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READING THE BIBLE AS WOMEN: The Impact of Male Authorship, Male Dominance, and Female Absence in the Text

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Abstract
This research project explores the complex interplay between Aboriginal spirituality, Christian theology, and feminist biblical hermeneutics. It examines how cultural biases, particularly concerning gender, shape interpretations of biblical texts and impact contemporary social issues. The project analyzes the portrayal of women in the Bible, challenging traditional interpretations that perpetuate gender inequality. By integrating insights from Aboriginal spiritual traditions and feminist perspectives, this study seeks to develop more inclusive and contextually relevant readings of Scripture. It investigates the potential for intercultural dialogue between Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology, offering new avenues for understanding biblical texts and promoting social justice. The project critiques the influence of gender ideology on biblical translations and the lectionary, advocating for more equitable representation of women in religious discourse. Finally, it connects biblical interpretation to contemporary social issues, demonstrating how gendered understandings impact lived experiences and perpetuate systemic inequalities. This research contributes to a more nuanced and liberative understanding of biblical texts, promoting greater inclusivity, and social justice.

Keywords: Aboriginal spirituality; women in the Bible; masculinity; gender ideology; white Australia policy; motherhood

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary culture, references to the 'plain meaning' of the Bible are alarming common. The phrase 'the Bible is clear' is also quite common and carries the same message. This message is that the Bible should only be understood in one limited way, that often neatly applies to whatever social event or progression is occurring at any given moment. However, scholars of the Bible know that the text is anything but clear. In fact the Bible is poly-vocal, contradictory, drawn from a range of historical times and perspectives, and written in ancient languages that most people access in translation only. The bible is not clear and it does not carry plain meanings. Rather it is an inexhaustibly rich text that carries the faith wrestling of peoples from long ago.

The Bible can only be known through interaction with the text. When we read (or hear) the Bible, we understand it through the lens of our own contemporary context, and

we bring our own ideas and understandings into a conversation with the text. A 'pure' reading is not possible, because all knowledge is parsed through the cognitive frameworks our brains are constantly forming and reforming that allow us to make sense of the world around us. This is not a bad thing because it allows us to continue a conversation with the text that began many years ago. In entering this conversation, we stand on the shoulders of our forebears and ancestors who were also having a conversation with the text, which was also informed by their own cultural and social context. As long as people are reading the Bible, this conversation will continue.

Another contemporary issue is that of identity. As different groups draw attention to the way their identity impacts lived experience, new ways of reading the biblical text have emerged in scholarship. That is to say, new ways of reading the biblical text have become more acceptable. Feminist, womanist, mujerista, queer and other readings have drawn attention to the way elements of identity interact with readings and understandings of the biblical text as they are heard within specific social groups. The text has always been read in these communities, but the intentional examination of the interaction between the shared lived experience of specific groups with the biblical text allows the reader to understand how identity interacts with an understanding of the text. This article aims to look at this interaction with respect to reading, the bible and women.

In this article, the idea of reading will be explored as a hermeneutic which, rather than being a self-evident behavioral act, is an active conversation between the reader and the text. In this case, the text is one that has been designated as holy and as scripture, and so it carries authority that other texts do not. The power that is contained in these claims to divinity and assumed to be communicated within the text means that the responsible reader must remain cognizant of how their own biases influence their reading of the text.

The Bible will be considered, particularly with respect to gendered issues of authorship, perspective and historical understandings which can be taken for granted or sometimes ignored. It is not assumed that the gender dynamics within the text should or do mimic contemporary understandings of gender and gender relations. Rather, these dynamics are bought to the reader's attention so that they may be aware of how their own understandings impact the meanings they may draw out of this ancient text.

Lastly, the idea of women will be considered. This is not an essentialist or biological understanding of women. Instead, it is rooted in the understanding that when a person is perceived as a woman by society, she will be treated in ways that differ from a person who

is perceived as male. It is also based in self-identification as woman, regardless of how the individual is perceived in social settings. Further, the identity of woman is complicated by other elements of one's identity including race, class, age, culture and other intersections. In order to appreciate these intersections, it is important to consider how women themselves read the text and listen to their voices. This article will step through each of these elements – reading, the bible, and women – considering how each element adds to our understandings and our interaction with the text.

