Moses to the new phase of his career by introducing him to their father, the priest of Midian.[3]

Both of the above interpretations have some validity, but also tend to exaggerate. For instance, there may be twelve daughters to match the twelve sons of Israel, but Zipporah and her six sisters do not purposefully introduce Moses to the next phase of his career so much as function, unbeknownst to them, as means to this end.[4] Furthermore, the idea that Zipporah, like other women, is written out of history is excessive. True, the text does not record Zipporah's thoughts and feelings. This is probably due more to the economy of Scripture than to any silencing of Zipporah, i.e. the text only records those things which are most central to advancing the history of God's actions of liberation.[5] The real problem is the hermeneutics of remembrance which forces the conclusion that the text silences Zipporah based on the unwarranted assumption that women were always central characters to God's actions of liberation.

In contrast to Exodus 2:15b-22 and 18:1-9 which supposedly silence Zipporah, feminist interpretations see Zipporah as coming to the forefront in Exodus 4:24-26. The question here is the nature of Zipporah's actions or role.[6] First, there are a number of feminist interpretations which exegetically navigate this difficult text. For example, Trevor Dennis says that two things

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Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 65.

[3] Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter...She May Live!" 72.

[4] In contrast, one might even propose that Zipporah and her sisters are God's means just as God has acted in hidden ways through women in Exodus 1-2:10. Thus the text, although explicitly silent on this point, may imply this continued line of action.

[5] What is most central to the advancement of the exodus story is the "priestly" connection between Jethro and Moses. Also one notices that Ex. 2:15b-22 is evenhanded in that it records neither Zipporah's nor Moses' thoughts on their marriage. Furthermore, Ex. 18:1-9 does not fully ignore Zipporah but distinctly mentions her three times (vv. 2,5,6). Finally, textual silence does not necessarily mean absence. Just because the text does not record interchanges between Moses and Zipporah does not mean that they never happened. Instead, as mentioned before, this merely indicates that these interchanges are not the most economical in advancing the central story. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996) XIII, 6.

[6] There are many interpretational questions, e.g. whose feet does Zipporah touch in v. 25 and what does "bridegroom of blood" mean in vv. 25-26, but these do not overshadow or squelch feminist answers

are sure about her actions: one, Zipporah performs a circumcision, the only woman in Scripture to do so; and two, "Zipporah averts a great danger."[7] Eileen Schuller defines Zipporah's action more specifically: "She [Zipporah] circumcises either her son or Moses, and it is her action that resolves the crisis and saves her husband's life."[8] Finally, Alice L. Laffey notes that Zipporah not only follows in the footsteps of Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter in keeping Moses alive, but also that Zipporah, by performing circumcision, "proved by her actions that she was faithful to–even exemplary regarding–the demands of Israel's covenant partner, Yahweh."[9]

The text substantiates the above interpretations. For instance, that Moses does not himself circumcise his son indicates that he is incapacitated because God is attacking him.[10] Another indication is that Moses is the previous referent in verses 18-23 thus the "him" of verse 24 most likely refers to Moses. Still another indication is that verse 25 designates "her son" (בנה)[11] as the recipient of circumcision, a change in referent that would not be necessary if the son, and not Moses, was the object of God's attack.[12] Furthermore, the fact that God leaves Moses alone after Zipporah circumcises her son strongly indicates that the circumcision which Zipporah performed

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any more than the previous passages.

[7] Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* 106-109.

[8] Eileen Schuller, "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 180.

[9] Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines* 49-50.

[10] Cf. Gen. 17:10-14 and Josh. 5:2ff where the father or male leaders are to circumcise the sons of Israel–be they infant sons or adult sons.

[11] The text does not say whether the son is Gershom (Ex. 2:22) or Eliezer (Ex. 18:4). This does not matter though since the main point is the lack of circumcision rather than which son Zipporah circumcises.

[12] See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1974) 98. These three points are opposed to the less textually substantiated position that Nahum M. Sarna takes. To wit, given the emphasis on "son(s)" in Ex. 4:21-3 "it would be wholly inconsistent...to assume that Moses was the one stricken. The sequence of verses strongly suggests

saved Moses' life (vv. 25-26a).[13] Finally, the probable contextual reason for God's wrathful attack is that Moses has not yet circumcised his son (Gershom), i.e. God attacks Moses because, like the Pharaoh who keeps the sons of Israel from worshipping God (Ex. 4:21-3), he has withheld God's covenant of grace from his son (cf. Gen. 17:10-14).[14]

It is true that there are textual difficulties which allow for various (exegetical) interpretations, e.g. what does חתן־דמים ("bridegroom of blood") in verses 25-26 mean?[15] Nevertheless, this does not change the salient exegetical point that Zipporah performs a circumcision on her son which saves Moses' life. And this point, at least for this thesis, is the

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that it was Moses' firstborn, Gershom, whose life was imperiled." Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 25.

[13] See Childs, *Exodus* 101.

[14] In fact, God's sudden wrath is rather understandable considering Moses' position as God's leader of Israel. For how could the one who is to lead God's people in the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:4-9) not place his own son under the sign and seal of this covenant (cf. Gen. 17:10-14). So also W.H. Gispen says, "The fact that one of Moses' sons...was uncircumcised was a sign of decline and apostasy and a transgression in the eyes of God." W.H. Gispen, *Exodus*, trans. Ed van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982) 64.

