Can the Bible make one a feminist? Note that the question here is not, “Can a feminist read (and appreciate) the Bible?” Feminists, of course, do read the Bible. While most might find it at least occasionally a challenge to their feminist sensibilities, only some who approach the matter with Christian faith intact—most famously, perhaps, Mary Daly—walk away from it rejecting that faith. Many manage to retain their Christian convictions in spite of what may seem like a consistently dismal portrayal of Scripture’s female characters and its often tacit prescriptions for men in keeping women in line. Still others may even find their faith renewed and fortified by their feminist reading of Scripture, especially those who discover in the text a more feminine representation of God.

No, the question posed above refers to the reverse situation: might it ever occur to someone who is not already a professed feminist and who grapples with Scripture that, at the very least, women in his or her own contemporary culture do not get a fair shake, or even that the revealed, inspirational content of Scripture calls upon us to liberate women from chronic forms of oppression? Can Scripture, in short, be the occasion for forming feminist sympathies? Many people might take the answer to be so obviously “no, of course not” that the question would be dismissed out of hand. Those who actually do feminist theology and biblical exegesis would no doubt themselves argue that it is practically impossible to read the Bible (or any text) “cold” and without certain presuppositions, and that one must be at least mildly committed to ending women’s oppression in its various forms in order to find corroboration for this in Scripture.

What seems peculiar about this is that it is not entirely true for other messages of human liberation thought to be fostered by Scripture. In particular, Latin American liberation theologians have the benefit of a popular perception that the Bible already talks a good deal and quite sympathetically about the poor and the economically oppressed, and often portrays the Judeo-Christian God as being squarely on their side. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, one of the more prominent voices in feminist biblical criticism today, has conceded as much. While we need not imagine that scores of Christians have moved seamlessly from the Gospel of Luke to Karl Marx’s Die Grundrisse, it seems fair to say that the economic message of liberation theology has a decided advantage over the message of feminist biblical theology: many people already believe Scripture to be at least in part about the liberation of the poor, while few people if any expect to get from reading the Bible what they might get from reading The Second Sex.

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The remarks that follow will not belabor the obvious point that Scripture may superficially be read as unfriendly to the cause of women’s emancipation. Nor will I be arguing the contrarian position that a feminist message is readily and with only mild effort harvested from Scripture; this, we can concede from the start, is implausible. No, the aim here is to navigate the waters in between these extremes—to address a simpler question: what must we bring to the scriptural table in order to leave it again both with a confidence in the reign of God and with the aspiration to liberate women from the various forms of oppression that still hold sway in this world? This is, of course, primarily a methodological question of how we approach sacred Scripture. But it also amounts to a relevant pastoral matter to ask just what “people in the pews” would need to understand and believe before they approach Scripture if they are to, as many feminist scholars suggest they can, find an emancipatory message for women embedded in the revelation of God’s word.

II.

If you come to appreciate period music—be it, say, chamber works of the baroque era or nineteenth-century banjo performances—you soon find yourself in a dilemma. What counts as an authentic interpretation of music from the desired period: that which is created on instruments actually manufactured in the corresponding era, or that created on instruments built in the contemporary period to the standards applied during the period of interest? The differences can be quite stark; a well-preserved violin built in 1715 will have remarkable resonance when played in 2015, but its tone will be very different from the tone it produced for European ears three hundred years ago. Conversely, a baroque-style violin built today may sound somewhat muted to modern ears familiar with orchestral instruments built to modern standards (with, e.g., steel strings rather than the gut strings of pre-modernity) and seasoned by at least a few decades of playing. But that muted, gut-string sound is pretty much what denizens of eighteenth-century Europe would have heard from a violin built around that time. To demand modern sonorities from the instruments is, for some listeners, to defeat the purposes of appreciating period music. Neither instrument, consequently, has the same sound that it did for listeners in early-eighteenth-century Europe.

Such is the problem of anachronism. When we attempt to preserve the meaning of something over the course of time, whether it is a few generations or several centuries, we find ourselves troubled by the question of whether fidelity to what we believe to be original intent suggests preserving (or, if necessary, rehabilitating) “original” content and inserting it into contemporary settings, or somehow adapting that “original” meaning to those new settings so that the experience of the content is similar to what it was in its original setting. Change the issue from cultural meaning to legal intent, and we capture virtually every important dispute over Constitutional law.

