



# Unlocking Eden's barred gate

*Feminism, hermeneutics and the recovery of the Bible as Scripture*

*by Anne Hollinghurst*

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*Wondering about including the f-word in the title, Anne Hollinghurst firmly believes in the equality of men and women, the need for women as well as men to be free to become all God has made them to be, and the need to reject all that comes in the way of that. To agree with that is to count yourself a feminist, she says...*

Many make it so far with feminism, but fail to understand that there is then potentially a real problem with the Bible. Perhaps the starting point has to be stating the problem as simply as possible.

A thoughtful reading of the Bible leads to a fairly obvious question; "Where are the women?" Nearly all of the key players, it seems, are men, with just a handful of notable exceptions. The women get a mention most frequently in the roles that relate them to the men, namely as "wives, harlots or concubines!"<sup>1</sup>

So why does it appear that God deals primarily through the men? Are the women less capable of hearing from God, or of doing courageous things for God? Experience and the history of the Church's mission says otherwise. Many feminist theologians have pointed out that Israel's history is really *men's* history. You do not have to read too far to discern that there is truth in this. For example, the law of Moses is quite obviously addressed to men as the assumed covenant community: What about "do not covet your neighbour's *wife*"?<sup>2</sup>

The issue of women's absence from many of our faith's founding stories is one thing; the roles they are often cast in when

they *are* present is another. Perhaps it is not going too far to speak, as some feminists have done, of certain "texts of terror". There are numerous examples where women are simply portrayed as the powerless, often voiceless victims of rape, incest, violence, etc. and the text appears curiously ambivalent.<sup>3</sup>

The world portrayed in much of the Old Testament, combined with some traditional interpretations of New Testament teaching, mean that the Bible today is seen increasingly as expounding a religion developed by men and for men. The questions raised are urgent ones to engage with from the perspective of mission; for some are leaving our churches and others never coming near because of them.

Answers proposed by feminists have been various. The post-Christian feminist<sup>4</sup> has come to the conclusion simply that the Bible is irredeemably patriarchal. To not go down this same path, is to engage in some form of hermeneutics.

One influential feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, takes up the phrase a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and for her school of thought, the task is all about recovering the hidden tradition of women and

the liberation message which is the reality of the gospel.<sup>5</sup> We are to go about this by starting from the assumption that the texts which have made their way into the Bible are essentially patriarchal. A "fill in the gaps" approach is adopted, with Gnostic literature often called upon to help out in the reconstruction of her-story rather than his-story.

Despite all the ambiguity of Scripture, however, there are those who know they have encountered God through it. For those who, therefore, want to hold on to a stronger sense of the Bible as Scripture, there is another route open.

Hermeneutics has been embraced by many heart-searching feminists, because it is fundamentally about acknowledging the big cultural and historical divide between the contemporary world of the reader, and the world inhabited by the text. There is work to be done before we can claim to arrive at a biblical view of anything to do with gender.

An example of this might be the naming of God as "father". This can be understood as promoting an image of an overwhelmingly male God and as a particular problem where there has been experience of male abuse of position or power. We cannot just assume, however, that "father" in relation to God encompasses all the shades of meaning that we may wish to dump upon it. We must also realise how this relationship was perceived within a particular culture and society.



Further, this metaphor's development has a royal dimension, for God is not just any old father, but a king with a royal inheritance to bestow, and Jesus becomes the royal son of the line of David. Some interesting implications emerge when we are told that in Christ, all become "first-born sons". Within the cultural context, these were the ones to receive the father's inheritance. Within the metaphor in question, what an inheritance it is! It is no less than a kingdom which *this* father has to bestow. The joyful declaration of the gospel, is that the perks are no longer reserved for free, first-born Jewish sons, but they are open to everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, men ... or women. Read in this way, the father/son language of the New Testament describes a relationship that Jesus opens up to women too. It becomes, ironically, a message not of oppression, but of emancipation.<sup>6</sup>

The surprise discovery of some recent feminist hermeneutics, is not that the Bible reflects the patriarchal culture of the world around it: *of course* it does. The surprise discovery is that the Bible contains so much which rises *above* its cultural context and prophetically subverts it. It points beyond the world it inhabits to ever greater implications of God's saving work which it is the Church's ongoing task to bring to light in every age. Feminist hermeneutics is a part of this process: it is about discovering the keys which open up the way for both men and women to become more truly what God has made them to be.

Perhaps the discovery that the Bible is not so hopelessly patriarchal should not be a surprise at all, for the clues are there. It begins with the story of a garden, in which men, women and God enjoy together the harmonious relationships intended. The first hermeneutical key we find here, is that both men and women were made equally in the image of God. "He will rule over you" was spoken to the woman as a consequence of things going wrong. The rest of the book is the grand saga of God putting things right. The Bible takes us

on a journey away from the garden paradise and tells us what we know reflected in our day-to-day reality, the truth that the gates to it are now barred. We have, however, been given a key we must hold on to, if we are to fully unlock the message of restoration and new creation that the book goes on to tell.

There are plenty of other clues along the way, for outnumbered as they are, there *are* present in both the Old and New Testament, stories of the women characters who against the cultural odds, play out their vital and courageous parts. They subversively de-construct the more patriarchal gender messages which other passages send out.

The most dazzling clue for the feminist reader of the Bible as Scripture, is to be found in the person of Jesus himself and in the role that women are accorded in the gospels. Jesus not only defies the customs and *relates* to women, but *debates* with them as well and allows them to sit at the feet of a rabbi as any male disciple would.<sup>7</sup>

In the search for the gospel key which opens the barred gate to both men and women and invites them to re-find their full humanity in the image of God, the person of Jesus is the greatest surprise of all. There are those, of course, who see it is as a problem that Jesus was male and who are wary of a faith that proclaims a "male saviour figure" to women who are seeking to discover their own dignity and sense of self-responsibility. Looked at in another way, however, it could be argued that the figure of Jesus on the cross is in many ways the climax of the subversive thread which runs throughout the Scriptures. For here we see a male-figure who models the way of humility, service and ultimately self-sacrifice. Whilst there is theological value in exploring the image of "Jesa Christa", a female Christ upon the cross, it could be asked what there is that is new, subversive or speaks of salvation for women in that?

The alternative approach is to see in Jesus the great surprise of God which transcends all cultural expectations. In the famous

words of Dorothy L Sayers:

"it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man... There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about women's nature."<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is the title taken by Alice L Laffey for her book which examines the Old Testament in feminist perspective. (SPCK, 1990)

<sup>2</sup> This point is made clearly by the Jewish theologian, Judith Plaskow, for example, in her book *Standing Again at Sinai* (Harper, 1990). She also shows how in the law codes, sexual transgression was not understood foremost as being about violation of the woman in question, but violation of the man whose woman she was (e.g. Deut. 22.22, 24, 30; 27.20, and Lev. 18.7, 11, 14)

<sup>3</sup> Try reading, for example, Genesis 34, Judges 19 or 2 Samuel 13.

<sup>4</sup> Prominent examples are Daphne Hampson and Mary Daly.

<sup>5</sup> See for example *In Memory of Her*, (SCM, 1983)

<sup>6</sup> This still leaves us, of course, with the question of what language we should use in our contemporary culture to communicate this joyful news in the way we talk about God, but that is another issue.

<sup>7</sup> A radical question to throw in here might be that of asking who, after all, recorded that there were only twelve disciples? It fits nicely with the theological schema of course, but doesn't seem to reflect the descriptions we have of the band of women followers who clearly accompanied the male troupe and even supported them!

<sup>8</sup> From *Are Women Human?*, (Eerdmans, 1971)