[15] Whatever the meaning or referent of this enigmatic phrase the outcome is still the same: the circumcision which Zipporah performs on her son saves Moses. See Childs, *Exodus* 100. One probable interpretation is Umberto Cassuto's view that when Zipporah says כי חתן־דמים אתה לי ("surely a bridegroom of blood you are to me") in verse 25 she means, "I am delivering you from death–indeed, I am restoring you to life–by means of our son's blood; and your return to life makes you, as it were, my bridegroom a second time, this time a blood-bridegroom, a bridegroom acquired through blood." Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 60-61.

Whereas Cassuto takes לי ("to me") to be possessive, I also suggest that לי can be read in terms of specification or comparison. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) § 11.2.10d. Thus, Zipporah says, "In respect to me you are a bridegroom of blood." In other words, Zipporah acknowledges that even though she circumcised their son she still transfers this act over to Moses. The reason for this is that the father was to circumcise his son (cf. Gen. 17:23). Further support for this view comes through חתן ("bridegroom") which is sometimes covenantal language (cf. Is. 62:5); and Ex. 4:24-26 is certainly covenantal with its emphasis on circumcision. Even though Is. 62:5 indicates that God is the חתן ("bridegroom") while Israel is His כלה ("bride") still, in respect to Zipporah, Moses, being the father, is as the חתן ("bridegroom") of God's covenant of circumcision to his son. Finally, this interpretation gains further support from other passages where "falling" (נפל) at someone's "feet" (רגל) is an act of humility and submission (cf. 2 Ki. 4:37, Jud. 5:27, 1 Sam. 25:24). Granted, "feet" does sometimes refer to male genitalia (cf. 1 Sa. 24:3), but this is not necessary here. Also, the text does not say that Zipporah falls at Moses' feet, still she lowers herself in some fashion to touch Moses' feet, an act which is similar enough to have similar significance. In sum, I propose that Zipporah vicariously circumcises their son for Moses because Moses is somehow incapacitated by God's wrath, and, then, Zipporah transfers this act over to Moses, who is the "bridegroom" of this covenant of "blood" (circumcision) for his family.

most important because it demonstrates that some feminist interpretations correctly understand Zipporah's role to revolve around a circumcision which saves Moses. In other words, these feminist interpretations of Zipporah's actions or role remain under God's covenant of grace wrought through circumcision (cf. Gen. 17:10-14). And this is important, for as Brevard S. Childs says, "Whatever Zipporah had done– she had cut off the foreskin, touched his 'feet', pronounced the words– comprised the act of circumcision, and this is what saved Moses."[16]

Other feminist interpretations either blur the line between exegesis and exaggeration or clearly exaggerate Zipporah's role. For instance, Alice L. Laffey believes Zipporah "prepared" Moses for his role as Israel's deliverer by vicariously circumcising Moses.[17] Furthermore, Drorah O'Donnell Setel proposes that because Zipporah is from a priestly line she may not only have been priestly herself, but may have given Moses some of his roles of prophet, leader, and priest.[18] Finally, Trevor Dennis says that if Moses is the one whom God threatens, "then Zipporah's prompt action could hardly be more significant, for then she saves the one who will play the central role in God's deliverance of his people..."[19]

The problem with the above interpretations is that they either explicitly or implicitly exaggerate Zipporah's role at the expense of God and His covenant of grace. For instance, even if Zipporah did vicariously circumcise Moses, God's covenant of circumcision, i.e. God Himself, is

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[16] Childs, *Exodus* 100. Childs also astutely notes that "It was not the blood in itself which had power, not the sign upon the legs, nor even the words which she had spoken. Rather all these elements were part of the rite of circumcision which was known to Israel." Childs, *Exodus* 101.

[17] In short, Laffey believes that Moses was not circumcised, which was essential for a male to be a part of the Israelite people–let alone Israel's deliverer, so Zipporah circumcises her son and then vicariously circumcises Moses by touching the son's foreskin to Moses' feet. Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines* 49.

[18] Drorah O'Donnell Setel, "Exodus," *The Women's Bible Commentary*. eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 30-31.

[19] Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* 108.

still what ultimately "prepares" Moses to be Israel's leader.[20] In other words, although Zipporah performs the *act* of circumcision, it is God's covenant of circumcision that makes Moses God's own (cf. Gen. 17:10-14).[21] This is not to deny Zipporah's important act in saving Moses' life, but this does mean that Zipporah ultimately does not save Moses' life. Instead, God's grace through the covenant of circumcision, which Zipporah performs, restores Moses to God.[22] Consequently, interpretations which ignore God's gracious covenant of circumcision wrongly imply that Zipporah alone saves Moses, Israel's deliverer. Instead, the correct emphasis is that God ultimately saves Moses–even though God is also the one attacking Moses.

Lastly, there are still other feminist interpretations which eisegetically distort Zipporah's actions or role as well as God's role and His gracious covenant of circumcision. For instance, Athalya Brenner interprets Zipporah's role as not fulfilling God's command of circumcision, but, rather, as spontaneously acting like a "witch doctor or holy man" who saves Moses' life through "the apotropaic act of expiation by offering to the god-demon a part of Moses' manhood."[23] In other words, Zipporah saves Moses from death by "offering a part instead of the whole."[24]

Ilana Pardes interprets in a similar vein when she views Zipporah's role as an Egyptian story about Isis and Osiris. Pardes proposes that the story surrounding Zipporah is a Hebrew

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[20] Exodus does not say if and when Moses was circumcised, but the most likely answer is not Zipporah's actions. First, the text does not record Moses' circumcision as occurring later in his life hence one expects that Moses' father followed the rule of circumcision within eight days of birth (cf. Gen. 17:10-14). Second, Pharaoh's daughter immediately recognizing the boy (Moses) as Hebrew might indicate that she knew this because of his circumcision (Ex. 2:6) Third, God has already called Moses to be His leader and did not indicate that Moses first needed to be circumcised. Fourth, if Moses still needed circumcision, then he would have been circumcised for real–just like other previous adult males (cf. Gen. 17:23-27).