If the relevance of the metaphor to biblical studies is not already apparent, consider an example where an aesthetic decision about an authentic reading of the text is at stake. In his film The Passion of the Christ, based loosely on Gospel accounts of the Passion supplemented by the reported mystical visions of Ann Catherine Emmerich, director Mel Gibson famously opted to forgo a vernacular script for Aramaic, Hebrew, and occasional Latin. While Gibson’s apparent aim was authenticity, many critics noted that, even if his rendering was accurate (this is itself doubtful, since characters speaking Latin would more likely have conversed in Greek), he succeeded at most in recreating the acoustic qualities of first-century Palestine. How modern ears understood the strange utterances emitted from the soundtrack had presumably little in common with how Jesus’ contemporaries understood them; the latter had little need for subtitles. Gibson’s play at authenticity thus arguably backfired: non-Aramaic speaking audiences (i.e., most of us) got little sense of the cultural patois of Jesus’ Galilee and Jerusalem.

Contrast this with, among many examples, Martin Scorsese’s film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel The Last Temptation of Christ. While Kazantzakis’ story is an expressly fictionalized account of Jesus of Nazareth’s minis-
try, the film audience arguably has a better sense of social relations among the occupants of Jesus’ milieu than they do from Gibson’s film. David Bowie’s British English captures the calm, aristocratic demeanor that we might imagine Pontius Pilate to have had; Harvey Keitel does little to mask his native Brooklyn accent in portraying Judas Iscariot. While Mel Gibson reproduced the sounds of the region and era—much like we might either fabricate a baroque violin today or hear a genuine one that is uncharacteristically seasoned by three hundred years of playing—Scorsese departs from the text in an attempt to capture a sense of how we might have experienced it in context, where subtle differences in dialect signal crucial differences in social location.

III.

Anachronism is precisely the fear of scholars concerned with feminists and others who find liberatory content in Scripture. It is only possible to find feminist readings of the Bible, they worry, if that is what you are looking for in the first place; one is attributing to the text ideas that make sense in one’s own time but would never have occurred to the people found in the narrative, much less to the original author. If, to put it differently, you are finding justification for your particular cause in the words of the prophets or the parables of Jesus of Nazareth, you are missing the point: your cause is contemporary, while the Judeo-Christian Bible captures the lives of people living anywhere from 3000 to 2000 years ago.

It would be easy to dismiss this position as a caricature, though history is not without its voices to this effect. Encountering a text such as the Bible is more or less a science, we were told in the earliest days of the historical-critical method (hereafter, “HCM”), and the goal of the biblical exegete is strictly to determine the author’s original intent, as it would be with any text. All else is mere advocacy disguised as scholarship; it is eisegesis, not exegesis. Schüssler Fiorenza describes the limits of what she calls this “Rankean view of history” (after nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke). Such a view, caught up as it was in the scientific fervor of the nascent industrial age, predates modern theories of hermeneutics outlined a century later which cast serious doubt on any unmediated, “scientific” analysis of “authorial intent” that fails to acknowledge our own interests and presuppositions in electing to read the text in the first place.

This is not to say, however, that contemporary practitioners of the HCM are any less prone to consider interested readings of the Biblical text to be advocacy. The difference, one might argue, is the acknowledgment that we are all advocates now—i.e., every reader of Scripture has some sort of interested view when he or she approaches the text. The text itself, however, still speaks for itself, and we remain methodologically (if not ethically) bound to at least try to separate the author’s original intent from our exegetical aims, however intractable this task may be. Perhaps what is unique to modern efforts of biblical criticism is the attempt to capture the unique roles and attitudes of the exegete and the interpreter. Krister Stendahl famously described the distinction in terms of what the author meant and what the text now means: the former is a descriptive endeavor undertaken by the exegete, while the latter is a normative question for the theologian who tries to understand it as the revealed word of God, as well as for the preacher or pastor who must locate spiritual truth within it. Raymond Brown reiterates and elaborates, suggesting that the literal sense of the text is closed off “when it has left the pen of the author,” at which point its canonical sense takes hold and the text is understood as Scripture; since it is the hierarchy of the Church that has decided just what is Scripture and what is Apocrypha, it is the Magisterium

3 “[I]t should be clear,” Joseph Fitzmyer tells us, “that the use of all such [Biblical] criticism is geared to one end: to determine the meaning of the text as it was intended and expressed by the human author moved long ago to compose it.” See Joseph A Fitzmyer, The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-critical Method (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 66.
that is for Brown the primary interpreter of “what the text means.”5 Thus even for the late-twentieth-century understanding of the HCM, the text is of its time and place, and could not conceivably be speaking of something peculiar to our modern sensibilities. We may have more of a legitimate claim in reading the text through the lens of those sensibilities, modern or archaic, but we do not imagine that this is what the text really meant to its authors. An advocacy reading on behalf of women, post-colonial cultures, or any other dispossessed group is fine, so long as we acknowledge that this is an advocacy reading and not properly *exegesis*.

