A DIALOGUE ON FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, MUSA DUBE, AND JOHN PAUL II ON MARK 5 AND JOHN 4

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A DIALOGUE ON FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, MUSA DUBE, AND JOHN PAUL II ON MARK 5 AND JOHN 4

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ABSTRACT

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The study of feminist biblical hermeneutics is very diverse; it can mean different things to different people. As a result, there is much disagreement concerning how to read Scriptures from a feminist perspective in the correct way. For a proper study of the Scriptures from a feminist point of view, one must converse with other forms of feminist hermeneutics. Therefore, using excerpts from Mark 5 and John 4, this thesis will create a dialogue between the theologians Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, Musa Dube, and John Paul II. In doing so, this thesis will attempt to show a more comprehensive feminist biblical hermeneutic using theological perspectives from Catholic Western feminism, Protestant Two-Thirds World feminism, and the Magisterium.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. iii

I. INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................... 1

II. ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA ................................................................. 6

   Introduction .............................................................................................................. 6
   Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation ............................................................... 8
   The Limits of Language .......................................................................................... 13
   Schüssler Fiorenza’s Interpretation of Mark 5 ..................................................... 18
   Schüssler Fiorenza’s Interpretation of John 4 ....................................................... 21
   Conclusions ............................................................................................................ 24

III. MUSA DUBE ......................................................................................................... 26

   Introduction ............................................................................................................ 26
   Postcolonialism ....................................................................................................... 27
   Postcolonialism and the Bible ................................................................................ 29
   Postcolonialism in Light of Feminism .................................................................... 31
   Postcolonial Feminism and the Bible ..................................................................... 34
   Dube’s Interpretation of Mark 5 ............................................................................. 37
   Dube’s Interpretation of John 4 ............................................................................. 40
   Conclusions ............................................................................................................ 44

IV. JOHN PAUL II ......................................................................................................... 46

   Introduction ............................................................................................................ 46
   *Mulieris Dignitatem* and John Paul II’s Theology of Women .............................. 47
   *Dei Verbum* .......................................................................................................... 47
   Historical Context and the Author’s Intention ...................................................... 50
   The Dignity of Women through Vocation .............................................................. 55
   John Paul II’s Interpretation of Mark 5 ................................................................. 59
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Feminist biblical hermeneutics, or the study of Scriptures through a lens that promotes and celebrates the worth of women, is an important topic that theologians have approached from a broad variety of perspectives. It is significant because it moves Christianity away from the sexist notions of the past and it moves the Church towards a truly egalitarian relationship between women and men. Throughout the years, many forms of Christianity have treated women as lesser beings than men often through the use of Scriptures. Feminist biblical hermeneutics seeks to look to the Scriptures but instead of focusing on arguments that support the submission or objectification of women, it seeks to discuss Scripture in light of a number of feminist concerns, including whether women are equal to men. “Equality” in this sense means that women and men should receive the same treatment because they are both created in the image and likeness of God and therefore have human dignity. Equal treatment includes many things—from a broader interpretation of Scripture (to include the experience of women) to including women more in the church and society.

In the field of feminist biblical hermeneutics, there is great diversity. For instance, there is the perspective of feminism in the West, which often focuses on language and images of God. In addition, there is New Feminism, which is influenced by the
Magisterial teachings on women and how that might apply to the Bible. Also, there is womanist biblical hermeneutics, which reads the Bible from the perspective of an African-American woman. A final example of feminist biblical hermeneutics comes from the perspective of women in nations that were formally colonized, which is called postcolonial feminist biblical hermeneutics. These perspectives are diverse, but they are nevertheless all examples of feminist biblical hermeneutics. However, since the practice of feminist biblical hermeneutics includes such a wide variety of perspectives, oftentimes theologians disagree on the appropriate way to read the Scriptures. Unfortunately, there are still elements of sexism in various Christian perspectives, such as using women as metaphors for sin or conquered nations, or using the text to imply that women should solely submit to their husbands. Because of these examples and many others, feminist theologians still have much work to do. One of the biggest problems in the field of feminist biblical hermeneutics is not that theologians are not trying hard enough to fight against sexism and gender issues, but rather that the wide variety of feminist theologians do not stay in dialogue with one another. To be in contention with others who seek the same goal is counter-productive. Therefore, in this thesis, I will address this problem and suggest ways in which to solve it. This thesis by no means represents the perspectives of all feminist theologians—it does not even represent a small portion of them. Conversely, this thesis will show the contrast between a small sample of feminist theologians and the issues between them. I will put three theologians in dialogue with each other and take the strengths of each one to create a more comprehensive and complete feminist biblical hermeneutic that can point us toward a more egalitarian Church.

