5

Reclaiming the Sacred Text: Christian Feminism and Spirituality[1]

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The fourth chapter of John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1-42).[1] Jesus is tired and thirsty. It is midday and he has been travelling all day. He meets the woman, who has come to draw water, and asks her for a drink (v. 7) – a simple enough request but one that transgresses cultural barriers of gender and race. When the woman exclaims in surprise (v. 9), Jesus abruptly turns his request on its head, and himself offers water for the woman to drink (v. 10). Although sceptical at first, she attempts to understand the meaning of Jesus' offer of water, setting it within the context of her own experience.[2]

The woman begins her search for understanding by appealing to her traditions and cultural religious experience (v. 12).[3] She has difficulty in perceiving the spiritual and symbolic nature of the water offered by Jesus. For her it is a physical gift and she does not yet perceive its relationship to Jesus' revelation and his gift of the Spirit (v. 15).[4] Jesus unfolds the symbolic meaning, therefore, by addressing the woman's life-experience (vv. 16-18). He reveals to her, not her moral inadequacies (since the narrative does not imply that she is a great sinner or social outcast[5]),

but the profound thirst for life which "drives [her] from one supposed satisfaction to another, never letting [her] attain the final fulfilment until [she] finds the water of life" (Bultmann 1971:188). For the evangelist, it is not in sexual relationships with men that the meaning of her life is to be found, but in a renewed relationship with God mediated through Jesus.

The woman responds (v. 19), not with avoidance as readers sometimes assume, but with acceptance and insight (O'Day 1986:69-70). She sees at once that the self-knowledge which Jesus offers is profoundly spiritual. She perceives also that the real issue has to do with the Spirit and spirituality (v. 20). The woman does not avoid the painful issues of her life but rather seeks to find the place in her own experience where self-knowledge and the knowledge of God meet; where self-awareness gives rise to mystery within the concrete realities of life. For the rest of the conversation, the woman explores her way to a deeper understanding of Jesus' central role in God's revelation from her Samaritan perspective (vv. 21-25). Finally he reveals his true identity to her (v. 26). Having understood this, she runs to the villagers and shares with them her faith (vv. 28-30).[6] She leaves behind her water-jar because it is now irrelevant for her purpose (cf. Matthew 4:19-22); she now knows, at the deepest level, the symbolic nature of Jesus' gift (Schneiders 1991b: 192). In this action, she acknowledges both her thirst for life and her recognition of Jesus-Sophia as the giver of living water (cf. Sirach 14:19-22).[7]

The disciples have meanwhile returned and are outraged by Jesus' transgression of gender boundaries (v. 27). From now on it is clear that they understand nothing of what has taken place. The woman, on the other hand, does understand Jesus' mission and journeys to the village in the role of an apostle, sharing with him, through her witness (vv. 39-42), the eschatological "harvest" (Brown 1979:187-189; Schneiders 1982:40; Culpepper 1983:137; Fiorenza 1983:327; Okure 1988:161-181). Her response to the revelation contrasts markedly with the disciples who, through misunderstanding and gender prejudice, play no part in the apostolic harvest (vv. 31-38). Self-knowledge and spiritual insight have thus led the woman from inner emptiness and thirst to spirituality, self-knowledge, and a sense of purpose.[8] As a result, she brings the whole village to faith in Jesus as the "Saviour of the world" (v. 42).

Spirituality and a "Hermeneutics of Suspicion"

This reading of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman illustrates the inter-relationship between the Bible, feminist insight, and spirituality within a Christian theological framework. In particular, it suggests the importance of feminist readings of the Bible from a viewpoint that implicitly or explicitly challenges androcentric interpretation of the text.[9]

The hermeneutical debate in recent decades within Jewish and Christian circles has shown that there is no unbiased reading of the Bible, no pure form of objectivity to which the reader of the text can appeal.[10] On the contrary, self-conscious subjectivity can, where it is recognised, play a creative role in biblical exegesis (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:xiii-xxv, 26-36; Tolbert 1983:117-120).[11] This is particularly relevant for spirituality that reads the text intuitively and symbolically.