### IV.

We would lose a great deal of texture and substance to reduce the many feminist criticisms of this vestigial conceit—this self-understanding of the HCM as having a privileged focus on “what the text meant”—down to one iconic objection. The position’s perceived *androcentrism*, however, serves as a useful thumbnail for a much bigger picture, especially when space is limited as it is here. *Androcentrism* is a term that, despite relatively widespread usage (47,700 hits on Google.com as of this writing) since the dawn of second-wave feminism, still struggles for acceptance (the noun form earns a red underscore when typed into MS Word while its adjective form does not, apparently signaling to authors that particular things can fairly be described as “kinda-sorta androcentric,” but we wouldn’t want to go so far as saying this is a *real* phenomenon). Far from the patriarch’s and the misogynist’s nightmare of castrating women bent on tearing down their beloved institutions, androcentrism refers more to the epistemic causes (and effects) of women’s oppression than to its political manifestations. It says simply but quite effectively that our understanding of the world (for both men and women) is normed according to masculine values and interests—i.e., that the male view is taken to be the *human* view while we rational thinkers are reassured that “gender has nothing to do with it.”

In our case here, the claim that contemporary HCM retains an *androcentric* bias would suggest that (a) the distinction between “what the text meant”—be it defined by the author’s original intention or otherwise—and “what the text means” is a red herring; and (b) it is a red herring that finds credibility only because it privileges a particularly male-defined way of approaching exegesis, one that clings to the possibility of a value-neutral reading of the text, however difficult we concede this may be to achieve in practice. For feminist biblical analysis—as well as feminist literary criticism, as well as just about any hermeneutical standpoint not under the direct tutelage of the androcentric canon—what the text *means* is not simply difficult to abstract from what it *meant*; it is of its nature impossible. It would be akin to my saying to a native German speaker, “translate your term *Wissenschaft* into English for me, but don’t tell me what it *means* to German speakers; I’ll figure that out on my own”; meaning is what we are after by translating in the first place. Traditional androcentric methods of biblical exegesis, to put it in terms of our baroque instrument metaphor, foreclose on the question of which performance brings us closer to the experience of hearing Bach’s *Partita for Solo Violin #3* for the first time in the early eighteenth century. It is either, we must believe, one played on a baroque facsimile or one played now on an instrument built in 1715. We may dispute the relative merits of these two approaches, committed as we are to our favorite theories of period music reproduction, but we fail to notice that perhaps the best way to replicate what the experience *meant* to Leipzig residents circa 1720 will involve not a violin or J.S. Bach at all but might require a Fender Stratocaster and Jimmy Hendrix, a combination that has a peculiar *meaning for us*—those with an historical perspective that can draw *meaningful* lines between baroque music and classic rock.

While the sources of androcentrism may be epistemic, however, its presence in biblical scholarship ultimately carries theological and political consequences for women which are not terribly different in kind from those imposed by much more crude, nineteenth-century conceptions of a “purely scientific” study of the text. Witness Susanne Scholz:

Historical criticism allows interpreters to position biblical literature in a distant past, far removed from today’s politics, economics, or religion. Although the exclusion of contemporary questions is not an essential requirement of historical methodology, especially not as understood by many historians during the last decades, biblical scholars often continue using historical criticism in a way that keeps the bible separate from today’s world.  

We should consider very carefully the nature of this criticism. It suggests that the HCM has indeed taken a turn for the better in the twentieth century and surrendered some of the scientific pretenses that sullied its inception, but that it simply has trouble living up to these perceived improvements. The HCM acknowledges that we bring baggage with us when analyzing the text, but is over-confident in how easily it believes we can abandon androcentric biases. Carol Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, in their introductory contribution to the volume that features Sholz’s comments, are more explicit on the “corrective” nature of feminist criticism:

The problem...is not with partiality per se, but in the denial thereof. Indeed, from this perspective the tools themselves are not to be blamed in principle, but rather the ways in which they have been used. Feminist criticism could therefore use them to serve different ends...and to recover the voices and traditions about women—all women—in the sources of the past...Feminist critics are thus explicit about their own social location—and the way in which that location affects their historical reconstruction—in a way that earlier male-stream scholars could not possibly be.  

