



Liberation, Faith, and Gender: Feminist Readings of the Gospels

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Abstract:

Feminist theology has given us a deep new way to read the Gospels, which challenges patriarchal readings that have pushed women to the edges of Christian traditions in the past. Feminist scholars reinterpret Jesus' teachings as a radical message of freedom that upholds dignity, equality, and justice by putting women's opinions and experiences front and center. In the Gospels, women are often not just passive followers, but also important witnesses to faith. For example, Mary Magdalene was the first person to tell people about the Resurrection, and the Syrophoenician woman who pushed Jesus in a conversation are both examples of this. When feminists look at these kinds of stories, they show how the Gospel message can be used to break down male structures. Furthermore, feminist readings show that early Christian groups were welcoming, but later became limited by established patriarchal structures. This essay makes the case that feminist readings of the Gospels not only give women back their power in the biblical story, but they can also help modern battles for gender equality and spiritual empowerment. By doing this, the Gospels are no longer relics of old patriarchy, but live texts of freedom that reimagine faith as a place of resistance, justice, and human flourishing in every way.

Keywords:

Feminist theology, Gospels, liberation, gender, women's agency, Jesus, patriarchy, faith, equality, spiritual empowerment

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Introduction

The Gospels, as significant Christian texts, have frequently been interpreted via male-centric perspectives, diminishing the prominence of women's voices. Feminist theology

interprets the Gospels as narratives advocating for freedom, justice, and gender equality. It endeavours to resurrect these words. Feminist scholars do not perceive women as passive recipients of faith; rather, they emphasize that women were active adherents, possessed theological acumen, and played a crucial role in Jesus' mission. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza famously stated in 1983, "Christian origins cannot be comprehended without considering the history of women." "Women were not merely recipients of Jesus' message; they were also active proclaimers and leaders in the early movement" (p. 33). The feminist interpretation is grounded in the narratives of the New Testament, which contradicts entrenched ecclesiastical traditions that prohibited women from assuming leadership roles. Feminist interpretations assert that Jesus' teachings significantly deviated from contemporary norms regarding the treatment of women. His engagements with individuals such as Mary Magdalene, Martha, and the Samaritan woman at the well challenge conventional notions of gender roles and affirm the spiritual authority and value of women. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) asserts, "The New Testament presents a vision of redeemed humanity where the hierarchy of gender is transcended within the faith community" (p. 117), highlighting this liberating dimension. Feminist theologians reexamine the Gospels as revolutionary texts that challenge patriarchal supremacy and envision a religion community founded on justice and equality.

Feminist interpretations of the Gospels transcend mere analysis; they include both political and theological endeavours aimed at reclaiming power. They illustrate how institutional Christianity has perverted the Gospels' capacity to liberate individuals historically, while also creating new dimensions of faith and practice. In 1992, Schüssler Fiorenza stated, "The struggle for liberation is a significant aspect of proclaiming the Gospel itself" (p. 5). This paper examines how feminist interpretations reinterpret the Gospel narratives as exemplars of freedom, faith, and gender justice. These narratives remain crucial for contemporary struggles against patriarchy, both within and without religious institutions.

Conceptual Framework

The convergence of liberation theology, feminist hermeneutics, and critical biblical studies establishes the foundation for feminist interpretations of the Gospels. This perspective posits that the Bible is not merely a collection of static patriarchal traditions, but a dynamic text subject to reinterpretation in the struggle against oppressive regimes. In 1983, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza referred to this as a "hermeneutics of remembrance." Feminist theology seeks to uncover the overlooked contributions of women in Christian history and reinterprets the Gospels as narratives of inclusive discipleship (p. 34). This entails not just highlighting the women featured in the text but also critiquing the male-centric interpretations of the Gospels historically. The framework additionally employs the emancipatory aspects of theology that amplify the voices of the marginalized. The Gospel fundamentally conveys a message of emancipation, proclaiming the kingdom of God as favourable tidings for the impoverished and subjugated (Gutiérrez, 1988, p. xxv) within