DISCUSSION

Reading

The idea of 'reading' the Bible may seem self-evident, in that an individual picks up the text and engages with the words that are contained on the page. However, in this paper, I suggest that reading should be understood as a hermeneutic which contains a range of meanings that are often carried unconsciously.

Reading begins with presuppositions. Reading begins with bias. Reading begins from our own standpoint, which in reference to the biblical writings, is temporally, socially and culturally divorced from the ancient Near Eastern context where the text was composed and recorded. While some of these gaps have been bridged through scholarship, there is still a wealth of detail and information that is unknown and potentially unknowable both within the text and within the context of the writing.

An example is in the area of Psalms scholarship, where it is almost impossible to assert with any certainty who the authors of these texts are and even when they were written.[1] While some Psalms do carry superscriptions that might seem to indicate authorship, the nature of Hebrew conjunctions mean the title לְדָוִד (*lᵉḏāwiḏ*) often translated as 'of David,' could also be understood as 'to' or 'for' David, suggesting that they may have been written with David, or a Davidic legacy in mind rather than having been written by the historical King David. Indeed, David Willgren Davage argues that these superscriptions possibly indicate a 'Davidisation' of the psalter that may have occurred as late as the Second Temple period.[2] Therefore, when we read a psalm that is connected to

[1] Alter describes the dating of psalms as 'a region of treacherous scholarly quicksand.' Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), xv.

[2] Davage examines textual variants from within the Qumran scrolls to support his contention that fluidity within the superscriptions continued into the Second Temple period. David Willgren Davage, "Why

David, we are reading through the lens of a constructed Davidic identity that has been altered and refined at different historical points, as well as our own understanding of the Davidic persona developed through Bible reading, Christian teachings and understandings.

People have been reading these psalms for thousands of years, and while commentaries give us an insight into how scholars have read these texts, for every scholarly reading there will be many thousands of other readings of which we have no record. For each person reading the psalms or hearing the text within a worship context there will be individual nuances of the meaning of the psalms and its attendant application to the readers own context.

Of course, these texts are not being read in isolation. These texts are often read within theological and denominational traditions which carry their own presuppositions, bias and doctrinal understandings. Jeremy Punt, in a defense of the study of reception history suggests

> "the 'world' which a reader creates from the text cannot be seen in isolation from the reader's own culture, ideology and 'social place or location'. Failure to account for this aspect of reading as well as the almost consistent disregard for the history or tradition of interpretation of the text and this tradition's role not only in the 'production' of the meaning of the texts but also in one's choice of methodology, will eventually petrify and domesticate that tradition to the extent of rendering it invisible but no less active in its continuing influence on contemporary interpretive practice. The unrecognised and therefore unchecked influence of such tradition can paradoxically lead to the contradiction of other and perhaps contextually and contemporary more adequate readings, to the extent of not tolerating any such divergent (from this tradition) reading."[3]

Punt warns here against a naïve reading of the text from within Christian communities which assumes a normative and unchanging understanding that may obscure alternative readings of the text. These normative readings usually reinscribe hegemonic power relationships as biblical and therefore divinely authorised. This means that cultural cis-hetero-patriarchal norms are read back into the text increasing the

Davidic Superscriptions Do Not Demarcate Earlier Collections of Psalms," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1 March 2020; 139 (1): 67–86. doi: https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1391.2020.4.

[3] Punt argues that "witnessing communities" have influenced the interpretation of Scripture and therefore it is vital to attend to the history of interpretation, namely through reception studies. Jeremy Punt, "Inhabiting the world in front of the text: the New Testament and reception studies," *Neotestamentica*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2000), 213.

chance that women, queer people and other marginalised individuals are rendered invisible.

