

Ecofeminism and Biblical Interpretation

For some time now ecofeminists have interpreted the Bible both critically and hopefully. Alert to the ways biblical religion has been implicated in the oppression of women and the domination of nature, ecofeminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Judith Plaskow and Ivone Gebara have used ecofeminist ethics as a basis for critical and selective re-interpretations of biblical material. For example, in *Gaia and God* (1992) Ruether re-interprets the biblical motif of 'covenant' to encompass 'the covenant of creation' in which "we are to be in right relation to our fellow beings" (228). Plaskow (in Adams 1993) refers to biblical prophecy in the context of a Jewish ecofeminist vision of repair of the world. In *Longing for Running Water* (1999), Gebara describes an orientation toward life within the parables of Jesus. Through these new interpretations, the Bible becomes a source for developing an ecofeminist response to environmental devastation and to the interrelated oppressions of women, indigenous peoples and other subordinated groups.

Of particular interest to ecofeminists have been the biblical motifs of genesis and apocalypse. In a reversal of the Christian canon, Anne Primavesi's *From Apocalypse to Genesis* (1991) moves from contemporary judgments on human actions destructive of nature to the possibility of an ecological re-reading of the creation stories of Genesis 1 to 3. Critical of the role of Christianity and Western society in the subordination of women and the domination of nature, Primavesi interprets the Spirit of God in creation as an image of the regenerative power of trees, oceans and human bodies. In "Nuclear Power and the Sacred", Jane Caputi (in Adams 1993), following the work of film critic Michael Wood, links the gendering of the atomic bomb as female with the biblically-based myth of Adam and Eve. She traces a pattern in which nuclear

weapons are given women's names and associated with the sexual power of women. This pattern, portraying woman as seductive and destructive, emerges from a tradition that represents Eve as culpable for human evil. In *Women Healing Earth* (1996) Sun-Ai Lee-Park writing in Reuther's *Gai and God*, focuses on "the forbidden tree" of Genesis 2 and 3. There God offers the first humans all the bounty of the forest garden, except for the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When Lee-Park witnesses the logging of ancient rainforests in Sarawak, she recalls this divine prohibition. The Genesis story for her parallels the way in which ignoring environmental limits leads to destruction and loss.

Themes of genesis and apocalypse come together in Carolyn Merchant's *Earthcare* (1995) and Catherine Keller's *Apocalypse Now and Then* (1996). Both writers describe ways in which the myth of a lost Eden and the vision of a New World coalesce in the colonization of the Americas. Keller argues that an apocalyptic framework, rejected by Western modernity, continues to influence Western imagination and practice through what she calls a 'cryptoapocalypse'. By offering an extended ecological feminist engagement with a single biblical book, namely the Book of Revelation, Keller's *Apocalypse* represents a shift for ecofeminist biblical interpretation.

Within biblical studies, ecofeminist frameworks of interpretation are continuing to be developed. As Gebara indicates, in several Latin American countries women are re-reading biblical scriptures from the joint perspective of 'the integrity of creation' and 'respect for women'. In the first volume of the *Earth Bible*, Australian biblical scholar Elaine Wainwright has extended a feminist hermeneutic to develop an ecofeminist reading of the Gospel of Matthew. Focusing in particular on Matthew 11, which deals with the question of who Jesus is,

Wainwright suggests that the deeds of Jesus reveal the presence of divine wisdom and the possibility of right relationship not only between humans but within the entire Earth community.

In the same volume Heather Eaton draws on feminist biblical criticism to suggest directions for an ecofeminist approach to biblical interpretation. Questioning conventional notions of the text as sacred and authoritative, Eaton writes: “From an ecofeminist perspective, the Bible can be accepted only as contingent and provisional” (59). This implies an acceptance of the material reality of the Bible. Words on scroll, page or screen are not possible without the plants from which paper or papyrus and ink are produced or the fossils and rocks from which the plastics of a CD rom and the parts of a computer are formed. Writers and readers of the text are also dependent on the Earth community for their sustenance. A recognition of the interdependence of readers and text within an Earth community is particularly pertinent for ecofeminist biblical interpretation.

Related ecofeminist concerns with embodiment surface in the *Earth Bible's* volume on biblical wisdom literature. Shirley Wurst's focus on eokinship develops aspects of interconnectedness and Earth kinship evident in the biblical personification of divine wisdom as a woman. Drawing on the practice of biblical scholar Claudia Camp, Wurst names this figure of kinship Woman Wisdom. For Laura Hobgood-Oster Woman Wisdom offers a vision of the divine which contrasts with other less Earth-friendly images: “The divine being frolicking in creation suggests a very different image than a king sitting on a throne with Earth as ‘his’ footstool.” Woman Wisdom inhabits the realm of Earth; she invites humans to open themselves to a passionate knowing of Earth. In the same volume, Carole Fontaine focuses on the celebration of sexual desire in the Song of Songs. The lovers' desire to connect is reflected in the

wider interconnectedness of the Earth community. Not only does the natural world provide space for the lovers' meeting and material for their metaphors, but is itself both lover and beloved.

As Eaton indicates, ecofeminist interpretations must be ethically responsible. The patriarchal and androcentric character of much biblical material remains a key concern. So, too, does the problem of the anthropocentrism of the text and its readers, which tends to make ecological concerns marginal to the work of biblical interpretation. Further as post-colonial insights are integrated with ecofeminist ones, there is a critical focus on the ways in which the Bible has been used in the Eurowestern project of colonization. At the same time, eco-sensitive readings are emerging in the interplay between ecofeminist reader and biblical text. Considering the problematic aspects of the text, Hobgood-Oster writes: "Earth recontextualizes and subverts." The challenge to ecofeminist interpreters of the Bible is to allow Earth to recontextualize and subvert our readings of the text.

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Further Reading

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