Christian feminist readings of the Bible generally begin with a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:15-18; 1992:52-53, 57-62) and move from there to a reclaiming of the text. The first proposed step – suspicion – means confronting and naming the text itself, as well as its interpretations, as patriarchal and harmful to women's psyche. This is particularly so for those parts of the text which sacralise a spirituality of invisibility and subservience: "Women today have the right ... to reject passages which are hostile to women or reinterpret them because they violate their status as children of God" (Moltmann-Wendel 1986:200). According to this method, a suspicious hermeneutic exposes the way in which the text manipulates the reader into an uncritical acceptance of patriarchy.

The second proposed hermeneutical step – reclaiming – takes different forms. For some feminist biblical scholars, it means the discovery and celebration of women's history behind the text (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992:31-34). For others, to reclaim the text means to interpret it from a literary and/or theological perspective. This involves reading "against the grain": inserting women's presence or experience into texts where they are conspicuously absent (Tolbert 1990:16-19). A theological example of this is the way Ruether, in her earlier work, re-directs the "prophetic-liberating traditions" of the Bible to women and women's experience of patriarchal structures of oppression (Ruether 1983:22-33, 61-66). Reading "against the grain" can also mean interpreting sympathetically texts which denigrate female characters, such as Schüssler Fiorenza's interpretation of Herodias in Mark 6:14-29, which presents her as a victim of patriarchal vilification (1992:48-50).

Although this method of reading Scripture is widely accepted by feminist exegetes and theologians, it is nevertheless problematical in one important respect: to suggest that we *begin* reading any text with suspicion seems to me to be fundamentally flawed. Feminist theology and spirituality need to be wary (suspicious!) of the kind of Enlightenment rationalism that such an approach presupposes. If Ricoeur is right, we begin reading a text naively, opening ourselves to its dynamic in the way children listen to stories; this first movement is "a naive grasping of the meaning of the text as a whole" (Ricoeur 1976:74). Critical func-

tions of any kind cannot and ought not to precede this initial response. Any reading – feminist or otherwise – that begins with suspicion is open to the same problematic: it assumes the reader can leap effortlessly across the abyss from the critical to the intuitive, from the negative to the positive. Yet to do so is difficult if not impossible. That is why so many current feminist readings of the Bible have become stuck in suspicion and have so little energy for reclaiming the text. On this point, feminist biblical scholars may need to adopt a more critical stance to our Enlightenment heritage – particularly the key role played in it by doubt and scepticism.

The problem here lies not so much with suspicion itself but rather the prominent place it is often given in feminist hermeneutics. One of the contributions women can make to the renewal of the Christian tradition is to emphasis the neglected role of the Spirit and spirituality in the dynamic reading Scripture. This means that women's contribution needs to avoid uncritical acceptance of the presuppositions of the historical critical method, however valuable the method is in itself. Women need to be aware that, as much as critical methodology has liberated the text, it has also down-played – and in some cases denied – its "spirited" possibilities. If we begin reading Scripture in a suspicious frame of mind, presupposing its androcentrism (or whatever), our interpretation can become entrapped, at best in a "neutral" reading that ignores the place of faith and the Spirit, and at worst in negativity, prejudice, self-projection and the desire for control. Suspicion can liberate, but it can also enslave. It needs to be seen as one in a number of critical tools that Christian women use to understand the Bible – part of the process of "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm). It is neither the first nor the last word on the text.

In the framework of a "naive" and open-ended reading, therefore, suspicion has a role to play. Texts operate on many levels, as modern literary studies of the Bible have shown. The "excavative" step in biblical studies (Alter 1981:13) – which is where suspicion rightly belongs – is one aspect in a holistic reading that allows different levels of meaning. A text is not exhausted when the critical work is done; in some cases, it has barely been touched. Three things are important for feminist hermeneutics, therefore, in moving to a positive and creative reclaiming of the text. First, it is important to come to terms with the text itself and not be satisfied with reading behind it (Tolbert 1990:12-14). In this sense, any interpretation of the text will be to some extent "against the grain". Yet there is a sense in which the text allows itself to be read in this way. Second-Isaiah's re-working of the exodus tradition, for example, could be said to be "against the grain" (cf. Weaver 1993:57-60); as could the

entire New Testament in its re-interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. When women read themselves and their life-experience into androcentric texts, they are doing – in one sense – as their ancestors have done. While they bring a radically new perspective to their reading, they do so from a perspective of inter-textuality that allows the "old" and the "new" to be mutually illuminating.[12]