[21] Besides, Exodus makes it plain that God gives Moses the role of Israel's leader (Ex. 3:7-10).

[22] A similar example is that God's Word attached to the water of baptism is what saves a person–not the one who performs the baptism.

[23] Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (The Biblical Seminar 2; JSOT Press, 1985) 71.

[24] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 71.

borrowing of an Egyptian myth where Isis brings Osiris, her husband, back from death after Seth, his brother, murders him.[25] The supposed connections or similarities between the two stories are as follows: "a violent persecutor" (Seth and God), "a wife saving her husband" (Isis and Zipporah), "a penis undergoing treatment" (the re-attachment and rejuvenation of Osiris' penis and the circumcision in Exodus 4), and "wings" (Isis has wings and Zipporah means "bird").[26] The importance of these connections for Pardes is that Exodus 4:24-26 displays its polytheistic past, a past in which there were "guardian goddesses" (Zipporah) who strove to protect their heroes (Moses) by magically warding off (circumcision) demonic, male deities (Yahweh) with their "unregulated violence."[27] The upshot is as Pardes concludes: "Zipporah overcomes Yahweh in this fleeting moment in which patriarchy and monotheism prove vulnerable..."[28]

The problem with the above interpretations is that they seriously ignore and distort the text. By ignoring and reading into the text, the above interpretations distort Zipporah into a quasi-goddess magician as well as ridicule God's covenanted grace of circumcision by interpreting both God's wrath as "unregulated violence" and circumcision as apotropaic magic rather than as God's covenanted grace. But verse 26 is quite clear that the events revolve around "circumcision" (מולח). This means that what Zipporah does is strictly within the bounds of God's covenant (cf. Gen. 17:10-14), and does not spill over into spontaneous apotropaic magic. Also verse 24 clearly indicates that Yahweh (יהוה), and not a god (אלהים, אל), seeks to kill Moses. This means that God's wrath, and not a demon-god, strikes Moses over the fact that Moses' son has not been circumcised. This also means that God's grace, which is circumcision, saves Moses from God's

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[25] Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 88-92.

[26] Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* 91-92.

[27] Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* 86-89.

[28] Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* 97.

wrath. Finally, this demonstrates that the text is not quietly polytheistic and Zipporah is not a pseudonym for a "guardian goddess" but is actually and only Moses' wife.

In conclusion, even though Exodus 4:24-26 has more than a few interpretational difficulties, those feminist interpretations which grasp a more accurate and substantiated view of Zipporah's actions or role are exegetical. Exegetical interpretations understand that Zipporah quickly circumcises her son in order to save Moses from God's deadly wrath. Thus Zipporah's actions are extremely important, especially considering that Moses is Israel's leader and that Zipporah was the only person who could act. Furthermore, exegetical interpretations also perceive that God's covenanted grace through circumcision is what ultimately saves Moses from God's own wrath. In this way, exegetical interpretations not only comprehend Zipporah's role but also grasp the God who saves through covenanted grace.

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, those interpretations which apprehend a more substantiated and accurate view of Exodus' major female characters and God's actions vis-à-vis liberation are exegetical interpretations. Here God is the main, albeit hidden, doer of liberation while the major female characters are faithful to God's ways and means of God's fulfillments. These interpretations not only stand against the substantiation and accuracy of exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations but also question the basic feminist hermeneutical presuppositions. This next, and last, chapter will critique the basic presuppositions of feminist hermeneutics to demonstrate further that even on the level of hermeneutics exegetical are to be preferred.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, feminist hermeneutics seek to create a usable past and future for women by (re)naming themselves, the world, and God. Specifically, the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance (re)create the Scriptural past in order to show women acting in ways which feminists consider to be equal with and as historically central to God's promises and fulfillments of liberation as men. A prime example and hermeneutical key for this assumption is the feminist view of liberation which says that humanity/women are co-creators with God, if not sometimes monergistic creators, without God, in bringing about humanity's liberation.

Feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus are quite warranted in pointing out the social side of Exodus where God delivers Israel from oppression and establishes a nation which is just and somewhat egalitarian (cf. Ex. 20:10, 21:1-23:9). Nevertheless, many feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus tend to minimize other important features or extrapolate points too far. Some feminist interpretive emphases are liberation,[1] typology,[2] realized

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[1] Contrary to many feminist interpretations, liberation in Exodus is not merely a social event of temporal liberation and justice which rises out of God's unqualified advocacy of oppressed or poor people. Rather, God's promises to Abraham indicate that liberation in Exodus is a theological event that has both temporal and spiritual ramifications for Israel. As J. Cheryl Exum recognizes, the exodus occurs because God identifies with His promises to Abraham concerning many descendants and a land of Israel's own (cf. Gen. 15:13-14, 50:24). In other words, the "cries" (Ex. 3:7) of the sons of Israel do not move God to identify with anonymous or random cries of oppression, but Israel's cries of oppression in a foreign land remind God that He has not yet fulfilled His promise to Israel of a land of their own.

