

## 6. Gender Theory and Women in the Bible.

*Elizabeth Cady Stanton and The Women's Bible. Feminism, Womanism, and Transcending Androcentric Interpretation; 1980's directions; Complementarian and Egalitarian Approaches.*

### Feminism, Womanism, and Transcending Androcentric Interpretation

- **What is feminism?**

- “Feminism is a range of social movements, political movements, and ideologies that aim to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes . . .” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>)
- “A point of view in which women are understood to be fully human and thus entitled to equal rights and privileges” (Bellis, 6)

- **What is Womanism?**

- “A social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of women of color, especially black women. It seeks, according to womanist scholar Layli Maparyan (Phillips), to ‘restore the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconcil[e] human life with the spiritual dimension” (Layli Phillips)

- **Feminism and Androcentric Interpretations**

- “An awareness that society’s norms (and in the case of the Bible, those of the text) are masculine and that to be a woman in such a society (or text) involves *marginality*” (Bellis, 6)

## Feminist Theology and Christian Feminism

- “Reconsiders the traditions, practices, scriptures, and theologies of religions from a feminist perspective. Some of the goals of feminist theology include increasing the role of women among the clergy and religious authorities, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, determining women’s place in relation to career and motherhood, and studying images of women in the religion’s sacred texts”
- “Christian feminism is a branch of feminist theology which seeks to interpret and understand Christianity in light of the equality of women and men, and that this interpretation is necessary for a complete understanding of Christianity.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism#Theology>)



### A Changing Landscape: Latter-day Saints and Feminism

- Early Latter-day Saint women, such as Eliza R. Snow, saw the restored gospel as empowering to women
- Latter-day Saint pioneer women were in the forefront of the suffrage movement and leaders in professions
  - Martha Hughes Cannon was a polygamous wife, physician, Utah women's rights advocate and suffragist, and Utah State Senator
- In the post-World War eras, the Latter-day Saint community assimilated more and more to conservative American culture
- In the social and sexual turmoil of the 1960’s and 1970’s, feminism was suspect until the turn of the current century
- **An official statement in the January 2020 New Era rehabilitated and accepted (with some qualifications) feminism in the Church!**
  - “Feminism can mean different things to different people . . . Sometimes it refers to efforts to ensure basic human rights and basic fairness for women, as well as efforts to encourage women to obtain an education, develop their talents, and serve humankind in any field they choose. Latter-day Saints support these things.”
  - See Peggy Fletcher Stack’s January 13, 2020 *Salt Lake Tribune* article for the responses of several leading, thoughtful LDS women thinkers

## Elizabeth Cady Stanton and *The Woman's Bible*



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)

- **A Leading Nineteenth Century Feminist**
  - precocious and educated (including Greek and Latin), she “should have been a boy”
  - wrote The Declaration of Sentiments adopted at Seneca Falls in 1848
  - a close associate of Susan B. Anthony
  - negatively affected by the “gloomy, puritanical Presbyterianism” of her youth
  - **began looking at the Bible with a critical eye, especially because of its treatment of women**
- **Driving force behind *The Woman's Bible* (1895–98) and an important contributor**
  - “Cut and paste” job of all passages relating to women
  - “Plain translation” by women Hebrew and Greek scholars
  - commentaries on these passages written by “women of earnestness and liberal ideas”
  - Stanton's own commentary on Genesis 1:26–28 maintained, “We have in these texts a plain declaration of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine.”

## Towards Feminist Hermeneutics

- The Momentum of the 1970's
  - Critical attempts to **restore the meaning** of biblical texts “by exposing the masculine-dominated and often misogynistic interpretations of Scripture” (Bellis, 5)
  - When the texts themselves are the problem (e.g., describing women as chattel)
    - “How could a book that included so much that ran directly counter to feminism be accepted as authoritative, religiously or culturally?” (Bellis, 6)
- Three directions in 1980's
  - Liberal (political reform, equal civil rights, improved living and working conditions)
  - Socialist/Marxist (capitalism in patriarchal cultures placed double burdens on women)
  - Romantic/Radical (feminist values inherently superior)

## More Recent Developments

- **Revisionist or neo-orthodox**
  - Some Evangelical feminism: *inequality post-fall and pre-Church*
- **Remnant** (Phyllis Trible): retrieve overlooked texts but recognize that the majority is patriarchal
  - some distinguish between central concepts of scripture and the patriarchal contexts in which it emerged—God speaks through the text but not all scripture is inspired
- **Reconstructive or “Liberationist”** (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza)
  - OT Israel and NT Church were more liberating than the Judaism and Christianity that grew out of them!
  - Careful contextualizing of feminist interpretations themselves *and* their implications
    - See her critiques of Stanton and *The Women’s Bible* (Fiorenza, 2–8)
  - Alice Ostriker: “If the Bible is a flaming sword forbidding our entrance to the garden, it is also a burning bush urging us to freedom” (Fiorenza, 8)

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## Groothuis and Pierce on Gender and Equality

*A Progressive Evangelical Perspective*

- A message of biblical equality is true, logical, *biblical*, and beneficial
- “Gender, in and of itself, neither privileges nor curtails one’s ability to be used to advance the kingdom or to glorify God in any dimension of ministry, mission, society, or family”
- Differences between the sexes do not grant men unique and perpetual prerogatives of leadership and authority
- **Complementarians** recognized “equal but different,” that the sexes complete or complement each other
  - Some aspects of leadership and family life might be more the province of one sex than the other
- **Egalitarianism** recognizes patterns of authority in family, church, and society but rejects that this is granted or denied based on gender alone
  - They may still believe in complementarity but without hierarchy

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## Assessing Interpretations

- “The recognition that interpreters bring different life experiences to the reading and interpreting task does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid” (Bellis, 15)
  - Ex.: apologists for slavery drew false (or immoral) conclusions from the biblical material
- **Polyvalent or Multivalent passages**
  - Gaps in the texts leave room for more than one interpretation
- **Distinguish between Emic (insider) and Etic (outsider) reading**
  - *Essentially the difference between exegesis and exposition!*

## Some Contributions of Feminist Interpreters

(see Bellis, 19–20; Fiorenza, 8–11)

- Investigations into *the status and role of women in ancient Israelite (and early Christian) culture*
- Rediscovery and assessment of **overlooked biblical traditions and passages about women**
- Discovery and exploration of **feminine biblical images of God**
- Exploring **issues of translation that concern women**
- Consideration of **the history or reception and appropriation of biblical texts about women (positive and negative)**
- A feminist interpretation will be **canonically transgressive in order to not exclude texts and topics marginalized by the process of canonization**
- **Suspect the term “biblical,”** connoting Western concepts of authority, and **embrace “scriptures” as more inclusive**

## Final Observations

- **Every text is authentic and authoritative but interpretations and applications vary with time and culture** (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 160)
- **Women may read the Bible differently than men**
- **Biblical texts are culturally conditioned, and that includes gender expectations**
- **Readers themselves are culturally conditioned and must take care not to impose anachronistic, agenda-driven grids on the text** (at least in exegesis)
- **“Feminism” itself can be a problematic term if it focuses solely on women, especially First World women and focuses solely on androcentric biblical texts and authority, failing to struggle transform patriarchal and kyriarchal structure** (Fiorenza, 20–21)