Secondly, to move beyond suspicion means discovering in a fresh way a large number of passages – such as the story of the Samaritan woman – that speak to the heart of women's experience. Texts such as these have been marginalised or interpreted in androcentric and even misogynist ways.[13] Christian feminist spirituality does not accept the decrees of patriarchal tradition which determine how one text is to be evaluated in relation to another, but has the freedom to re-inscribe well-known texts and to draw marginalised texts into the centre of women's religious experience.[14] This is an aspect of hermeneutics that particularly affects liturgy. Here it is instructive to note the lectionary's inclusion of texts that negatively portray women's role and its exclusion of other texts that present female characters in a positive light (Procter-Smith 1985:51-62).

Thirdly, a feminist reclaiming of the text needs to proceed from the heart as well as the head, if the dualistic framework of patriarchal critical methodology is to be overcome. Spirituality and exegesis need to be brought closer together for a feminist hermeneutic to be successful. Again to use Ricoeur's model, a return to "naïveté" is the final, as well as the first, stage in reading a text. This time, however, the reader has passed through the "adult" phase of critical reading and now reads with an innocence that is no longer unknowing. In Ricoeur's dialectic, naive understanding moves to explanation (the critical stage) and then back to a sophisticated, empathic understanding (Ricoeur 1976:71-88). The reader, having eaten the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, now has access to the tree of life: to touch and taste the healing in its leaves. In this model, spirituality is not an extraneous move made once the exegete's task is done. Rather it is present from the beginning, allowing the critical, suspicious voice to be heard, but returning in the end to its own voice – the critical embraced by the mystical.

Women read the Bible, therefore, with woman-centred eyes, searching out spiritually and critically the word of God and discerning the presence of the Spirit in their faith-journey. They do not need to make the uncritical assumption, characteristic of certain forms of fundamentalism, that the "raw text" is of itself the word of God. Christian theology recognises that Scripture *becomes* the word of God in the context of spirituality, liturgy and lived experience. As Tolbert has expressed it,

"revelation and authority do not occur *in* the Bible, nor did they occur once upon a time *in* some historical past; rather, revelation and thus authority come now in the present experience of the believer" (Tolbert 1990:18). One of the reasons the Western tradition is so susceptible to biblical fundamentalism is its lack of focus on the doctrine of the Spirit. After all, if the Bible is literally the word of God, the voice of the Holy Spirit is superfluous. Feminist spirituality needs to advocate a vibrant renewal in Christian understanding of the Spirit who, in the interaction between text and experience, makes the ancient "dead letter" of the Bible into living, contemporary words.

Building on an earlier definition of symbol, Schneiders describes Scripture as the "symbol of the word of God".[15] That is, the text both points to and conveys the mysterious reality of the divine word within everyday experience but is not to be simplistically equated with that word (Schneiders 1991b:27-43). In effect, Schneiders is speaking here of the Bible as icon: a human creation with all its limitations that opens a window onto the divine, thus leading to human and social transformation.[16] This view of the Bible arises from the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, in which divine transcendence is manifest in human immanence. In the same way, an icon is not an idol – not identical with the divine – but is a pictorial symbol that leads to the transcendent. In an iconic sense, the Bible is and is not the word of God. A feminist hermeneutic needs to learn how to live within the tensive dynamic of the "is" and the "is not". Neglect of one or other dimension – which is, in effect, a denial of the Spirit – imprisons the reader in either credulous fundamentalism or nihilistic suspicion. In neither case does an authentic spirituality emerge. Within this framework Schneiders accepts the authority and normativity of the biblical text:

> If Scripture is understood as the sacrament of divine revelation, of God's historical self-disclosure, then normativity will be understood as the ever-developing guiding influence on our thought and action of an ever-deepening familiarity with God in Jesus (Schneiders 1991b:59).