Particularly in contemporary evangelical contexts, these readings might be defended as a 'plain reading' of the text, or with the defence that the text is inerrant and infallible.[4] That is, it is claimed that these texts arrive with a pre-existent meaning that has universal application. However, these claims ignore the fact that these texts are most often accompanied by teaching and preaching that directs the communities understanding of a text. Those in ministry will have undergone specific formation practices which encourage the text to be encountered in specific ways and which perpetuate the bias of their own teachers. If the preacher is not aware of their own bias in approaching the text, they may not be able to distinguish their understanding of the text from the text itself. Further, if a majority of leaders in the denomination or faith community share the same set of characteristics and have similar life experiences, then the potential for divergent readings to be heard are reduced.

In Australia in 2016, the National Church Life Survey Leader Survey found that 78% of senior church leaders were male, 75% of leaders were in their first marriage, 77% were Australian born, and 74% are university graduates.[5] This suggests that in terms of the key characteristics of gender, marriage and education there is a high level of uniformity in church leaders across denominations, and further this does not necessarily

[4] While Varley does not explicitly use the term plain reading, he argues that the inspired nature of the bible means that it can be understood to anyone who approaches the scriptures with a humble heart (Deut 6:6-7; Ps 19:7; Mat 11:25-26) (Lewis Varley, "Scripture as a Divine-Human Book," *TGC Australian Edition*, 5 September, 2023. https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/scripture-as-a-divine-human-book/). DiStefano reports that a reply on a previous article of his argued that "There is no 'interpret the Bible,' there is only the plain reading of the text by honest men who have a good conscience towards God. The motive for anything else is ALWAYS cowardice." (Matthew DiStefano, "There Is No Such Thing as a Plain Reading of the Bible," *Patheos*, 25 March, 2019. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/allsetfree/2019/03/there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-plain-reading-of-the-bible/). The provisos 'with a humble heart' and 'honest men who have a good conscience' allow readings that are contrary to one's own to be rejected through the argument that the reader doesn't have a 'humble heart' or 'a good conscience.' It is also worth noting that the commentor genders the reading as done by honest *men,* betraying a patriarchal world-view that elevates reading of the text by men over readings by women.

This understanding of the text can be directly seen in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, drafted in 1978, which has been adopted by a range of evangelical groups and claims that "Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching" ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy", Themelios, Vol 4, Issue 3, April 1979. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy/), although this claim is limited to the original manuscripts of which no copies still exist. The ideas of inerrancy and infallibility have been widely critiqued by scholars and commentators alike. See: Adam Hamilton, "Is the Bible Inerrant and Infallible?," Ministry Matters, 15 July, 2021. https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10848/is-the-bible-inerrant-and-infallible.

[5] Data drawn from: Powell, R., Pepper, M., Hancock, N. and Sterland, S. *2016 NCLS Leader Survey*. (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2017). https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/training-for-ministry/https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/demographics-of-senior-church-leaders/

match church attenders. In fact 61% of church attenders in Australia who participated in one survey were female.[6] Given the gendered world that we live in, this gap between the gender of leaders and the gender of church attenders should raise questions.

In other respects, the education and ethnicity of leaders were quite similar to attenders.[7] However, if 75% of church leaders are in their first marriage, there might be less understanding of the experience of church attenders who are never married, remarried, divorced or widowed. Life experiences inform readings of the text, and if most leaders do not share similar life experiences with individuals within their community, there is a large potential for those people to feel unseen or not valued within the church. When these life experiences are reflected back into the text by leaders, readings can be produced which justify and uphold positionalities which are divorced from the experience of those listening to the teaching. This can result in feeling oneself distant from the Bible and therefore God. It also means that there are some who are always accessing the text through translation, not just translation from the ancient languages but translation from the ancient languages into the local vernacular and then further translation so that it applies to their lived experience.