1 These feminist perspectives are merely examples and do not include every feminist voice. For instance, while this thesis will deal partially with Western feminism, there is also an entirely different feminist perspective in the East, which is not included here.
The three theologians that I will be using have significantly different points of view, but are each very significant to their field. The first chapter will be about the Catholic feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. She is an immigrant to the United States from Germany and deals with Western feminist issues that pertain to the Roman Catholic faith, although her ideas and methodologies can be applied to other faiths as well. Schüssler Fiorenza is important to feminist biblical hermeneutics because she represents a well-respected voice in Western feminism. In the past, this voice was the only voice associated with feminism. In addition, Schüssler Fiorenza is important because she, like John Paul II, comes from a Roman Catholic perspective, but she comes to very different conclusions about Scriptures. While this thesis will not solely represent Roman Catholic voices, it is still coming from the perspective of a Roman Catholic, thus it is significant that Schüssler Fiorenza is both a feminist and a Catholic. Schüssler Fiorenza (in contrast to John Paul II) demonstrates how even within the same faith-tradition, people can come to very different conclusions on a particular biblical text based on their personal experience.

Chapter Two will analyze the works of Musa Dube, an African postcolonial feminist theologian. Dube’s work critiques colonialism, Westernization, and Western feminism. She seeks to give a voice to those in the Two-Thirds World—especially women. Musa Dube is an important voice for feminist biblical hermeneutics because she represents the critique of both the solely male perspective and the Western feminist perspective. In addition, her voice is important because she is not Catholic, so she offers a different view of Church Tradition and what it means to be a Christian in general (in the sense that she of course does not follow the teachings of the Magisterium).
Chapter Three will explore the theological perspective of Pope John Paul II and his document *Mulieris Dignitatem* in particular. He is not generally considered a “feminist” in the traditional sense, but his apostolic letter deals especially with women. John Paul II seeks to emphasize the dignity of women through their vocations. His voice is important for feminist biblical hermeneutics for a number of reasons. First of all, he comes from the perspective that many feminist theologians have tried to critique in the past—the perspective of the all-male hierarchy. It is especially significant that he was pope, since he has the authority to shape Church doctrine, and his pro-women point of view demonstrates that sexism in the Church is not tolerated under any circumstance. In addition, his perspective is important because it shows us exactly where the flaws are in Church teachings that pertain to women. Instead of reading a secondary source, reading his work directly shows us the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic Church’s theology of women.

Each chapter relating to a particular theologian will be structured in the same way. First, I will discuss their overall methodologies. This includes how they each interpret Scriptures, but it also includes their theological perspectives. This will give the reader a sense of the argument that each theologian is making, and as a result, will help the reader make sense of the final section in each methodological chapter. The final section of each chapter will consist of an analysis of two particular Scripture passages—Mark 5 and John 4. These two passages are significant to feminist biblical hermeneutics because they both deal with Jesus interacting with women directly, and therefore they demonstrate how Jesus instructed us to treat women. While there are many passages that could be applied
to feminist biblical hermeneutics, I use these texts to make a specifically Christian point and look at how Christ treats women.

In the final chapter, I will compare and contrast the three theologians. Having examined each theologian’s assumptions and methods, I will put them in conversation with each other, making educated suppositions about the kinds of questions they might pose to the others. I intend to show the positive aspects of each three of the theologians’ methodological approaches to feminist biblical hermeneutics and why these aspects are important for dealing with sexism and gender issues that pertain to biblical texts. However, I will also point out the problems with each theologian, and explicate the ways in which the other two theologians are necessary to pick up where he or she leaves off. In other words, I aim to show the weaknesses of each methodology in order to argue why the three theologians should stay in dialogue with each other.

My conclusions will not solve all of the problems with feminist biblical hermeneutics, but should give the reader a small glimpse of ways in which more and better conversation, especially between those who strongly disagree with each other, might improve feminist biblical hermeneutics. Without the use of dialogue, the study of feminist biblical hermeneutics solves no problems and only creates a divide, not only with “traditional” mainstream scholarship, but with other feminist theologians. My conclusions will show the benefits of staying in conversation with one another through demonstrating the great diversity of scholarship in the field.
CHAPTER TWO
ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA

Introduction

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is an immigrant-American Catholic theologian who focuses on such topics as feminist biblical hermeneutics, how we are to speak about God, and the problem of patriarchy. Specifically, in her biblical hermeneutics work, she attempts to create new methods that do not have direct patriarchal influences, such as her use of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which does not assume the text to be correct, but rather suggests that we read texts with suspicion. In addition, she also deals with language issues as they pertain to the Bible and Christianity. Schüssler Fiorenza is considered a feminist theologian, which can mean many things. However, for her, this means she begins with women’s experience in order to end sexist ideals in Christianity. Through her theology, she looks towards a more egalitarian form of Christianity, similar to Christ’s original group of followers. She calls this ideal a “discipleship of equals.”