Here the Bible is understood to operate in a dialogical, rather than coercive and authoritarian way, in women's lives (see also Russell 1985:140-146).[17]

The Role of Experience

A Christian feminist approach to the text gives a new set of priorities to the way the Bible is read. It takes seriously and regards positively the perspective from which women read the text, drawing attention to the way that liturgists, preachers and spiritual directors – even where they

have not been misogynist – have failed to take seriously women's experience (Halkes 1988:22-36; Schneiders 1991a:74-81).[18] Christian feminism claims that it is legitimate and necessary that women read the text afresh from their own perspective. To some this may seem as if feminists are subverting sacred literature to an ideological perspective that is uncritically affirming of women's experience. However, ideology of this kind – which in its own way can be oppressive of women – is not inevitable, provided that the reader's encounter with the text engages her in genuine dialogue. In itself, the focus on experience is not a new insight. The spiritual mothers and fathers of the Jewish and Christian traditions have always recognised, at some level, the need to take experience seriously in spirituality and worship.

An approach to spirituality that takes life-experience seriously does not imply, however, that human experience (of either gender) is the sole arbiter of truth (Young 1990:81-82). To say as Fischer does that "the authority of women's experience ... is a norm for the truthfulness of the tradition" (Fischer 1988:6) is not necessarily to absolutise the role of experience. Feminist theology needs to be wary of "religious enthusiasm", where experience is regarded as the only authority and which easily leads – as it has in certain forms of Protestantism – to religious and ideological fanaticism. For this reason, feminist concern for women's experience must maintain the integrity of the sacred text – and the tradition – as the other partner in dialogue. Christian feminist theology that ignores the critical role of Scripture and tradition in shaping women's experience creates a new form of hegemony and makes an idol of experience. In Young's words, an idolatry of experience is nothing less than the attempt to "develop an alternative magisterium" (Young 1990:81). The practice of discernment in spiritual formation offers one way of attending to these competing authorities in the context of personal spirituality. Through the dynamic presence of the Spirit, women discern the living truth of the Bible and the living truth about themselves. Each has its own integrity and its own authoritative voice.

This means that an authentic feminist spirituality cannot be uncritically affirming of women's experience. The challenging dimension of divine revelation is important for women as well as for men (Achtemeier 1988:51). The Bible uses the language of "judgement" to describe this aspect and it is often misunderstood. Theologically, judgement is the gracious and wise discerning of God who challenges and purifies the heart. Like men, women need to listen with the ears of faith to the divine word which is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow" (Hebrews 4:12). However, the challenge is not necessarily the same

for women and men. A woman's theological self-discernment addresses itself not so much to pride, self-assertion and the need for self-denial, but rather to self-doubt, timidity and the need for a strong and courageous sense of self (Saiving 1979:25-42; cf. also Saussy 1988: 125-137).[19]

This last point is an important one and involves recognising how women have been damaged, as well as nurtured, by the Christian tradition. Feminist spirituality recognises, for example, that behind much of Western spirituality lies a Platonic dualistic ideology that separates soul from body, spirit from matter, abstract from concrete, the human from nature, male from female. Not only have these groups been dichotomised, they have also been set into hierarchical relationship, in each case the former being superior to and dominant over the latter. This creates a body-matter-concrete-nature-female nexus which, within a pyramidal structure, is inferior to soul-spirit-abstract-human-male. As a result of this ontological dualism, women have suffered the destructive effects of a male-oriented religious worldview so that their experience of the divine is wounded. They have inherited a sense of shame, particularly associated with the body and sexuality, that is underscored wherever they are excluded from participation in, and leadership of, religious ritual. While there are traces of dualism in Jewish and Christian writings, however, such thinking is generally alien to the Hebrew mind. The Bible is both androcentric and patriarchal, but (unlike some of its later interpreters) it generally resists a full-blown dualism.[20] According to feminist theologians, it is this dualism as much as anything which lies at the basis of women's sense of oppression and low self-esteem (Halkes 1988:22-36; Schneiders 1991a:74-81).

Feminist spirituality involves, therefore, an acute sensitivity to the negative effects of dualistic thinking on female religious experience. When Christian women read the Bible, they do so out of a desire to experience the healing power of the divine, yearning to "resolve the split between self and other" (Fischer 1988:39); to discover, in place of dualism, the reconciliation and mutuality which lie at the heart of the Trinity (Wilson-Kastner 1983:121-137). To find such a spirituality, women need to recover a theology that affirms that, in partnership with men, they are created in the divine image (Genesis 1:26-27), and re-created in the image of the Christ through baptism (Galations 3:27-28). This is not fundamentally an ideological or intellectual stance. It arises out of the sufferings of women who, through patriarchal oppression and dualistic modes of thinking, have learned to under-value themselves as human beings and their experience of the divine.