[2] For example, the Passover is closely tied to Christ's sacrificial death for humanity's sins and eternal salvation (cf. Ex. 12-13:16). As 1 Peter 18-19 says, "...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver and gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as a lamb without blemish and without spot" (cf. Is. 53:7-12). Given the connection between these sacrifices it is possible to say that the Passover provides the book of Exodus, as well as the exodus itself, with solid theological and typological meaning that God's own means of sacrifice freely saves Israel from God's death blow.

eschatology,[3] and the egalitarian nature of Exodus.[4] One of the gravest problems with these interpretive perspectives is that they keep many feminist interpretations from grasping God's full promise of salvation and freedom. God's liberation is not merely a social event but also includes eternal, spiritual salvation. But the greatest problem, for this thesis, is God's role vis-à-vis humanity, or women specifically, concerning liberation in Exodus.

Most feminist interpretations of liberation in Exodus emphasize a synergistic liberation of humanity. In fact, as the previous chapters have shown, this co-creator view of liberation in Exodus often becomes quite monergistic when dealing with the major female characters of Exodus by arguing that the women alone start the exodus while God waits to respond to the women's initiative. The problems with this view of liberation are twofold: exegetical and theological.

First, there is the exegetical point that Exodus frequently uses the *hiphil* (causative) form of יצא ("bring/lead out")[5] when speaking of God as the subject or "doer" in relation to the exodus.[6] The force of this verb and its form is clear: God alone is the cause/power behind Israel's deliverance. Further exegetical support for God's monergistic actions of liberation comes in light of God's earlier promise of Israel's slavery and His deliverance for them (Gen. 15:13-14). In

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[3] For instance, God's Passover graciously saves Israel from death and then God leads Israel toward the land that He promised freely to give them. This promised land, especially in connection with the New Testament, manifests itself as a "here and now" type of the new heaven and new earth which God promises to create for His redeemed people (cf. Is. 65:17-19, Rev. 21:1-3).

[4] The egalitarian nature of Exodus does not allow one to say that a person is liberated from any and all forms of social order. Certainly God liberated Israel from Egypt, but God also made Israel His own nation, placing Israel under His rule and order. Therefore, the notion of an egalitarianism in Exodus needs to be tempered and ordered by God's rule and His sense of order. See Dianne Bergant, "Exodus as a Paradigm in Feminist Theology," *Exodus–A Lasting Paradigm*. eds. Bas van Iersel and Anton Weiler (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark Ltd., 1987) 101.

[5] Cf. Exodus 3:8, 6:6, 7:4, 12:51, 13:3,9,14,16.

[6] "The *meaning* of *Hiph'il* is primarily...*causative* of *Qal*, e.g. יצא *to go forth*, Hiph. *to bring forth, to lead forth, to draw forth*..." Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Emil Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2nd ed. (Clarendon: Oxford, 1910) §53.c.

other words, this earlier text demonstrates that God's actions of liberation in Exodus are not actually a response to human actions of deliverance. Instead, this text indicates that any perceived human actions of liberation are, more likely, means of God's actions of liberation. Therefore, on exegetical terms, the feminist view of synergistic liberation between God and humanity is unfounded.

The second problem is that the general feminist interpretation of synergistic liberation in Exodus does not fully grasp the God who Himself promises and fulfills liberation for humanity, both social and spiritual. A few feminists recognize God's overall role as liberator[7] and thus have a view toward the God who Himself promises and fulfills liberation. But most feminist interpretations either do not recognize this or ignore God's role, at least when dealing with the major female characters of Exodus. Unfortunately, most feminist interpretations have less of God than what He promised and fulfilled. As a result, many feminist interpretations in the scope of this thesis have a deficient view concerning God and His role in liberating humanity.

The reason for this deficient theology of God is the general feminist interpretation of liberation in Exodus. In short, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, many feminist interpretations take an exegetical point concerning women's actions in the beginning of Exodus and exaggerate the point in an unwarranted fashion. Still other feminist interpretations ignore exegesis for eisegesis. That is, they interpret the text purely by means of the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance. Both of these interpretive routes end up with an elevated view of humanity/women in terms of liberation and deficient view of God and a deficient liberation. On the other hand, those feminist interpretations which adhere to the text (exegetical interpretations) not only have a more accurate portrayal of the women's important relation to liberation, but also save the God that Exodus offers–the God who Himself alone promises and fulfills liberation, both

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[7] See J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semia* 28 (1983) 68.

social and spiritual, for Israel.[8]

Thus the root problem with feminist interpretations of Exodus' major female characters is feminist hermeneutics. Although there are various grounds upon which to critique feminist hermeneutics,[9] I will address another central issue, namely, the role of experience in relation with God's Word. This issue will unfold much of feminist hermeneutics as well as the notion that exegesis provides a more textually and historically substantiated and accurate view of these women and God in terms of the exodus.[10]

The first point concerning feminist hermeneutics is that, despite its claim of supplying a devastating critique of the man-centered Enlightenment,[11] it is itself partly an offshoot of the Enlightenment.[12] As such, feminist hermeneutics might be better termed the "feminist enlightenment" because feminism merely transfers authoritative sources and norms from "malestream" epistemology to female epistemology and women's experience.[13] In fact, in light of

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[8] Although on the basis of typology and fulfillment liberation extends to all people through Christ.

[9] For instance, there are the avenues of scriptural inerrancy (2 Timothy 3:16) and divine inspiration (2 Peter 1:20-21) over against the view that Scripture is an oppressive and self-serving androcentric text. See James Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995) 230-243.