In much the same way, Schüssler Fiorenza describes how her “hermeneutic of suspicion” outlined in her germinal text *In Memory of Her* may be applied to the HCM—not, apparently, to dismiss it but to temper it and make it better at what it aims to do:

Feminist studies therefore maintains that established scholarship as androcentric scholarship is not only partial to the extent that it articulates male experience as human experience, but also biased, to the extent that its intellectual discourse and scholarly frameworks are determined only by male perspectives primarily of the dominant classes. This feminist claim runs counter to the assertion of traditional historical-critical biblical scholarship that prides itself on being impartial, objective, and value-neutral. Recognizing its sociopolitical location and public commitment, a feminist biblical interpretation must therefore utilize historical-critical methods for the sake of presenting alternative interpretation of biblical texts and history for public scholarly discussion and historical assessment.  

Pause to consider Schüssler Fiorenza’s point here: the historical-critical method is not dead, nor does it deserve to be killed off; it is merely wounded by its androcentric biases. And what might feminist critics of the HCM use to correct these biases in their own work? Why, the historical-critical method, of course.

I have been writing largely in abstractions thus far when describing “feminist methods” of biblical exegesis. If, as we have just seen, they might be understood to be not an usurpation of the dominant HCM that governs scriptural studies today but rather a correction—a holding of the HCM to its purported ideals (granted, not all feminist critics would agree with this)—what exactly do these critical methods entail in practice? Bridget Gilfillan  

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Upton provides us with a concise account, based largely on the earlier work of Mary Ann Tolbert. Upton partitions the landscape between, among other things: (a) feminists whose work involves a “remnant standpoint,” resuscitating and rehabilitating biblical passages that have been overlooked by exegetes drawn by androcentric biases to the usual corners of the canon, but that might shed light on the role of women in Scripture (Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror* serves as an example of this approach); and (b) those who eschew the official canon of the Bible on the assumption that androcentric principles were active in the initial decisions of what does and does not count as “the word of God”; these feminist critics, Upton suggests, argue that different criteria for what it means to be “canonical” yields the inclusion of texts that show a more substantial role for women in the Ancient Near East than the codified texts would indicate.

One might well respond to these approaches with a cynical “why bother?” Unless we already believe that women were treated as equal partners with men in the Ancient Near East and were permitted by their cultures to live lives comparable to women who have reaped some of the benefits of contemporary feminism, what exactly would we be expecting to find in the “lesser discussed” texts of the Bible or their contemporary apocrypha? Does not the fact that we are taking our textual interpretations of characters described in the approved and “unapproved” Scripture and holding those interpretations up for comparison to how we live now itself represent an androcentric bias—an operating assumption that the past (where men likely ruled most walks of life) must somehow govern the present and the future, or at least serve as our conceptual starting point? Is this not just a submission to androcentrism, and not a “correction” of its biases? Sandra M. Schneiders certainly seems to think so:

> [A]ccepting the authority of the Bible does not entail material imitation or replication of the arrangements of first-century Christianity any more than the imitation of Christ entails being a carpenter, a Jew, a male, or an itinerant preacher. The normativity of the Bible cannot be reduced to material replication. Consequently, the discovery, insofar as it is possible, of the roles of women in early Christianity, important as this is for the feminist agenda, cannot be used positively to establish the roles of women in the current church community.

Or, we might add, any community, if feminist exegesis is to benefit women at large and not just women of the Judeo-Christian faiths.

We haven’t, however, exhausted the feminist methods that Upton catalogues. In addition to these approaches that focus on women’s roles in canonical and non-canonical texts, there is a more general methodological aim of feminist biblical criticism, one she attributes to the writings of Rosemary Radford Reuther: a discovery of the “prophetic liberating tradition.” This approach focuses on the “canon within the canon,” a particular reading of the Bible that locates the thread from the Abrahamic covenant to the resurrection of Christ as it weaves through a recurring message heralding the liberation of the oppressed. While examining biblical narrative may play a role in this approach, it is guided more by an interpretation of the author’s liberatory aims than by the events

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10 Upton, “Feminist Theology as Biblical Hermeneutics,” 100-101. Credit goes to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this essay in underscoring that neither approach (a) nor (b) can ever employ more than an assumption in this regard; it is impossible for contemporary readers of the Bible to know for certain just how much or how little its authors in various periods and cultural contexts had the interests of women in mind. This can only be inferred in retrospect.


and persons described. One could, in principle, attribute a liberatory message to a biblical author describing episodes that might seem superficially mundane or even repressive.