Imaging God

So far I have spoken of the way in which Christian women, as embodied and spiritual beings, read the Bible in the context of experience. A further dimension is the question of how women perceive the divine, particularly in relation to prayer. Theologically the Jewish and Christian traditions assert that God is not male, despite their predominant use of male images and pronouns. Feminist theology finds the contradiction between form and substance inconsistent and disturbing. Images and metaphors are not decorative elements added to truth; they contain meaning within themselves. To image God in patriarchal and exclusively male terms shapes women's understanding, not only of the divine, but also of themselves. On an intuitive level, no matter what they are taught on the cerebral level, they believe that being male is closer to the divine than being female.

Women need a religious experience, therefore, that reveals rather than conceals the presence of the divine within them (cf. Genesis 1:26-27; Galatians 3:27-28). In Schneiders' words, "a healthy spirituality requires a healing of the imagination which will allow us not only to think differently about God but to experience God differently" (Schneiders 1986:19). In the mystical tradition, no image can capture the mystery of the deity; though some images are more appropriate than others, all are ultimately inadequate. Feminist theology that begins from this point argues that it is idolatrous to absolutise any one image or theological conception of God. Not only does such absolutising deny divine transcendence; it also leads to an idolatry of the male (McFague 1982:145-192; Plaskow 1990:125-128; Johnson 1992:18,40; cf. also Bloomquist 1989:45-60). Spirituality means encountering the mystery of God in ways that undercut the human tendency – male or female – to domesticate the divine. A feminist re-imaging of God along these lines, locating itself within the Jewish and Christian tradition, is another way of celebrating the holy otherness and mystery of God (Johnson 1986:243-247).

Once again, the Bible has a central role to play in naming God.[21] Biblical imagery for the deity is predominantly male. In an androcentric worldview, the male is normative and the female in some sense "abnormal"; thus the most appropriate way for monotheism to image the God-beyond-gender is assumed to be male. A "hermeneutics of suspicion" enables women to challenge this assumption and to understand it within a broad hermeneutical perspective: to note the way in which within Scripture, text and context, revelation and language coalesce in naming God. Here as elsewhere, the Bible is the source of its own

deconstruction. Its fundamental insight is a paradoxical one: God's name, revealed for the salvation of humankind in the word of Torah and for Christians in the divine Word of Jesus Christ, is beyond all names (Exodus 3:14), all "graven images" (Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10), and all human efforts at speaking and knowing (John 1:18, 5:37b, 6:46, 14:8-9).[22] Even in its most passionate naming of the divine, the Bible never forgets that God is ultimately unnameable.[23]

Moreover, even within biblical anthropomorphism not all divine language and imagery are patriarchal. The Bible offers a number of images for God that are both non-patriarchal male, and female (Schneiders 1986:20-49). These arise out of the experience of the community of faith as it struggles, at various points in its history, to name the divine in the light of the "new thing" God has done (Plaskow 1990:134-136). In theological terms, the naming of God emerges from the union of divine revelation and human experience. The traditions of the past are not discarded in such naming – since they belong within the orbit of revelation – but rather are re-interpreted. Feminists today are engaged legitimately in the same naming process: the same reclaiming and renewing of the past in light of present experience; the same contemporary "bringing to speech" of revelation. The one whose speaking is described, on the one hand, as "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8; cf. 1:1-2) is also the one who is voiced anew in each generation.

In this process of spiritual renewal, feminist theology needs to reclaim male imagery for God that can operate powerfully against patriarchy. Behind the Synoptic Gospels, for example, the divine name "abba" used by Jesus expresses a spirituality of love and trust within the terms of a close relationship (Mark 14:36). In the Gospel of John, the Greek *pater* ("father") develops the usage of the historical Jesus into a sophisticated Christology, without losing the intimacy, relationship and self-giving that lies at its heart. *Pater* in the Fourth Gospel occurs in contexts that articulate the giving away of power, and the drawing of others into relationship (e.g., John 1:18, 5:19-29, 6:37, 11:41-42, 14:1-31, 17:1-26, 20:17). This Christology challenges the patriarchal instinct to retain power and maintain exclusive relationships. In Paul, "abba" is used by the Christian community to express intimacy with God and the inclusion of all believers in divine "adoption" and inheritance – an inheritance that belongs to Christ as first-born son yet is extended by the Spirit to all within the household of faith, daughters as well as sons (Romans 8:14-17).[24]