The practice of men-only ordination also has the potential to create a barrier between attendee and leader. In Australia, alongside the Catholic Church which does not ordain women world-wide, the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia do not ordain women and do not authorise women to preach. This means that women in Australia across these denominations are unlikely to hear a person of their own gender presenting a reading of biblical texts within their worshipping community.[8] This impacts the readings of the text that they will hear, but it also influences a wide variety of decisions that are taken by leadership which may not take into consideration the lived experiences that female members bring into Church contexts. This can lead to women – me included – feeling invisible or absent in terms of representation, consideration and inclusion.

[6] Data source: 2021 National Church Life Survey by NCLS Research . "The Gender Profile of Australian Churchgoers," *NCLS Research*. https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/the-gender-profile-of-churchgoers/.

[7] Data about marital status of attendees was not available.

[8] The Lutheran Church of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia are notable because other Lutheran and Presbyterian organisations world-wide have been ordaining women for many years. Women are also unable to be ordained in the Sydney Anglican Diocese, despite other Australian Anglican Dioceses ordaining women.

In recent years theology has been approached from a range of new perspectives. Queer hermeneutics draw our attention to the way understandings of sexuality influence our presuppositions and readings.[9] Colonial and post-colonial hermeneutics draw attention to the way cultural identities influence our reading of the text.[10] In Australia, theologians such as Garry Worrete Deverell and Anne Pattel-Gray have drawn attention to Indigenous theology and the relationship between First Nations people, Christianity and theology.[11] An intersectional perspective often takes into account the perspectives of gender, sexuality, race and culture, however this often still leaves other biases unacknowledged and therefore unreflected, particularly in the ways they influence our reading of the text.

One way of addressing bias is through Contextual Bible Study, as developed by Gerard West.[12] Contextual Bible Study is an interpretative process that is based on a See-Judge-Act framework, that encourages the readers to view a biblical text through a lens of social analysis, biblical reflection and social action. It is a form of liberation hermeneutics that values reading the text with 'ordinary' readers. In this program, reading is intentionally dialogical as both 'ordinary' and 'scholarly' or academic readers meet together to discern an understanding of the text. West notes that Contextual Bible Study intentionally "privilege[s] particular contexts, namely those of the unnamed poor and marginalised" rather than the educated non-believer.[13] The poor and marginalised are those who are economically alienated, however West helpfully notes that the marginalisation of queer people and sex workers is another form of marginalisation which still must be considered.[14] Marginalisation, in this way, may be considered as lack

[9] For a general and accessible introduction to queer theology, see: Linn Marie Tonstadt, *Queer Theology : Beyond Apologetics*. Cascade Companions, 40. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018).

[10] Post-colonial theologies are often developed intersectionally, such as in: HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Mary Elizabeth Moore, and Musa W Dube Shomanah *Interdependenc : A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018); Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*. 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); and, Johnny Bernard Hill, *Prophetic Rage: A Postcolonial Theology of Liberation*, Prophetic Christianity (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014).

[11] Garry Worete Deverell's most recent book *Contemplating Country* continues the ideas he developed in his earlier book *Gondwana Theology* (2018) thinking about ways Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology connect (Garry Worete Deverell, Contemplating Country (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2023).

[12] Gerard West, 2014, 'Locating "Contextual Bible Study" within biblical liberation hermeneutics and intercultural biblical hermeneutics', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2641, 10 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2641

[13] West, Locating Contextual Bible Study, 3.

[14] Fones draws attention to the way refutations of Mary Magdalene as prostitute can alienate sex-workers' readings of the text and reinforce ideas of in/decency and its attendant acceptability. Benedikta Fones, "Autonomy, Ambiguiity and Sex Worker Liberation: Resisting the Politics of In/decency" in *Women and Gender*

of equal access to power, authority, and leadership, which remains true for women across the world, in the church and in the biblical text.