Our ear perks up at such a description: this is essentially the method of biblical exegesis that Liberation Theologians have advocated for decades, in the Latin American context and well beyond, is it not? Indeed it is, and those who have taken up a more explicit account of how liberation theology can yield a fruitful perspective on biblical exegesis describe this search for the liberatory “thread” throughout Scripture as a methodological starting point. Feminist biblical criticism, since it can be said to have a liberatory aim, shares this methodological principle with liberation theology in general, with the particular aim of identifying and examining the scriptural passages in which meaning (and what was meant) points to the liberation of women from oppression.

Yet even if we take this approach as potentially more productive than one where we try to locate feminist messages in the actual characters or situations described in Scripture, feminist exegesis is at somewhat of a disadvantage when compared to the liberation theologian: Scripture, it seems, already says a great deal about the economically marginalized. Ancient Judaism had duties to the dispossessed (hence, for example, the “gleaning” and “jubilee” traditions), and Jesus of Nazareth was notorious for consorting with them and upbraiding the self-appointed pietists of his milieu for not doing so as well. Not so with the case of women in the Bible; we don’t get explicit calls for their liberation from oppression, or predictions that they will inherit the earth by virtue of the conditions they suffer as women. Jesus never addresses them as a class as he does the poor. Liberation theology, it would seem, has an unambiguous edge when it comes to explicating this “prophetic liberating tradition.” The point is not ignored by feminist scholars; Schüssler Fiorenza herself concedes that her colleagues doing liberation theology have a somewhat more cooperative text to work with than do feminists:

Liberation theologians maintain...that their pre-understanding—the option for the poor—is not eisegesis but exegesis, since this message is already found in the text: The God of the Bible is the God of the poor and oppressed. At this point it becomes apparent that the critical hermeneutical task of feminist theology is more complicated, since it cannot state without qualification that the ‘God of the Bible is the God of women,’ because there is considerable evidence that the Bible not only was used against women’s liberation but also had no clear “option” for women’s liberation.

Pause once again to take stock of where we stand. We have seen that feminist biblical exegetes on the order of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (at least at the time of Bread Not Stone’s publication) see their task as not necessarily closing down the HCM—arguably the dominant model of scriptural scholarship in use today—but rather opening it up, dismantling the androcentric biases brought to the table from the start so that it can do what it aims to do. Some practitioners of the HCM, feminists can concede, persist in asserting a hard-and-fast, almost ontological distinction between what the text meant to its author and what it might mean to its various audiences, but feminist adherents to the HCM know that this is at best a useful heuristic device.

We see now that, despite this fairly modest understanding of the feminist biblical project, there really is not much to go on in Scripture itself that would invite this particular perspective on the HCM. One must define one’s feminist outlook outside the text and only then approach biblical analysis. Unlike the liberation theologian, the feminist theologian is likely to find little feminism in the bible, though she may, Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges, find reason to be a liberationist struggling on behalf of the poor even if she had not been before she broke open the word of God. There is a seeming tension here. Feminist analysis, on the one hand, need not import any sub-

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stantive content to the HCM; it merely provides a corrective to androcentric biases in the standard HCM model that compel practitioners to overlook a more favorable understanding of women’s roles in Scripture. Yet feminist analysis, on the other hand, unlike the liberationist’s analysis, must have a vision formed outside of the text itself; the Bible will not be supplying the motivation to take a feminist approach to the Bible.

The anti-feminist Christian might take this apparent contradiction in the aims of feminist biblical scholarship as license to dismiss the entire project as incoherent. This would be hasty even if it were not likely motivated as much by enmity as by putative academic rigor. No less important than resolving the seeming contradiction, I would argue, is the fact that liberation theology might be said to share it, despite appearances and despite the estimation of Schüssler Fiorenza herself of economic “liberationist” content already in the Bible. Marxists and other secular advocates of economic justice have long suggested that, for Christian Scripture at least, the biblical message is not material liberation of the dispossessed but rather their relative placation, perhaps with the promise of future reward.\(^\text{15}\) Granted, Luke paints a picture of the early Christian communities in Acts 2:44-45 that would be the envy of any utopian socialist commune, but one would be hard pressed to build a case for the eradication of poverty in this world based on Scripture alone. Indeed, arguably few if any have ever tried. Since the first centuries of Christianity, the message derived from the canon has not been that the kingdom of God on earth somehow entails distributive justice in this world but rather that “redemptive almsgiving” will mollify the poor while guaranteeing spiritual salvation for the well-off (“almsgiving will buy paradise for as little as you want,” promises John Chrysostom in a sermon on Lazarus and the rich man—Luke 16:19-31—circa 388 A.D\(^\text{16}\)). By the middle ages and the rise of the mendicant religious orders such as the Dominicans and the Franciscans, almsgiving would become institutionally inextricable from the exaltation of “voluntary poverty,” diluting the earlier message that involuntary destitution was cause for spiritual redemption. Interest in real poverty was decimated while those of ample means who could emulate it became the models of spiritual enlightenment.\(^\text{17}\) Liberation theology may well find its inspiration in Scripture, but it is difficult to see how Scripture alone would motivate the liberation of the economically oppressed in this world.