Schüssler Fiorenza notes that “a feminist theology attempts to name and to reflect critically upon the negative as on the positive G*d-experiences [and experiences in

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Christianity in general] of wo/men (sic).” In other words, feminist theology deals heavily with personal experience. In addition, she stresses that

A feminist theology engages in a never ending feminist process of critical theologizing, which is able to reject any attempt that seeks to express the Divine as an ideal type of femininity or that projects cultural feminine values and images into heaven. At the same time this feminist theology continues to insist that Christian theology and piety should not go on to name the heavenly world and the Divine in purely masculine-patriarchal language and images that are exclusive of women. 

In other words, for Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist theologian constantly thinks critically and avoids limiting Christian ideals (and in this particular case, how we are to think and talk about the Divine) to gender stereotypes (whether they are female or male gender stereotypes).

An additional thing to point out about Schüssler Fiorenza’s work is that it has elements of liberation theology—she is clearly influenced by Latin American liberation theologians such as Juan Luis Segundo. In Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, she seeks to alleviate problems of sexism in Christianity and liberate the marginalized (in particular, marginalized women). She looks to the Bible to interpret it in a way that is redemptive and liberating to women, rather than demeaning and degrading. Unlike many secular feminists, she does not dismiss the Bible outright simply because it has sexist elements. Instead, Schüssler Fioreansa tries to emphasize what is good about the Bible while also taking what can be seen as negative and puts it in the correct historical context.

Another important point to mention about Schüssler Fiorenza’s theological project is that she creates words of her own. This is significant because she is going

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5 Ibid.
outside of what is considered normative—Schüssler Fiorenza changes language to avoid falling into language traps that she feels contributes to patriarchal norms. Also, she does this to include people of various sociopolitical and ethnic groups, such as men and women in the Two-Thirds World. Schüssler Fiorenza incorporates her new language terms into her theology.

In this chapter, I will lay out Schüssler Fiorenza’s methodologies for practicing a critical feminist biblical interpretation. In addition, I will argue that she has a methodology that she does not explicitly say—her emphasis on the problem of language as it pertains to feminist theology. Finally, I will demonstrate how Schüssler Fiorenza applies her methodologies to actual Scriptural texts, using the New Testament stories of the bleeding woman and the Samaritan woman.

*Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation*

In Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, she emphasizes the need for a new kind of biblical hermeneutics. She notes that in the past, biblical interpretation was strictly done from an androcentric (male-centered) perspective. Schüssler Fiorenza points out that the androcentric perspective, at least in academia, is still dominant due to the fact that feminist New Testament studies and feminist theologies do not have sufficient “institutional structures and support systems.” In other words, feminist New Testament studies needs its own unique methodologies that are completely separate from the ones that have been present in academia for years. She continues on to point out that

If the so-called value-free stance and patriarchal institutions of the academy guarantee the structural perpetuation of the androcentric-dualistic paradigm, then we have to ask what kind of institutional basis and

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7 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word*, 190.
research strategies or methods the feminist paradigm needs to create in order to overcome androcentric dualism and to support women in our liberation struggle.\textsuperscript{9}

Here she suggests that we need to create new strategies in academia that go outside the usual patriarchal paradigm. Schüssler Fiorenza further explains that women, as members of a marginalized group, have trouble changing the “dominant paradigm”:

Feminist scholars in religion, I would submit, have focused on androcentric symbol systems, language, and traditions because as members of an academic elite we have the "power of naming" within the overall androcentric academic paradigm. However, as women belonging to a marginal and powerless group, we do not have the power to change the dominant paradigm as long as we and our work are not a conscious part of a women's movement for change and liberation.\textsuperscript{10}

Essentially, as long as there are no alternatives to the current methods in the hermeneutics of Scriptures, feminist biblical scholarship cannot be utilized properly and move forward.

In addition, women in feminist scholarship, even though they are members of a marginalized group, “share in the privileges of the male academic elite” (making them capable of oppressing other women through their power).\textsuperscript{11} Since this is the case, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that a new methodology be put into place when interpreting the Scriptures.