[10] Another helpful key is that of the formal and material principles of feminism and Christianity. Feminism's formal principle is women's experience and the material principle is temporal liberation from sexist oppression–often gained by means of "praxis" or the dialectic practice of self-reflecting knowledge and action. In this sense, feminism is akin to both gnosticism and liberation theology because salvation comes by means of an esoteric metaphysic, e.g. women's experience and personal action. In contrast, the Christian Church's formal and material principles are Scripture/God's Word and the Gospel of being justified by grace/Christ through faith. In this light, feminism, in general, and Christianity are opposites. See Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism With the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992) 89-98.

[11] See Rebecca Chop, "Eve's Knowing: Feminist Theology's Resistance to Malestream Epistemological Frameworks," *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts*, eds. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) 117.

[12] This is not to deny the fact that many feminists are also post-modern or postmodernist. Many denounce the modernist ideas of autonomy, objectivity, reason, absolute or natural laws, harmony, and progress. Yet even these feminists partly retain the modernist notion of autonomy by positing a woman's experience as the source and norm for her knowledge.

[13] Hermann Sasse is probably correct when he says that the Enlightenment was the greatest schism

Mary Daly's quotation concerning what it is to be human,[14] feminist hermeneutics advocate eating "the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil" all over again.[15] That is, instead of trusting God and His revelation Adam and Eve set themselves up as the source and norm for wisdom, truth, and life.

Considering hermeneutics more broadly, feminism also stands in the historical lineage of placing the individual as subject over God and His creation. For example, Protagoras said, "Man is the measure of all things." Archimedes said, "Give me where I may stand and I will move the earth." The Gnostic Monimus said, "Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point."[16] Pico della Mirandola said "We can become what we will."[17] In the same way, by placing women's experience as the source, norm, and authority by which to name themselves, the world, and God, feminist hermeneutics have a direct connection with these humanistic theses. So feminists, while thinking that they are merely (re)claiming from patriarchy the right to name themselves, actually end up usurping God's right as Creator and Redeemer to name His creation and Himself.

The main point of critique here is the implicit question and answer discussed above,

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in the Church because it placed autonomy over Scripture with the result that that people could no longer confess the Christian faith together. Feminism, which stands in this same lineage, might also been seen as equally schismatic for the Church and the Christian faith. See Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ, Vol. 1*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984) 65-66.

[14] Daly says: "To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God." Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 8.

[15] This understanding of the phrase "knowledge of good and evil" comes from Gordon Wenham, who sees this phrase as referring to the sinful usurpation of God's wisdom in order to establish human moral autonomy. See Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 63-64. Or, in Luther's terms, Adam and Eve sinned by turning away from God and turning in on themselves (*incurvatus in se*) such that they trust in themselves and only seek their own desires. Thus the same judgment may be placed upon the hermeneutics of magisterial experience because it turns in upon itself and places the self above God and His Word. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 25*. ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Jacob A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972) 245,291,313.

[16] As quoted by Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1981) xviii.

[17] As quoted by John Carroll, *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture* (London: Fontana Press, 1993) 3.

namely, whether or not experience does or should have a hand in interpreting Scripture. No doubt we humans use our experiences to interpret other experiences and thus one expects personal experience to have a significant role in interpretation. Scripture itself even appears to indicate this thought with statements like those of Luke 2:19, "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart," and Matthew 24:15, "Whoever reads (concerning Daniel's statement about the abomination of desolation), let him understand." Or, one may consider the parables where personal experience helps the reader enter into the parable. Thus Scripture seems to indicate that readers are to use their experiences to understand and interpret Scripture. The question is *how* Scripture intends people to use their experiences.

Feminism clearly advocates the idea that personal experience is to function magisterially, or authoritatively, over Scripture, which is to function ministerially, or as a servant resource. But God's Word–with a view toward the relationship between God, the world, and ourselves–defines the roles differently. Although the reader is to enter into Scripture by means of personal experience, like experience of language or events, still Scripture (God's Word) is ultimately and magisterially to convey and define meaning. For example, Romans 12:2 states, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Furthermore, Colossians 2:8-10 admonishes, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power." Finally, passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:26 and James 1:5,22-26 also admonish one to trust and follow God's ways and Word rather than human ways.

Given these passages it becomes clear that Scripture draws a line between human experience and God's Word. God's Word is magisterial over the reader's ministerial

experience.[18] Nevertheless, Scripture also includes experience as a part of understanding God's Word, e.g. the experience of language. Therefore, the two are not mutually exclusive although they hold different levels of authority and function.

Systematically speaking, the authority and function of experience parallels that of human reason regarding an understanding of the Scriptures. For instance, Francis Pieper says,

> We must distinguish between reason left to itself, or judging according to natural principles, and reason held locked within the circle of the divine Word and kept under discipline, or illumined by the Holy Scripture. That the latter can judge matters of faith we do not deny; but we do deny that judgment in matters of faith belong to the former.[19]

In other words, although reason and experience have an authoritative function in temporal matters they, in spiritual matters, become an instrument of God's Word. Scripture uses reason and experiences to facilitate communication, yet Scripture also norms reason and experience.

One way in which Scripture norms a reader's experience is through the "hermeneutical circle." In brief, the hermeneutical circle is the idea that subject matter, or context, is of paramount importance in understanding the words (signifiers) of a given text. Otherwise stated, "Scripture interprets Scripture" (cf. Luke 24:27). For instance, Martin Franzmann says, "Interpretation is a 'circular' process (from *verba* to *res* to *verba*), and in this process the *res* is of crucial importance, since the question addressed to the text helps determine the answer to be gotten from the text."[20] Thus as common practice, necessity, and linguistics[21] dictate, spoken or

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[18] The same line that Gen. 1-3 draws between the authority and function of the Creator and created.