Furthermore, divine fatherhood in significant parts of the New Testament is firmly anchored to the cross and not to patriarchal power structures. Rather than choosing patriarchal methods of power, the father-God of Jesus is the one whose power is manifest through suffering, who iden-

tifies with the powerless, who is unafraid of vulnerable self-giving, and whose power –when it comes – is life-giving for all (e.g., Mark 14:32-42/ pars.; John 3:16-17; 10:17-18; 13:3; Philippians 2:5-11; Ephesians 1:15-23). The God of the cross is the one who stands over against the "principalities and powers" of the world, patriarchal or otherwise. Although these powers are finally overthrown in the Easter events, they are defeated not by triumphalist methods but – to use Paul's terms – by the wisdom of God which is folly in the eyes of the world and the strength of God which is weakness (1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5). The symbol of divine fatherhood in this sense challenges patriarchal projections of power.

This is the God who is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth within the biblical tradition. Although Jesus' life is embedded in the finite realities of space and time – including gender – he represents in Christian theology the incarnate presence of God within the world. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God is named in a definitive way and revealed as radically loving and life-giving. In the New Testament, Jesus is the source of hope, not only for those who believe, but also for the world and creation (cf. Romans 8:18-25). As he is presented within the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' proclamation of God's *basileia* ("reign") challenges patriarchal religion and draws women into a "discipleship of equals" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:105-159) that reflects the *koinonia* ("communion") within God's own self. The risen Christ becomes the symbol, therefore, neither of male divinity nor male humanity, but rather of the inclusive humanity of God (Wilson-Kastner 1983:71-119; Johnson 1992:151-154, 164-165; Carmody 1992:141-146).

The Bible also offers a range of female imagery as a basis for explicitly female language for God (Mollenkott 1983). The first of these images or conceptions is that of Sophia or Lady Wisdom. Sophia is found primarily in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and inter-testamental period (Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach), but is also present in the New Testament: in the Synoptic Gospels (particularly the Q-tradition and Gospel of Matthew), the Fourth Gospel and the Pauline corpus. According to Elizabeth Johnson, who has particularly developed this theme (1985:261-294; 1992), Sophia within Wisdom literature is not just a personification but a manifestation of the divine being: "in certain texts, Sophia is in reality God herself in her activity in the world, God imaged as a female acting subject" (1985:275). The image is carried into the New Testament where Jesus is the messenger and, later, the incarnate presence of Sophia-God (1985:276-289; 1992:150-169). Sophia is pictured in the biblical tradition as hostess at a banquet, generously inviting all to share her lavish hospitality, her satisfying food and drink (Proverbs 9:1-6; Sirach 24:19-21; John 4:10-14; 6:35, 51-53; 7:37-38). She graciously sum-

mons disciples to take on her easy yoke, which is life-giving and directional (Matthew 11:28-30; Sirach 51:26-27). She appeals to those who are poor and hungry, lovingly nurturing them and satisfying their deepest yearnings for life. More than any other image, Sophia embodies the female gestalt of God within Scripture (Johnson 1992:86-100). Her divine characteristics make her a dynamic resource for Christian feminist spirituality (cf. Cady *et al.* 1986:76-93).[25]

In addition to Sophia, mothering images are used of God in the Hebrew Scriptures: giving birth, breast-feeding and nurturing (e.g., Job 10:10-11; Hosea 11:3-4; Isaiah 42:14; 66:13; cf. Johnson 1992:100-103). Similar female imagery is found in the New Testament. The image of birth lies at the basis of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, for example, where the divine Spirit is the one who mysteriously gives birth to God's children. Mothering images are used of Jesus – as in the lament over Jerusalem where Jesus pictures himself as a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings for protection (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). Female images are used of God in Jesus' parables, such as housekeeper (Luke 15:3-7) and bakerwoman (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). It is significant that in these two parables the link between God and the woman at the centre of the story is seldom made, unlike parables with a male protagonist (Schneiders 1986:38-40). Where these and other texts are used, they are fruitful resources for developing female imagery for God in relation to women's experience. The re-imaging of God reveals an important way in which Scripture can be reclaimed by women in today's context.