the framework of liberation theology. Feminist theologians advance this notion by asserting that gender oppression, akin to racial and economic oppression, represents a critical arena in which the struggle for freedom must occur. Feminist interpretations of the Gospels position women at the core of Christian identity and activity, rather than on the periphery.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) asserts that “the promotion of the full humanity of women” (p. 18) is a crucial feminist theology principle that must be maintained. This concept influences the interpretation of the Gospels, emphasizing narratives that bolster women’s faith, challenge patriarchal conventions, and envision alternative communal living arrangements. Employing this approach, feminist scholars can interpret the interactions between Jesus and women as transformative dialogues that contest gender roles and promote spiritual and social liberation. Feminist interpretations of the Gospels hinge on three interrelated concepts: reinstating women’s roles in early Christianity, perceiving the Bible as a text of justice from a liberationist perspective, and the ethical imperative to acknowledge women’s complete humanity. These concepts collaboratively facilitate the deconstruction of patriarchal interpretations of the Gospels and their reconstruction as dynamic texts of faith, gender equality, and liberation.

Women in the Gospel Narratives

Women have a significant yet underappreciated place in the Gospel narratives. They not only receive Jesus’ mission but also actively engage in sharing their beliefs. Their presence alters men’s expectations of the era and provides feminist theologians with significant avenues for contemplation. Mary Magdalene was the inaugural individual to proclaim that she had witnessed the resurrected Christ, informing her companions, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18, NRSV). She is among the most significant characters in the narrative. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983) emphasizes the significance of this verse, noting that Mary “assumes the role of apostle to the apostles” (p. 59), which contradicts subsequent traditions that marginalized her and denied women apostolic authority. Likewise, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–29) illustrates the concealed nature of Jesus’ mission. Engaging in conversation with a woman, particularly a Samaritan woman, contravened religious and social conventions. However, she emerged as a pivotal witness for her community. Sandra Schneiders stated in 1991, “The Samaritan woman is the first individual in John’s Gospel to whom Jesus explicitly discloses his identity, acknowledging her as a source of theological insight” (p. 133). This experience demonstrates that women may engage in religious discourse and empowers them to facilitate understanding of faith.

The Gospel of Luke further accentuates the roles of women as disciples and assistants. Luke 8:1–3 identifies Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna as women who supported Jesus’ mission “from their own resources.” In 1994, Turid Karlsen Seim stated that this information “challenges the notion of women as dependent figures and instead portrays them as independent agents in the Jesus movement” (p. 131). These narratives illustrate

that women played a significant role in the expansion of Jesus' mission. The presence of women at both the crucifixion and the empty tomb underscores their significance as credible witnesses following the departure of the male disciples. In her book, Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts, "The fidelity of the women at the cross and tomb signifies a profound reversal of patriarchal anticipations, positioning women at the core of the Christian kerygma." (1983, p.135) This recognition provides feminist interpretations a robust foundation for reinstating women at the core of the theological and historical development of Christianity. When analysed from a feminist perspective, the Gospel narratives portray women not as peripheral figures but as significant witnesses, adherents, and proclaimers of faith. Their narratives contest the patriarchal dismissal of women's experiences and emphasize the emancipatory potential of the Christian faith.

Themes of Liberation and Faith

The Gospels articulate a concept of freedom that transcends societal, cultural, and gender constraints. They demonstrate that faith is a potent catalyst for transformation, rooted in justice and inclusivity for all individuals. Jesus' mission centers on proclaiming the kingdom of God as a message of hope for the marginalized. According to Luke 4:18–19, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the impoverished and liberate the captives." This poem highlights the liberating nature of faith, wherein freedom encompasses both spiritual and profound social dimensions. Gustavo Gutiérrez articulated in 1988 that freedom constitutes "a single, complex process which is social, political, and spiritual simultaneously" (p. xxvii). Feminist interpretations extend this assertion by incorporating women into the broader concept of liberation, positing that gender-based oppression is equally significant to the Gospel's message as poverty or colonialism. In the Gospels, women's faith is frequently shown as a paradigm of liberation. This is explicitly illustrated in the account of the lady afflicted with hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34). She approaches Jesus directly, despite the prevailing moral objections, and her faith not only restores her health but also elevates her notoriety: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Mark 5:34). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza characterized this incident in 1983 as "a paradigmatic narrative of women's faith overcoming structures of exclusion" (p. 122).