VI.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to finding a prima facie “feminist” reading of Scripture—in the New Testament, at least—is what we might call the recursively anti-feminist nature of the text: we cannot now and may never fully appreciate just how much Scripture is already the result of attempts to subjugate women and put them in their place. It is conceivable that the early church was rife with disputes about the proper role of women and, more importantly, that the eventual codification of Jesus’ life and ministry in the canonical gospels and other New Testament writings would depict those disputes in such a way as to suggest there never was a dispute at all. The male “victors” of these struggles, in other words, would provide the texts that we today call “The Bible,” and what we read and analyze may have already been read, analyzed, redacted, and filtered so as to mute the fact that these were once what we describe in modern academic parlance as “contested discourses.” Christian (if not all) Scripture, in short, may well have been handed to us disarmed and defused—“coded” in such a way as to have us believe that women have always fared quite well, and sanitized of anything that might suggest otherwise.

An example may help; Luke 10:38-42 offers us a telling one. It is a short pericope that has earned a place in popular lore (many non-Christians would recognize the story, we might speculate) largely because it both en-

dorses and seemingly confounds our modern stereotypes of gender relations. Here is how it appears in the New Revised Standard Version:

(38) Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. (39) She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. (40) But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” (41) But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; (42) there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

If much of sacred Scripture is marked by the remoteness of the narrative from everyday life in the modern era—few of us, for example, are compelled to walk to a well outside of town to fetch the water we will consume for the day, much less squeeze the stoning of adulterers into our social calendars—this short tale of Martha and Mary in Luke is one where we might immediately glom onto the timelessness of it, given our enduring stereotypes regarding women and domestic work. While it has been no less the object of standard biblical exegesis and analysis, it has taken on almost a mythical role in what Loveday Alexander describes as “popular exegesis”: those biblical memories reinforced by an ongoing process of preaching, teaching, and retelling “largely untouched by academic exegesis.” When it comes to Martha and Mary in Luke (less so in the Gospel of John, where they are given a definite geographical location and an ailing brother), seemingly everyone has an opinion, and it probably involves pitting the two sisters against each other and taking sides. Jesus does, it would appear, and his chiding of Martha for her fretting over her “many tasks” is routinely taken for an exaltation of the placid sister Mary soaking up the words of the Nazarene.

Pitting one sister against the other as abstract representations of different “ideal types” has indeed been a traditional interpretation of the passage, and it lends credence to the notion that the Lucan tradition (the story is unique to this Gospel) was more interested in conveying a particular normative point than in relating an episode in the life of the historical Jesus. Our modern sensibilities may well find the suggestion agreeable: Martha’s words and actions seem to stand for the “active life,” or “justification by works,” or even the fastidious adherence to propriety that Christians have often attributed to Judaism; Mary, on the other hand, seems a perfect embodiment for “contemplation,” “justification by faith,” and the putative simplicity of “Christianity.”

If Jesus is to take sides between the two sisters, it seems, so must we, and even those with feminist leanings have held conflicting views over the message we are to take from Luke 10:38-42. A superficial reading would suggest that the sort of domestic labor traditionally associated with women (Martha’s) is being denigrated by Jesus himself. Yet in doing so, Jesus could be perceived as elevating the status of Mary to that of a rabbinical student, affording her a role that would, we might believe, be rare for women in Hellenist culture. Such a reading of Jesus’ intentions would likely be missing the mark, however. For one thing, we know that Jesus would not have been all that subversive in openly teaching a woman; Barbara Reid, among others, has noted that formal education for

women was already becoming widely accepted in Hellenistic circles, especially among elite women.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, Mary is not exactly the perfect picture of the thinking, vocal, active scholar in this scenario, despite her posture and position of the typical student. A number of feminist commentators have noted that Mary’s docility in the whole affair (she utters not a word) paints a fairly negative picture of women’s roles that bears little resemblance to images of male students in Scripture and fosters the stereotype that, even when learning, women are to sit patiently and listen to men pontificate. As Kathleen Corley has suggested, a far more “radical” stance from Jesus would not have him situating Mary at his feet, hanging on his every word, but rather reclining with him at table and engaging in disputation.\textsuperscript{22}