Christian spirituality is about encounter with God, through Jesus and in the power of the Spirit; it means being open to the divine self-communication and giving voice to one's true self in response. In Christian feminist spirituality, this mutual self-giving occurs not in individualistic isolation, but in the context of Christian community and the concerns of everyday life; it is also linked to a radical involvement in the world's oppression and pain. Despite being patriarchal, the Bible plays a key role in this communication. It is the channel that facilitates self-knowledge, knowledge of the world, and the intuitive knowledge of God. In this sense, the Bible in a feminist reading is the icon of the divine Word which radiates the mystery of God, through – and sometimes in spite of – its human structures and language. In dialogue between past tradition and women's experience, the text becomes a mirror on women's lives and a window to the divine. In this sense, women are "empowered to take back the Scriptures: to speak of them and to hear them, painfully, angrily, prophetically, hopefully, lovingly, and gracefully" (Chopp 1989:47).

The story of the Samaritan woman is an example of a text that reveals both aspects of the spiritual journey – affirmation and challenge – and draws the implied reader into identification with the woman's struggle. The narrative pays tribute to an unnamed woman, who, unlike Nicodemus in the preceding chapter of John's Gospel (3:1-21), has neither name, status, power, nor theological qualifications in her favour (Collins 1976:39-40; Pazdan 1987:145-148). Though the woman's gender, race and personal lifestyle combine to make her a non-entity, a non-being, the narrative takes seriously her experience and her religious searching. A "hermeneutics of suspicion" might point to the fact that the woman's nameless identity is never resolved in the narrative, and she is never explicitly identified with the disciples. A reclaimed reading, on the other hand, challenges interpretations that denigrate the woman's life, faith or witness (Schneiders 1991b:186-191) and points to the dynamic power of the narrative for contemporary women's lives. It is not difficult in this story for the real female reader to identify with the implied reader in the journey of self-discovery towards the divine. Precisely at those points where a patriarchal, religious establishment deems her unworthy, the narrative confirms her worth. The narrative thus leads the female reader to an experience of "conversion" that dissolves barriers of race and gender. The reader is transformed by the encounter with Jesus: in her self-knowledge, her sense of meaning, her relationships with others, her understanding of the world, her conscious awareness of divine mystery. In reading the narrative from a self-consciously female/feminist perspective, she encounters the God who offers life and salvation beyond the boundaries of patriarchal construction.

A Christian feminist re-reading of the biblical text is a "hermeneutics of marginality" (Chopp 1989:43-47): it comes from those who feel themselves to be living in the wilderness, searching for springs of water (Weaver 1993:65-72). From its place on the margins, a feminist hermeneutic demands "conversion of patriarchal religion" (Carmody 1992:36), and opens the Bible to women's experience, enabling it to function as word of God in a fresh and vital way. In this sense, the Bible enables women to name the harsh realities of the world; it affirms and challenges their lives; it nourishes hope in the face of suffering; it gives value to their experience of the divine (Carr 1988:212). For Jewish and Christian women alike, the Bible is the spring at which they are invited to drink living water. The Bible is not the water but rather is the well which gives access to the life-giving drink: to the revelation of Jesus-Sophia and to the Spirit of truth and love. As in the story of the Samaritan woman, the water of this well quenches the thirst for life, nurtures a vibrant sense of selfhood within the context of community, provides the

apostolic basis for women's ministry, and draws women deeper into the divine embrace.

Notes

1 Some of the material in this article appeared in my (1992) "Feminism and Spirituality: The Role of the Bible in Women's Spirituality", *The Way* 32:23-32 and is reproduced here with kind permission of the editor.

2 The form of this story is the betrothal narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 24:10-61, 29:1-20; Exodus 2:15b-21); cf. Alter (1981:51-52) and Schneiders (1991b:191). Some scholars, however, overplay the betrothal imagery and fail to see how radically John has re-worked the form.

3 On Samaritan religious traditions, see Macdonald (1964) and Neyrey (1979:419-437).

4 Scholars dispute whether water here is a symbol of the revelation (cf. Sophia as revealer and teacher) or the Spirit. Most likely both meanings are intended: so Brown (1966:1.178-179), Schnackenburg (1968:1.426) and Culpepper (1983: 192-195).