[19] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) 199.

[20] Martin Franzmann, *Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics* (Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; ([St. Louis]: [Concordia Publishing House], n.d.) 2.

[21] Linguistics deals with the issue under the heading of "semantics." Semantics defines the meaning of words (signifiers) as synchronic and the meaning of a text (signifiers in syntagmatic relationship) as "the parts as a whole." In other words, meaning arises through context. See James Voelz, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going?" *Light for Our World: Essays Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri*. ed. John W. Klotz (St.

written texts are best understood in their greater context. Consequently, placing experience above the text creates disharmony and confusion whereas the hermeneutical circle adheres to the text and unfolds the meaning which text conveys.

Another way to look at this matter is in terms of reader-response criticism's distinction between the written text and the reader's experiential text, which is the reader's life experiences and presuppositions.[22] Feminism is correct in saying that all readers come to a text with presuppositions–the reader's experiential text–and interpret the written text by means of these presuppositions. This cannot be denied. But contrary to many feminists who use this to liberate and relativize interpretation the reader's experiential text only makes the issue of *the* correct interpretation more poignant. For example, Scripture continually narrates in terms of God addressing His people to reveal His judgments, promises, and fulfillments (cf. Gen. 2:16-3:16, Deut. 6). This implies that human presuppositions are both to give way to faith in God's revealed Word and understand that God conveys and defines *one* revealed truth or correct interpretation of God's Word.[23]

Still readers neither read in isolation from other readers nor do they read purely as a *tabula rasa* or as a "disinterested knower." Instead, readers tend to read (interpret) texts from the vantage point of the values and beliefs which their "interpretive community" holds.[24] Given this, plus the fact that God speaks to us in Scripture and not face to face, makes the issue of one's "interpretive community" and its beliefs vitally important in hermeneutics and exegesis. The

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Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1989) 237-241.

[22] See Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 207-216.

[23] This one correct interpretation includes multivalent words (signifiers) and paradoxes because these would be integral to and a part of the one overall correct interpretation.

[24] See Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 182-184.

pivotal question here is as James Voelz asks, "Are all *community* interpretations equal?"[25] The answer is "No,"for as Voelz proposes:

> [T]hat community which has produced, received, and preserved a given set of documents-or, better put, that community whose experiences as text include the production, reception, and preservation of a given set of documents–is likely to teach its members to read those documents in a way "congenial" to them–that is, in such a way as to find in them what reasonably may be found (= what intended meaning there may be), and, to allow further meanings to arise, meanings which are congruent with what intended meanings there might be.[26]

In other words, the most congenial or ideal community for interpreting a given text is that community which (historically) wrote the text. This is so because as the writers and inheritors of the texts that community knows best what the explicit and implicit beliefs in the texts are.

At first glance, this reader-response view places the interpretive community on a symbiotic level with the text itself. Yet, both the interpretive community and the individual reader, as receivers and preservers of the text, ultimately adopt a ministerial role towards the magisterial text. As Voelz says concerning the interpretive community:

> [T]hat community's members possess the competencies for interpretation called for by its documents, for they operate by a set of beliefs, standards, and knowledge (=life experience as text) congruent with the beliefs, standards, and knowledge of those who produced those documents and, therefore, congruent with the beliefs, standards, and knowledge assumed by the texts themselves.[27]

And, as Voelz later says on the level of an individual's experiential text:

> Put into my own terms: as one is in the church and adopts what is confessed (its beliefs, standards, etc.), one's experiential text becomes congruent with the experiential text of those who produced, received, and preserved those New Testament texts. And such a congruent experiential text is necessary, for it is an important factor in every facet of dealing with any text.[28]

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[25] James Voelz, "Multiple Signs, Levels of Meaning and Self as Text: Elements of Intertextuality," *Semia* 69/70 (1995): 160.

[26] Voelz, "Multiple Signs" 161.

[27] Voelz, "Multiple Signs" 161.

[28] Voelz, "Multiple Signs" 161-62.

So neither the interpretive community nor the individual is ultimately magisterial over Scripture. Instead, the most congenial interpretive community is that which is ministerial to Scritpure. Therefore, just as Scripture (the *norma normans*, "norm which norms") is to norm the Church's confessions, so the Church's Scriptural confessions (the *norma normata*, "norm which is normed") must norm one's experiences in order to conform them into ministerial instruments which interpret Scripture in the most "congenial" or accurate way.

Christ himself speaks in this way when he says that people can only come to God the Father through him and that the way "through" him is to be "in" him by means of faith (cf. Romans 5:2, John 14:6, 20:31). In other words, one can only come to know and understand God's Word and will by means of faith in Christ and *not* by means of personal reason or experiences (cf. James 1:1,5,17;3:17;4:3). Therefore, one's personal experiences are *not* the same as God's Word and will, although one can come to know God's Word and will by means of faith in Christ and the instrumental use of ministerial reason or experiences (cf. Romans 12:2).

From here the issue of narrative criticism's "implied reader" also comes into view. The implied reader is the reader to whom the (implied) author writes. More exactly an implied reader, as James Voelz says, "...is a person, a receptor, with that knowledge, those abilities, that competency, which enables him to find meaning in a text...It is he who conforms to the expectations of the author. It is he who conforms himself to the given text's assumptions."[29] Thus, the implied reader is one who understands the world of the (implied) author such that he/she has the competency to congenially decode and fill in the explicit and implicit assumptions and meaning(s)[30] in a given text. In this sense an implied reader, as Terrence J. Keegan says,

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[29] James Voelz, "Receptor-Oriented Interpretations of the Holy Scriptures," *Receptor-Oriented Communication: (Making the Gospel User-Friendly)*. eds. Eugene W. Bunkowske and Richard French (Fullerton: R.C. Law & Co., Inc., 1989) 58.