We thus bring baggage to the interpretation of this passage—feminist and non-feminist alike—and that baggage determines how we will read or hear it. We may not notice unless our attention is drawn to it by scripture scholars that Jesus’ concern is not primarily with the tasks Martha is absorbed in but with her anxiety over them. We may not realize, unless enlightened by someone who speaks the Koine Greek of the original parchments, that there is no food whatsoever mentioned in the short passage, even though scholars for centuries have suggested that Jesus is telling Martha that one or a few dishes will suffice for her meal preparations. It requires familiarity with the other scriptural uses of \textit{diakonian} to note that what Martha is engaged in is not necessarily routine hostess duties but \textit{ministerial service} of a more substantial sort.

This is precisely what Schüssler Fiorenza has argued, and it changes our perceptions of the narrative of Luke 10:38-42 entirely.\textsuperscript{23} She notes that Martha’s use of the appellation \textit{kyrios} (“Lord”) for Jesus in verse 40 would not likely be invoked in the simple retelling of events in the ministry of Jesus, since this is a post-resurrection understanding of Jesus as the Christ. The episode, in fact, Schüssler Fiorenza posits, is probably not even an event in the life of Jesus but rather \textit{in the life of the early church}—particularly, a depiction of the tensions we might infer were present in the Lucan community over the role of women in liturgy. The “many tasks” in which Martha is engaged are part of the “service” of the liturgy—the preparation of the Eucharistic meal. So too are Mary’s “tasks” in the story: listening to the word of God. We know that the Luke author was well aware of the strains involved in providing both of these aspects of liturgical practice; in Acts 6:2 we hear of “the twelve” concerned that “waiting on tables” (as preparation of the Eucharist is so quaintly described in the NRSV) is forcing them to neglect preaching the word of God—which, we are presumably to understand, is the more important of the tasks of \textit{diakonia}. Schüssler Fiorenza gathers from this that women, who apparently had ministerial roles in the churches of the Lucan community, were being marginalized as mere caretakers of the table, while preaching the Word was reserved for men and thus exalted as the more important liturgical task. Luke’s short tale of Martha and Mary thus is indeed conveying a normative message about the “proper” roles of women, but our modern association of women and domestic work clouds the recursively anti-feminist message of the text: it’s not the superficial stereotypes that Jesus is being asked to reinforce in his chiding of Martha but the real roles of real women in the early church that made use of such stories to keep women in their place.

\textbf{VII.}

No one, man or woman, liberal or conservative, Christian or atheist, is going to read Luke’s vignette of Martha and Mary without aid of Schüssler Fiorenza or Reid and reach the conclusion that the passage is in fact a sort of coded message to women struggling for recognition in their own parish communities. No one is going to find in it, without a thorough knowledge of Koine Greek or the guidance of someone who has it, a story of women’s

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\item \textsuperscript{22} Kathleen E Corley, \textit{Women & the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins} (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002), 60. See also Margaret Daphne Hampson, \textit{Theology and Feminism} (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA, USA: B. Blackwell, 1990), 104, for a similar interpretation.
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struggle for equity in the early church—one that women in the current church can appropriate for inspiration. “Popular exegesis” has structured our reading of Luke 10:38-42 for centuries, ensuring that androcentric interpretations are not merely read into the text but also, as Schüssler Fiorenza notes, generated by the text; hence the recursive, mirror-to-mirror nature of gender inequity that can arise from reading Scripture. So we must find some assurance in the fact that scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza and Reid are available to us to help us crack the code and consider what might really be the author’s intent in a pericope such as this, and what it thus might mean for us today.

The question, then, is “why now?” We can (must?) accept that a feminist reading of Scripture is not going to come without a good deal of preparation and work, and that we have to be predisposed to digging beneath surface appearances of the narrative, and even beneath the excavations of the HCM practitioners who have already examined the text, to reconstruct what might have been occurring in the author’s context that would prompt him to portray things the way he did. But we ask: if sacred Scripture is the divine word of God revealed, why did it take 1900 years for us to derive an arguably better picture of what might be transpiring in Luke 10:38-42?