The Bible

The Bible is a varied collection of texts, but one thing that ties this collection together is that they were predominantly written by men. David Clines goes further, asserting that:

> "the Bible is a male book, written by men, for men. It enshrines male values, promotes and inculcates them. It everywhere esteems men above women. It portrays a deity infused with male values."[15]

Clines argues that the key male values expressed in the text are strength, violence and killing, size, honour, holiness, womanlessness, totality thinking, and binary thinking. While there are certainly examples of men with these characteristics across the biblical text, the suggestion that these are male or masculine values, held consistently across the cultures and contexts behind the writing of the diversity of the biblical texts is simplistic at best. Indeed, it is only in recent decades that detailed analyses of what constitutes masculine and feminine, man and woman, and the various aspects of gender have been developed. This is not to say that there were not notions of typical behaviours that were ascribed to men and women. Rather, that these expectations are normative and often unconscious, and are liable to change from one culture or social group to another. Therefore, the requirements of maleness, such as in the writings of Paul and other New Testament writers reflects the Greco-Roman society in which they were written. In contrast, the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs emerge from the ancient Near East which held its own conceptions of masculinity and maleness.

Clines concludes his argument noting that a male Bible is scandalous because the commitment to male values (as he identifies them) disqualifies it from a claim to universality, but further that the maleness of the Bible remains unnoticed. In this claim,

and the Bible: Texts, Intersections and Intertexts, ed. Zanne Domoney Lyttle and Sarah Nicholson (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2021), 160-181.

[15] Clines presented these ideas in the 2015 Ethel M Wood Lecture, and they have been reprinted in his post-humously published collection of essays on masculinity. David J. A. Clines, *Play the Man! Biblical Imperatives to Masculinity* (United Kingdom: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2023), 210-230.

Clines displays an ignorance about the multiple ways that feminist theologians have demonstrated male bias of the text.[16]

Jewish theologian Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that patriarchy is "so firmly entrenched" in the social world of the biblical authors, they fail to notice it demonstrating a "gender blindness that totally ignores everyone but economically advantaged males."[17] However, she notes that even though the Bible is suffused with patriarchal understandings, the vision of humanity that exists within the text is one of gender neutrality. She argues that even though women are often portrayed as both powerless and subordinate, that this social position is not considered to be inferior. Rather, the social position of women is understood to be a paradigm for the powerlessness of Israel with respect to its much larger and more powerful neighbours. The image of Israel as powerless does not connote inferiority in the same way that the powerlessness of women does not connote an inferior status. This is just an accepted part of the way the world is constructed. This understanding of the patriarchal nature of the text, however, should not blind us to the understanding that women are considered inferior in contemporary contexts and that this understanding influences contemporary readings of the text.[18]

There is little doubt that the text was written by men, and that one impact of male authorship is that male experiences are prioritised, male perspectives are normalized, and male voices are authorised. Even the books which bear female names as titles – namely Ruth and Esther – are thought to have been written by men, or at the very least transcribed by men.[19] The one book that may have been written by a woman – The Letter to the Hebrews – contains no identifying details of the author, such that while scholars not

[16] Hanne Løland Levinson, "Still Invisible after All These Years? Female God-Language in the Hebrew Bible: A Response to David JA Clines." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 141, no. 2 (2022): 199-217.

[17] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the women of the Bible: A new interpretation of their stories*. (Tel Aviv, Schocken, 2004), xvi.

[18] The understanding of women as inferior in contemporary contexts is contested and rarely explicitly exposed. However authors such as Angela Saini have demonstrated how understandings of women as inferior impact things as diverse as snow-plowing patterns through to medical knowledge, resulting in worse social outcomes for women. Angela Saini, *Inferior*, (Lisboa, Portugal: Leya, 2020).

[19] In the Feminist Companion to Ruth, Adrien J Beldstein in the chapter "Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth Were Written By A Woman" imagines that Tamar, the daughter of David, may be the author (132), and Fokkeilien van Dijk-Hemmes analyses the evidence that might suggest this story comes from within 'women's-culture' (134-139). Athalya Brenner-Idan and Athalya Brenner (eds), *Feminist Companion to Ruth* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993).