[30] As Voelz says: "Meaning(s)" refers to meaning on different levels; namely, the levels of what the signifiers on the text say, significance, implication about the author's world, and application for today. See Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 155-67, 322-41.

"...involves becoming a slave of the text..."[31] This means that the text both invites and demands that the real reader, or the actual person reading (interpreting) the text, to become the implied reader of the text. That is, the reader is to perform a ministerial function in relation to the magisterial authority of Scripture.

More specifically, or rather theologically, this matter of the implied reader moves directly into the issue of faith–something which feminist hermeneutics tend to avoid but need to address to themselves. For Scripture the implied reader[32] is one who lives by faith, or complete trust in and assent to God's Word (Scripture) and Gospel (Christ) promises and fulfillments, rather than one who lives by any sort of personal moral or theological autonomy (cf. Gen. 2:16-3:19, Ephesians 1:1). Thus, lack of faith is not a minor issue for interpretating Scripture. Rather, faith is the most vital issue. Terrence J. Keegan explains this well when he notes the reason why Paul (2 Corinthians 3:15) says that the Jews cannot most competently and congenially read the Old Testament (and New Testament)–namely, because they have the veil of unbelief over their minds.[33] On the other hand, Christians can most competently read both the Old and New Testament because they have become the most congenial real reader. That is, by faith Christians have become the implied reader, a role which starts with congeniality (faith) and continues on with increasing competence (knowledge).[34]

As a result, the written text, the hermeneutical circle, the reader's experiential text, the

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[31] Terrence J. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 97.

[32] The implied reader is also often a sinner or unbeliever. Scripture witnesses to the sinner and unbeliever concerning God's Law and Gospel for the sake of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation. Consequently, even though the sinner or unbeliever is often an implied reader the ultimate, or "ideal," implied reader is one of faith.

[33] Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible* 88-89.

[34] Keegan notes the paramount role of the Holy Spirit in this process. See Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible* 89. James Voelz, who picks up on Keegan's interpretation, expands the discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit for interpretation. See Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 223-26.

confessional interpretive community, the implied reader, and faith all lead away from the feminist hermeneutics of magisterial experience and toward what might be called a "hermeneutical spiral" of ministerial congeniality.[35] In this view the reader's experiential text, reason, and presuppositions play a part in interpretation. Nevertheless, both Scripture (the text) and the faith of the "implied reader" control and conform the (real) reader's experiential text to be a ministerial instrument of faith to the magisterial authority of the Scripture.

The reader (interpreter), then, is not a modernist *tabula rasa* or a "disinterested knower." In fact, this type of objectivity is undesirable because the real reader is supposed to have the competency of the implied reader in order congenially to interpret the implicit and explicit assumptions and meaning(s) of the text.[36] Because of this, the hermeneutical spiral rests primarily upon the object (the text, which is itself neither a *tabula rasa* nor a "distinterested knower") and its conventions, rather than upon the subject (reader) and his/her invention. Furthermore, the hermeneutical spiral repeatedly follows a two-step path: understanding on the textual level increases as signifiers are normed by their context, and the reader's experiential text, or the reader, increases in Scriptural competency and congeniality as he/she is normed by Scripture.

In this light, feminist hermeneutics are correct in saying that personal experience factors into interpretation. But this does not warrant the relativizing of texts and interpretations. For Scripture, rather than placing experience as the source and norm of truth, directs the reader to submit his/her experiential text to the authoritative source and norm of Scripture. The result of this hermeneutical spiral is not only a more textually substantiated and accurate interpretation, but also a more historically substantiated and accurate interpretation of the major female characters of

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[35] James Voelz discusses the hermeneutical spiral as being a better metaphor than the hermeneutical circle because understanding, in terms of the text as whole and part, increases, rather than goes in a circle, when context interprets text. Voelz specifically addresses the text alone while I use the term to include the reader's text in the hermeneutical process. See James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 103.

[36] For a general discussion on reader competency see Jonathan Culler, "Literary Competency," *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 101-117.

Exodus. This is so for two reasons: first, Scripture is the only extant history of these women, and second, Scripture's literally recorded "experience," or historical narrative, is magisterial (authoritative) over the reader's ministerial (instrumental) experience. That is to say, exegetical interpretations are more textually and historically accurate than exaggerated and eisegetical interpretations because exegesis accurately interprets the only extant and authoritative history of these events–Scripture.

For this thesis, the above hermeneutical discussion critiques feminist hermeneutics and their subsequent interpretations in several key ways. First, Scripture's invitation and demand for faith on the part of the implied reader, and more importantly, for faith on the part of the real reader calls into question the validity, and, ultimately, the faithfulness–both to Scripture and to God–of many of the above femininst intepretations. For, if faith in God's Gospel and Word revolves around trusting God's monergistic promises and fulfillments of liberation for humanity (cf. Ex. 20:1ff, Jn. 3:16), then faith (and Scripture itself) fundamentally opposes those feminist interpretations which make God less of a liberator and humanity/women co-creators of liberation with (or largely without) God.

Second, and similar to the first, neither the hermeneutical spiral nor its resulting (exegetical) interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus and God vis-à-vis liberation is congruent with Mary Daly's proposal: "To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God."[37] In fact, if Daly's hermeneutic is followed, Scripture (cf. Romans 2:20-27[38]) gives clear

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[37] Daly, *Beyond God the Father* 8.