Three responses to the question present themselves. The first and perhaps most straightforward is offered by Schüssler Fiorenza herself: the hermeneutic of proclamation that should accompany our hermeneutic of suspicion “must insist that we do not accord to such a patriarchal text divine authority and proclaim it as the word of God.”24 This is not to suggest that we simply cherry-pick those passages from Scripture that comport to our worldview, declare this the divinely inspired content, and discount the rest as a “product of its time,” though such an approach is not without precedence among Christians. It is merely to acknowledge that time has seasoned our sense of scriptural revelation, and we can be more judicious than our predecessors in approaching canonical texts. Still, such an answer may strike the ears of those otherwise potentially sympathetic to the feminist cause as a compromise of their faith, and may be limited in its pastoral application among all but the most highly experienced scripture scholars who are trained to find the divine presence of God in texts they are examining critically.

A second possible response might be more pastorally comforting. We might suggest that some sort of divine accommodation is at work in Scripture, and that God’s self-revelation somehow accommodates its audience according to their circumstances and capacities. The concept derives from John Calvin but arguably can be useful in other Christian circles, including those of Catholics. Much like we attempt to break an infant’s habit of exploring the wall socket not with an excursus on the nature of electricity but rather with a firm slap on the hand, the theory goes, God suits God’s message to us according to our ability to comprehend it. This ability changes over time (ideally in the direction of improvement) and across cultures, so it would be reasonable to infer that revelation as it was manifest 2000 years ago in the aftermath of what is for Christians the ultimate revelation—the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ—might be looked upon differently today, and that this very difference in our ability to interpret the stories told in the past is itself revelation. This “divine accommodation” account holds a great deal of appeal, though in a less constricted context outside of the aims of this discussion, we might be drawn to explore particular misgivings it would hold for feminists.

A third response to the “why now?” question, one that I believe holds a great deal of promise, derives from the Marxist tradition and may in fact help to explain the emergence of liberation theology in the past century as well as the perception (discussed earlier) that the liberation of the poor is a message carried by Scripture even at the level of “popular exegesis.” Marxism—a.k.a. historical materialism, as Marx referred to his perspective—has a correspondingly materialist account of its own origins that suggests why we would not expect to find the Jesus of Scripture calling for a seizure of the means of production in the name of the associated workers. One of the

principle merits of Marxism as an account of human history is that it can situate itself; it can tell us plausibly why Marxism as a theory emerged only when it did amid the urban squalor of early industrial capitalism rather than amid feudal aristocracy or agrarian Phoenicia. It is only with the ripening of conditions the theory itself would anticipate that that the theory itself is born: Marxism accounts for its own origins. Perhaps no one has summarized this crucial element of historical materialist thought as eloquently as the Hungarian Marxist György Lukács:

It is therefore no accident—and indeed it could hardly be otherwise when we are concerned with real truths about society—that historical materialism evolved into a scientific method around the middle of the nineteenth century. It is not the result of chance that social truths are always found when the soul of an age is revealed in them; the age in which the reality corresponding to the method becomes incarnate. For, as we have already explained, historical materialism is simply the self-knowledge of capitalist society.\(^{25}\)

Feminists are not, of course, lining up to claim a similar materialist origin for the second-wave feminism spawned in the 1960s, much less for feminist biblical criticism.\(^ {26}\) If, however, it is conceivable that our modern Catholic concern for economic justice is in part a product of real political movements and the confluence of historical conditions outside of the church, we might wonder too whether the evolving feminist movement and the eventual liberation of women from oppression must be premised upon material, political struggle as much as scriptural inspiration. We can charitably read this as less a denial of God’s revelation or God’s activity in our lives than the concession that, to fully understand this revelation and to realize this divine activity, we must ourselves act cooperatively and with great effort to alter the conditions of this world. The oppressed who inhabit it, we believe, already receive God’s grace without having to merit it; what they do merit is an open, prayerful ear to their political struggles from those of us who profit from their oppression. If this isn’t already informing our every reading of God’s word, then perhaps it should.


\(^{26}\) Socialist and Marxist feminists have attempted this, but their work is thought largely to explain the oppression of women only under circumstances of economic exploitation and thus incomplete when it comes to isolating the oppression of women as a class in itself. One notable exception is the work of Isaac Balbus, based on the writings of Dorothy Dinnerstein, which attempts a materialist account of the rise of second-wave feminism based on changes not in the mode of *production* but rather in the post-WWII changes in the mode of *child-rearing* that Balbus painstakingly recounts. See Isaac D Balbus, *Marxism and Domination: A Neo-Hegelian, Feminist, Psychoanalytic Theory of Sexual, Political, and Technological Liberation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).