Faith serves as a mechanism of resistance that empowers women inside patriarchal societies. The narrative of the tenacious widow (Luke 18:1–8) illustrates the interconnection of faith, resolve, and justice. Sandra Schneiders (1991) asserts that the widow's persistent demand for justice exemplifies "a form of biblical faith that rejects exclusion" (p. 141). These narratives illustrate that freedom in the Gospels is not passive; rather, it is dynamic and necessitates a faith that advocates for equality and respect. Feminist theology emphasizes the interconnection between belief and action. In 1983, Rosemary Radford Ruether stated that "the critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women" (p. 18). She asserts that this principle alters our perception of Gospel narratives, transforming them into sites of liberating faith that

challenge oppressive traditions. In the Gospels, women's faith transcends personal piety; it serves as a transformative force that fosters community change and facilitates pathways to justice. Feminist interpretations of the Gospels integrate themes of liberation and belief to demonstrate that women may effectuate justice, healing, and renewal. The Gospel message demonstrates that it encompasses not only eternal salvation but also the dismantling of social and gender categories, illustrating a mode of existence rooted in faith and active resistance.

Feminist Theological Responses to the Gospels

In reaction to decades of patriarchal readings that demean women, feminist theology has reinterpreted the Gospels as writings of resistance and liberation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza initially articulated this assertion in 1983, positing the early Jesus movement as an egalitarian "discipleship of equals." She stated, "the proclamation of Jesus constitutes good news for women, as it transcends structures of subordination and exclusion" (p. 108). Fiorenza posits that women's roles as followers, leaders, and the initial witnesses of the Resurrection contradict male-centric traditions that subsequently marginalized their contributions. In 1983, Rosemary Radford Ruether asserted that feminist theology must critically engage with the Gospels, acknowledging their liberating ideas but dismissing their patriarchal interpretations. "Any entity that denies, diminishes, or distorts the complete humanity of women is consequently deemed non-redemptive," she asserts (p. 19). Feminist scholars employ this notion to distinguish the broad inclusivity of Jesus' teaching from subsequent ecclesiastical regulations that constrained women's responsibilities.

Sandra Schneiders (1991) asserts that the Gospels serve as narratives that empower women and inspire them to reclaim their identities as active participants in religion. Schneiders asserts that Mary Magdalene was the apostle who witnessed the Resurrection (John 20:11–18), and contends that "her role cannot be marginalized without falsifying the central meaning of the Resurrection narratives" (p. 182). This indicates that feminist interpretations of the Gospels are not novel concepts; rather, they represent reinvigorations of significant contributions women have historically given to the Christian religion. Feminist theologians emphasize the significance of interpreting the Gospels through the lens of contemporary justice struggles. Kwok Pui-lan (2005) asserts from a postcolonial feminist perspective that "feminist readings of the Gospels must be attentive to race, class, and colonialism, as these intersect with gender in shaping both biblical interpretation and lived experience" (p. 72). Feminist interpretations of the Gospels extend beyond gender, encompassing a broader perspective on religion and freedom. Feminist theology perceives these interpretations of the Gospels not as immutable writings entrenched in patriarchal tradition, but as dynamic expressions of liberation. Feminist theologians reexamine the Gospels as radical appeals for justice, equality, and dignity by reinstating women's perspectives, highlighting distortions, and addressing multifaceted difficulties.

Challenges and Counter-Arguments

Feminist interpretations of the Gospels prioritize freedom and equality; nonetheless, they encounter significant challenges from conventional theology and discussions regarding textual interpretation. A significant issue is that several scholars argue feminist interpretations impose contemporary notions of gender and justice onto historical texts, which is inappropriate. In 1998, Luke Timothy Johnson asserted that “ideological readings are perilous as they often compel the text to conform to the reader’s anticipations, obscuring the historical peculiarities of the Gospel narratives” (p. 35). Such objections indicate that feminist theology does not consistently prioritize contemporary challenges over textual purity. Another argument against this perspective is that not all elements of the Gospel align seamlessly with egalitarian principles. Historically, certain scriptures, like as Pauline directives instructing women to be silent in churches, have been seen as endorsements of authority. Feminist theologians such as Fiorenza reevaluate these concepts within broader liberatory frameworks; nonetheless, some opponents argue that this selective reinterpretation may compromise the text’s consistency. Women significantly influenced Jesus’ mission; yet, N. T. Wright (2004) asserts that “the later church did not consistently maintain this radical inclusivity, and the texts themselves exhibit both liberation and limitation” (p. 72).