Priscilla could be the author, her name is given within a list of men who are also plausibly the author.[20]

Male dominance in the biblical text is not limited to authorship but includes the lack of stories about women, and even within the stories that feature women an almost total absence of women's voices.[21] Women who are named in the text are exceptional women – either exceptionally good like Ruth, Sarah, Peniniah or Rebekah, or exceptionally bad like Jezebel, or Delilah, or Salome.[22]

This point is further illustrated when we acknowledge that there are more men named in Genesis than there are women named in the whole bible, and of 1700 distinct names in the bible only 137 are women. That is around 8% of names in the bible are women. In Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's groundbreaking text, *In Memory of Her*, she draws attention to Mark 14:9, which says of the woman who anoints Jesus "And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." However, this memory does not include her name.[23]

Schussler-Fiorenza reminds us that "Even her name is lost to us. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the eucharist celebrated another story is told: the story of the apostle who betrayed Jesus. The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman." [24] If this were the only instance of a woman's name being overlooked or forgotten we might be able to dismiss it as a quirk

[20] As early as 1900, Adolf von Harnack was arguing for Priscilla to be understood as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (Adolf von Harnack, "Probabilia uber die Addresse und den Verfasser des Hebraerbriefes," Zeitshrift fur die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der aelteren Kirche 1 (1900), 16–41.). In the absence of evidence either way, this conjecture is still being debated. See: Ruth Hoppin, "Priscilla and Plausibility: Responding to questions about Priscilla as author of Hebrews." *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 2 (2011): 26-28.

[21] In the story of Bathsheba and David (2 Samuel 11), Bathsheba is given just the one line "I am pregnant." The delivery of this message is the only time in this text, too, that Bathsheba is shown to have any agency over the events.

[22] Lovelace argues that within the Deuternomistic History sexual relations with foreign women are often portrayed as a threat to Israelite identity and that foreign women in the DH are portrayed in binary opposites as good and bad. However, foreign women are able to be seen as virtuous if they are not connected with a foreign religion and instead confess YHWH as God. Vanessa Lovelace "Intersections of Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation, in *The Hebrew Bible: Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives,* ed. Yee, Gale A. (Baltimore, Maryland, Minneapolis [Minnesota]: Project Muse, Fortress Press, 2018), 75-104.

[23] Cruz suggests that this woman is unnamed "probably because the author wanted to emphasize her actions" however he fails to consider why this should be true for her and not the male disciples. Juan Cruz "'She Has Done A Beautiful Thing to Me:' How the Deed of the Unnamed Woman in Mark 14.1-11 Became a Part of the Gospel Proclamation" in *Women and Gender in the Bible: Texts, Intersections, Intertexts*, eds. Zanne Domoney-Lyttle and Sarah Nicholson (Sheffield, UK, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2021), 30-46. These types of justifications for gendered disparities often provide excuses for women's exclusion within the text in the service of broader theological themes.

[24] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1995), xiii.

of history. But women's names are consistently – one might suggest somewhat systematically – left out of the text. This is one part of what I am referring to in my subtitle by the words male dominance.

However, male dominance isn't restricted to the text. Throughout the history of scholarship, men's voices and understanding of the text have dominated. The lectionary has more of a gender bias, than the Bible does.[25] That is the texts that are chosen for focus within many worship services are more likely to be about men and men's experience. And male leadership in the church means that women's understanding or reading of the text is often not heard. In scholarly spaces, feminist theology is often relegated to a sub-discipline, along with other contextual readings that focus on understandings emerging from marginalised communities. In 2023, normative readings are still white, male and middle-class.

Even the act of translation has had a male-centric focus, with translating teams being dominated and sometimes containing only men, resulting in gender-neutral elements of the text translated in biased ways. One example of this is the translation of the Hebrew word *hayil*.