5 The narrator has no interest in why the woman comes alone to the well; from a literary point of view, both she and Jesus need to be alone for the encounter to take place (v. 8). Similarly, too much weight cannot be given to the woman's lifestyle, despite its irregularity (vv. 17-18; cf. Moloney 1993:148-149), though some scholars (e.g., Derrett 1984:252-261) try to draw an allegorical parallel with the supposed idolatry of the Samaritans (2 Kings 17:29-34). On this, cf. Schnackenburg (1966:1.433) and Barrett (1978:235-236).

6 There is some doubt in the text as to whether the woman's faith at this point is partial or full. For the former view, see Moloney (1993:156-158, 169-173); for the latter, see Okure (1988:174); also BDB §427.2.

7 On the Sophia overtones of this narrative, see Scott (1992: 184-198).

8 For further on John 4:1-42 from a feminist perspective, see Schneiders (1991b:180-199) and O'Day (1992:295-296); see also Lee (1993:35-48).

9 For a summary of various feminist approaches to the Bible, see Sakenfield (1988:5-18), Wainwright (1989:142-150) and Schüssler Fiorenza (1992:21-39).

10 For a Jewish perspective on feminist readings of the Bible, see Plaskow (1990:25-74).

11 On the dangers of such subjectivity turning into prejudice, see Heine 1987:4-5. The creative role of subjectivity does not mean, in exegesis, that we do not attempt to encounter the text as "other" than ourselves; see Schüssler Fiorenza (1992:33-34).

12 Elizabeth Achtemeier advocates a canonical reading of the text, based on the Reformation principle of allowing Scripture to illuminate (and critique) Scripture (1988:53-54).

13 Compare Calvin's description of the Samaritan woman as a "hussy" and a "prostitute" (1959:90), and Brown's reference to her as "mincing and coy" (1966:175).

14 Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 18-19) calls this a "hermeneutics of proclamation".

15 A symbol is "a sensible reality ... which renders present to and ... involves a person subjectively in ... a transforming experience ... of the mystery of the Transcendent" (Schneiders 1977:223).

16 See Chopp (1989:40-70) for an important discussion of the role of Scripture in Christian proclamation, with particular reference to Luke 4:16-30. She sees a revisioned proclaiming of the Word by women as bringing women's voice into speech, thus producing "emancipatory transformation" of social structures and women's marginalised lives. Here she distinguishes between the words and Word of Scripture, the latter operating within the former through the anointing of the Spirit "to provoke, speak, anticipate, move and point forward" (41).

17 For further on the positive and creative role of Scripture and tradition within Christian feminist theology, see Young (1990:71-93).

18 On the issue of women's experience, see especially Carr (1988:117-133) and Young (1990:49-69).

19 Saiving defines women's sinful tendencies as "triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organising center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self" (Saiving 1979:37).

20 On this philosophical dualism and its relationship to the "household codes" of the New Testament, see Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:70-85).

21 Not all feminist spirituality takes this view. For some feminist writers, the Bible and the Jewish and Christian traditions have nothing to offer women. A number of these post-Christian feminists have turned to the notion of "Goddess" as the source of women's spirituality. Broadly speaking, this is a shift in emphasis from God as revealed in history to Goddess revealed in the cycles of nature. See Christ (1987a:273-287; 1987b:57-66), Daly (1973;1978), Goldenberg (1979) and Hampson (1990); see also Weaver (1989:49-64).

22 Rebecca Chopp expresses this point well: "Word/God is in a religious sense unnameable, God is not God's proper name.... There is not a literal name of God, a correspondence of God with a reality which in any positive sense signifies God.... The relation between Word and words is one of

meaning, presence, and signification, but also one of gaps, inexpressibility, rupture, and chaos" (Chopp 1989:32).

23 For a helpful discussion of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic language for God, see Carr (1988:134-157) and Plaskow (1990:154-169).

24 On God as "abba" from a feminist perspective, see Soskice (1992:15-29); also Moltmann-Wendel (1986:91-102), Moltmann (1990:3-23) and Braaten (1989:26-33). Against this view, see Thistlethwaite (1989:109-125).

25 See also Elaine Wainwright in the present volume.

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