[38] "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man–and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged their natural use for what is against nature. Likewise, also the men, leaving the natural use of woman, burned in their lusts for one another,..." (NKJV). These

warning concerning the supposed "liberating" consequences of such magisterial experience–namely, a falling away from the Creator God and a perversion of our created nature. For this thesis, the general truth of this warning manifests itself in feminist interpretations which "pervert" the textual roles of the major female characters of Exodus and God vis-à-vis liberation in order to conform them to feminist views of liberation.

And, ironically, by creating women who are "co-creators" of liberation with (or largely without) God, such interpretations forfeit these women's textually and historically important roles and ultimately fail to remember and proclaim these Scriptural women. As such these interpretations even diminish the textual and historical roles of Moses–God's prime chosen leader. But most dire, these interpretations end up forfeiting both faith in and the theology of the God who alone has the power to liberate humanity–whether hiddenly by means of faithful women or by His covenant of grace (circumcision). These are the results of exaggerated and eisegetical feminist interpretations.

In contrast, Jesus the Christ invites feminists to move in another direction by promising "liberation" in faithful adherence to his and God's Word: "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (John 8:31-32). The truth of this promise, for this thesis, appears in those interpretations which not only critique feminism, but also generally support feminism's goals of remembering and proclaiming the major female characters of Exodus. The interpretations which support feminism's goals, though, do so not by (re)creating or inventing characters, but by providing a more substantiated and accurate view of these women's important actions as faithful servants to God's ways and as part of God's hidden means for fulfilling His promises of liberation.

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consequences are amply in evidence today with the emergence of feminist "godding," churches blessing homosexual relations, and the ordaining of homosexual priests.

Just as important, by being substantiated and accurate, these interpretations rightly divide God's revealed means and type of liberation from human notions as well as rightly define God's and humanity's role vis-à-vis liberation. Such interpretations also provide feminism, as well as the Church, with a Scriptural means by which to critique (patriarchal) interpretations, theologies, and societies.[39] For instance, and specific to this thesis, substantiated and accurate interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus provide a negative critique of those things which, like Pharaoh's patriarchy, undervalue and undermine women's important roles as faithful servants of God's ways and as God's means for bringing liberation. On the other hand, such interpretations critique exaggerated and eisegetical feminist interpretations which elevate women's roles beyond that which God's Word describes or substantiates and seek the eventual and ultimate liberation of humanity via women's defiance of (perceived or real) oppression.

Similarly, substantiated and accurate interpretations of the major female characters of Exodus both critique feminism's application of a narrow, all-encompassing definition of patriarchy to Scripture as well as partially support feminism's goal of gender equality. Although Exodus records Pharoah's belittlement of women its picture of patriarchy is not the simple tyranny of men over women.[40] Instead, Exodus upholds what might be called "Yahwistic patriarchy." The notion of "male headship" remains with Moses being God's prime chosen leader for Israel. Nevertheless, integral to this type of patriarchy is the fact that women themselves–even without or contra the involvement, knowledge, permission, or coercion of men–act faithfully

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[39] Similarly, Francis Watson encourages feminists, and the Church, "to discover structurally significant standpoints within texts from which critique of their own patriarchal ideology might proceed and from which, still more importantly, a constructive theological alternative to that ideology might be outlined." Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) 197. I agree with Watson in searching for Scriptural standards for critiquing society or patriarchy. Still, I disagree with Watson in that patriarchy, if this general term is accurate enough to be helpful, is a problem of degree not of kind, i.e. a problem of comprehending and following God's theology of patriarchy rather than a problem with patriarchy itself as a product of the Fall.

[40] See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976) 57-58.

toward God and function as God's means of liberation for all of Israel. Even more integral, as evinced by Pharaoh's downfall and the midwives' "fear of God," is the fact that Yahwistic patriarchy centers on God's ultimate rule. Consequently, Exodus' picture of Yahwistic patriarchy is more complex, egalitarian, and supportive of women's roles than what the narrow, all-encompassing feminist definition of patriarchy allows.

Even more confirming for feminism is the idea that substantiated and accurate interpretations both provide the means for rightly remembering and proclaiming the important roles of these and other Scriptural women as well as establishing a foundation upon which women today can act. For instance, such interpretations not only display women who are, nor simply praise them for being, but also encourage women to be faithful to God's ways. So also these interpretations inform women, and men, to look behind the purely temporal or human view of existence and expect to be God's hidden means of liberating people from oppression and sin, e.g. by providing for the needy and witnessing the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection.

Finally, and most importantly, substantiated and accurate interpretations provide a more certain, complete, and hopeful interpretation of God and His promises and fulfillments of liberation for both women and men. As God ultimately alone liberates the Israelites from the bondage of oppression and death, so God, through Jesus the Christ, alone liberates women and men not only from sins against sex/gender (cf. Eph. 5:22-29) but also from sins against God (cf. Rom. 5:6-21). These are the liberating gifts of exegesis.

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Dr. Voelz,

The final redactor of my thesis made some suggestions according to the style of Turabian that I did not change since I wrote my thesis according to the 4th edition of the MLA. First, the MLA wants a 1/2 inch margin at the top of each page number instead of 1 inch (264). Second, the MLA does not want a ", p(p)." before the page number(s) in the footnotes (244). Third, although I did single space quotes for the sake of length, the MLA wants them double spaced (73). Last, the MLA does not want one to use "ibid." in the footnotes, but a shortened form of the entry (256).

Thank you,
Scott A. Shiver

OK - manuscript is