The word *ḥayil* is defined as 'strength', 'wealth' and it evokes images of warriors or the army.[26] When it is applied to Boaz in the book of Ruth (2:1), it is translated as prominent, rich (NRSV), mighty man of wealth (KJV), worthy man (ESV), respected, man of worth (CEB), mighty man of valour (JPS). When it is applied to the Proverbs 31 woman (v2) it is translated as capable, excellent (NRSV), virtuous (KJV), excellent (ESV), competent (CEB), valour (JPS). When applied to a male the word is translated as an important man who is worthy of respect. When applied to a female character it suggests one who is virtuous or competent. There is no explicit respect or worth for the woman like there is for the man. In this way translation reflects the bias of the male dominated translation teams and their inherently patriarchal theologies.[27] This is just one, clear

[25] Ferris outlines the gender bias of the lectionary demonstrating that the percentage of male to female focus in the lectionary is higher than the percentage in the biblical text. Susanne Sartor Ferris, "The Bible on Steroids: The Effect of Androcentrism on the Lectionary," *New Theology Review* 15, no. 1 (2002): 21-31.

[26] *New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 298.

[27] Perry demonstrates how the ESV translation has been intentionally developed to push back against movements toward gender inclusive language "in order to make various verses and passages about gender roles in the family, gender roles in the church, and masculinity and feminity more agreeable to complementarian interpretations." (86) Perry notes that the rise of gender-inclusive translations can be seen to also promote a specific ideology of gender also, albeit in a different direction. Samuel L Perry, "The Bible as a Product of Cultural Power: The Case of Gender Ideology in the English Standard Version" Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review 2020, 81:1, 68-92.

example of how translation is impacted by gender bias, which in turn impacts how both men and women hear the example of biblical women.

These brief examples demonstrate that the male dominance in authorship of the biblical text is further enhanced and exacerbated through male dominated translations, male led theological understandings and the bias towards stories of men within worship contexts and materials.

Women

This brings us to the final section of the title: women. First and foremost, I want to be clear that there is not one way of being a woman, and not one singular experience that women share. I am speaking and writing from the perspective of being a white, cis-straight, middle-class, highly educated Australian woman and each of these descriptors influence my reading of the text.

As a white woman, I have a high amount of privilege that is not always extended to other women with non-white skin. As a cis-straight woman, my claim to a female identity is not bought into question. As a middle-class, highly educated woman, I have had access to a variety of texts, perspectives, and experiences – such as opportunities to travel the world – that some of my peers have not. As an Australian, I have many individual freedoms and I live on a continent that has experienced long periods of fairly peaceful existence, the exception being the Frontier Wars where the local Indigenous populations where dispossessed and slaughtered, and through which my colonising ancestors benefitted. As an Australian, I live in the only Western country in the world that does not have treaty with its Indigenous people, and which deliberately kept foreigners who weren't English or white out via the White Australia policy.[28] This means that my reading of the biblical text is often imbued with whiteness that I have to actively challenge in order to gain a broader understanding of the text.

These elements of my identity that I have touched on inform my reading of the text, without even beginning to consider my identity as scholar, musician, mother, sister, daughter, divorced woman and other aspects of my personality. This is to say, that 'women' is not a hegemonic descriptor any more than the designation 'man' is.

[28] For an overview of the White Australia policy, see: Richard White, *Inventing Australia : Images and Identity, 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

Constructions of what a woman is, can be, should be, however are often simplistic, hegemonic and constructed via social norms that are taught to individuals from the moment they are born. The proclamation 'it's a girl' is accompanied by gendered messages that are reinforced through clothing, toys, and even the way adults interact with the newborn baby.[29]

Women are enculturated to be submissive, quiet, gentle and 'good,' particularly in Christian communities. The good Christian girl is chaste, modest, and undemanding; encouraged to put aside her own needs and desires, in favour of men's demands. She is expected to be married, and often held responsible if the marriage fails. She is also expected to be a mother, which carries with it its own set of demands and expectations.[30] All of these aspects she brings with her to her reading of the text, alongside all the interpretive traditions of her church or faith community, which often implicitly, if not explicitly encourage her to focus on the male-ness of the text, the male-ness of God, and the inherent male-ness of power and authority. So reading the Bible as a woman, is often a process of self-denial.