Certain theologians contend that feminist interpretations may not adequately acknowledge the merits of traditional exegesis. Donahue (1997) asserts that although patriarchal, patristic, and medieval interpretations include profound spiritual insights, feminist theology often neglects these perspectives (p. 14). This prompts me to consider if feminist interpretations may inadvertently force a dichotomy between freedom and tradition, neglecting the historical reception of the Gospels. Finally, postcolonial feminists caution against generalizing the experiences of women in the Bible as representative of all women. Kwok Pui-lan asserts, “Western feminist interpretations frequently neglect the influence of class, race, and colonial histories on women’s interactions with the Gospels” (p. 83). Feminist theology, while liberating, must engage in self-critique, remain cognizant of many contexts, and be receptive to other interpretations of freedom and religion. A significant number of individuals contest these perspectives, indicating that feminist interpretations of the Gospels remain contentious within theological discourse. They request a more intricate response that harmonizes independence with fidelity to the text, comprehension of the context, and acknowledgment of other interpretative approaches.

Contemporary Relevance

The feminist reinterpretation of the Gospels continues to influence theological discourse and social activism today, particularly with human rights, gender equity, and ecclesiastical reform. Interpreted through a feminist perspective, the Gospels reveal both historical struggles for women’s rights and contemporary strategies to combat patriarchal systems within the church and society. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserts in 1983, “Christian

women can no longer accept a subordinate role in the church when the origins of Christianity affirm women's centrality in proclaiming the gospel" (p. 67). This statement illustrates the significance of the feminist hermeneutic in reevaluating contemporary participation in the church. Contemporary theological discourse reveals that feminist interpretations illustrate how narratives of faith and liberation provide a counterpoint to the enduring gender inequality present in both religious and secular contexts. In 1993, writer Rosemary Radford Ruether stated, "the freedom promised in the New Testament must be actualized in the structures of church and society if it is to retain credibility" (p. 136). From her perspective, it is essential to continue transforming biblical vision into tangible reforms that enhance women's leadership, involvement, and voice.

Feminist interpretations of the Gospels align with global justice movements, amplifying the voices of the marginalized. Kwok Pui-lan states, "Contextual, postcolonial, and cognizant of the varied experiences of oppression and empowerment among women in the global South" (Kwok Pui-lan, 2005, p. 112). This indicates that the Gospels' message of liberation transcends cultural boundaries and addresses numerous challenges related to gender equality, particularly in postcolonial and non-Western contexts. Contemporary interpretations provide theological endorsement for gender-inclusive ecclesiastical activities, including as the ordination of women and inclusive liturgies. They also ignite broader movements for equality and remind Christians that the Gospels are not static texts but dynamic narratives of faith that combat many forms of injustice. Letty Russell (1993) asserts that the objective is to transform the biblical narrative of liberation into our personal narrative of resistance and hope in a persistently oppressive environment (p. 54). Feminist interpretations of the Gospels remain significant today as they reaffirm women's value, contest patriarchal systems, and preserve the radical, emancipatory aspects of faith for the continuous struggle for justice and equality.

Conclusion

Feminist interpretations of the Gospels advocate for the reclamation of Jesus' transformative vision of ministry, centered on justice, freedom, and dignity for all, particularly for women who have been marginalized within Christian tradition for an extended period. Feminist theology critiques patriarchal perspectives by emphasizing women's responsibilities as adherents, witnesses, and bearers of faith, while also revitalizing the transformative spirit evident in the Gospel narratives. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that the Christian faith cannot be authentically proclaimed today without addressing the complete humanity and value of women. This concept positions contemporary religion in opposition to systems perpetuating injustice, while reinstating the liberating potential of faith as a catalyst for gender justice. Theologically, these new interpretations present the Gospels as dynamic texts rather than as historical accounts. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, a religion of freedom should be evaluated based on its ability to uphold the complete humanity of both men and women. This interpretation ensures that faith and justice are not distinct, but rather the paramount

manifestations of one another. Feminist interpretations redefine discipleship by contextualizing it within the practices of unity, inclusivity, and resistance to injustice. These perspectives remain highly significant today as they provide both religious communities and society at large with resources to combat gender inequity. Feminist theology, according to Letty Russell, aims to sustain the aspiration for freedom in a context of oppression, so enabling faith to serve as a wellspring of hope and transformation. Ultimately, feminist interpretations of the Gospels demonstrate that faith and freedom are intrinsically linked, and that the pursuit of gender equality is not a mere ancillary concern but a fundamental aspect of the Gospel's essence

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