The ideals of what a woman should be is often more powerful than the examples of what women actually are, meaning real women who do not conform to an idealised notion of what it means to be a woman are dismissed, ignored or shamed. This has major implications for women's own reading, but also has ramifications for those of us within Christian communities who care about the discrimination and difficulties women can face accessing biblical readings and theologies that reflect women's context. So how can this issues be addressed?

Firstly, it is important to understand that male authorship, male dominance and female absence is an issue for many women reading the biblical text, and it is incumbent on both men and women to understand and acknowledge the depth and breadth of the problem. When we assume maleness as normative it takes an extra effort to see the gaps in the text. The effort expended to reveal this perspective is often borne by women and

[29] Research has shown that a baby that is assumed to be a girl based on gender-coded clothing are talked to more, and spoken to using gentler and passive language. Other research has demonstrated that toddlers are offered different toys depending on whether they are presumed to be girls rather than boys. See: Judi Mesman, and Marleen G Groeneveld, "Gendered Parenting in Early Childhood: Subtle but Unmistakable If You Know Where to Look," Child Development Perspectives 12, no. 1 (2018): 22-27.

[30] Cooey argues that the social demand of what it means to be a good mother is in direct contrast to the requirements of being a complex and mature adult subject. This puts women in a 'no-win situation. Paula M Cooey, "Bad Women: The Limits of Theory and Theodicy" in Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms, ed. RS Chopp and SG Davaney (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 143.

feminist scholars, who then have less time to focus on other perspectives of reading the Bible. Feminist scholarship over many years has addressed this issue, however, as Clines demonstrates it is easy enough to ignore or dismiss this scholarship. Further, lay people often do not have access to current scholarship and need to be made aware of these issues too. This should provoke a consideration of how theological understandings are communicated and who is doing the communication. If only men (and male clergy) are reading and communicating the latest scholarship they may overlook these issues or consider them as not important to engage with.

Women cannot do this work on their own, male allies are needed who are willing to see women as important and worthy of notice. Women's voices – in the text, in church traditions, and in faith communities – need to be intentionally listened to, alongside prioritising women interacting with, dialoguing with and reading the text. There needs to be a willingness to seek out these voices when they are hidden or obscured, and lift them up so that both women and men can experience the wisdom of women's lived experience.

Secondly, we need to understand the different facets of the issue and how the separately and in combination impact social behaviours. I have noted here that male authorship (which extends beyond the biblical text), male dominance and female absence all reinforce readings from a male perspective. But there are also many other factors, such as the deliberate suppression of women throughout history and even today, that impact women's experience and limit our capacity to understand how women may read the text.

One example of the deliberate suppression of women in the text is the apostle Junia mentioned in Romans 16:7. Junia is clearly a female name, and despite there being no historical attestation or manuscript evidence of the name Junias, this name has been consistently altered obscure the fact that this is a woman because of the difficulty for some to acknowledge that women in the New Testament were apostles.[31] Denying that women in the text were apostles, preachers, and leaders, is one way that women's leadership is denied and rejected even today. Gendered understandings, reinforced and justified via the biblical text extend across all parts of our biblical readings, worship and traditions, and therefore we must remain alert to this ongoing threat to gender equality within Christian faith communities.

[31] Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

Thirdly, we need to hear a variety of women's voices so that we can begin to understand the variety of women's experience, the breadth of women's perspectives and the way these elements interact with their reading of the text. White, well-educated, western women often have access to publishing and dissemination of their voices in a way that many others do not, so we need to think about ways to lift up the voices of women who have not been heard. All these factors have the potential to deepen and extend our own readings, if we are just willing to prioritise reading the Bible with women.

CONCLUSION

The issues of male dominance in the biblical text, in the church and in theology more broadly continue to impact the way women are viewed in Christian communities. This is an issue in my home country Australia as well as in many other countries. Feminist scholars continue to spend time and energy outlining the issues that arise from male dominance, time and energy that is then not available to work on other interesting projects and research. Unfortunately, until all members of the community decide that this is an important issue, this problem will continue to be present, and its impact felt most on women who are still marginalised in contemporary society.

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