Schüssler Fiorenza says that the Bible must be read in a deconstructive way as well as a reconstructive way. She details seven hermeneutical strategies\textsuperscript{12} to help her read Scripture in a way that complements the needs of feminist theology:

A hermeneutics of experience that socially locates experience, a hermeneutics of domination, a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of assessment and evaluation, a hermeneutics of re-imagination, a hermeneutics of reconstruction, and hermeneutics of change and

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Her seven strategies include both reconstructive and deconstructive methods.
transformation. These strategies are not to be construed simply as successive and progressive but must be understood as corrective, repetitive and interactive.¹³

The first hermeneutical strategy, a hermeneutics of experience, is not uncommon for feminist theology. Schüssler Fiorenza is stressing the importance of starting with personal experience. Since the experience of women has been absent due to androcentrism, this point is significant. However, a more unusual aspect of her method is her hermeneutics of domination, which has to do with how “our social, cultural, and religious location has shaped our experience with and our reaction to a particular biblical text or story.”¹⁴ For instance, a white American man might react very differently to a biblical story about slavery than an African American woman. We are all shaped by our social location, which in turn shapes our experience.

The next hermeneutical strategy, a hermeneutics of suspicion, suggests that the scholar should read the biblical text with suspicion rather than trust. In other words, instead of looking at the text with wholehearted “respect, acceptance, consent, and obedience,” Schüssler Fiorenza instructs scholars to look at biblical texts with caution and avoid taking “its claim to divine authority at face value.”¹⁵ Due to the fact that many people may find the questioning of biblical authority as taboo, Schüssler Fiorenza explains that one must work through one’s own “emotions, anxieties, and fears” and discover what good comes of “upholding a hermeneutics of appreciation and consent.”¹⁶ In essence, one must overcome one’s personal issues with questioning biblical authority.

¹³ Schüssler Fiorenza, Sharing her Word, 77.
¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Wisdom Ways, 172.
¹⁵ Ibid., 175.
¹⁶ Ibid.
The next strategy, a hermeneutics of assessment and evaluation, seeks to acknowledge the various meanings that a text could have. This strategy puts the text in context and analyzes the text’s rhetoric and traditions. It seeks to “make conscious the cultural-religious internalizations and legitimations of kyriarchy [patriarchy] and to explore the values and visions that are inscribed as counter-cultural alternatives in biblical texts.” \(^{17}\) A hermeneutics of assessment and evaluation recognizes elements of a patriarchal structure and does not make excuses for these elements. Instead, this method scrutinizes and critiques the text and its patriarchal elements.

One of Schüssler Fiorenza’s other strategies to biblical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of re-imaginartion. Simply put, this strategy seeks to imagine a better tomorrow. Schüssler Fiorenza stresses the importance of re-imagination because without it, one cannot change the future. Re-imagination allows us to understand the perspective of others. It allows us to understand the pain that others go through. In terms of women in history, it gives us the opportunity to understand how women struggled in the past and connect it to our lives today. \(^{18}\) Schüssler Fiorenza explains that this allows us to “tell the story differently [and] to see history in a new light.” \(^{19}\) It also allows us to perceive how negative situations could be changed and prevented in the future. \(^{20}\)

Moreover, Schüssler Fiorenza discusses a hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction. This strategy seeks to give a voice to the voiceless in the biblical text. As stated above, biblical texts come from an androcentric perspective. In contrast, Schüssler Fiorenza’s strategy of a hermeneutics of remembering looks to recall those who were not

\(^{17}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 177.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 179.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 180.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
heard in the text—the oppressed. Therefore, it does not necessarily look at historical sources as historical facts.\textsuperscript{21} However, a hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction “subscribes to rhetorical realism, which understands history as possible and probable.”\textsuperscript{22} In addition, it is “narrative laden; it is a remaking and retelling of reality but not reality itself.”\textsuperscript{23} A hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction seeks to improve our understanding of those who were left out of the texts. For instance, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that in places where women are not mentioned, we must assume that women were present (unless it is explicitly stated otherwise). A hermeneutics of remembering and a feminist critique of Scriptures reinscribes “the truth that feminist knowledge produces: Women are not and have not been an absence but a presence in all human affairs.”\textsuperscript{24}

In addition to noting this absence of women in texts, Schüssler Fiorenza also points out that if there is a text that instructs women to refrain from something, we must assume that it is because women engaged in the activity frequently at some point in the past. As a result, their presence eventually became a threat to the patriarchy. Finally, Schüssler Fiorenza explains that we must contextualize the texts in their particular religious and cultural environments and reconstruct them “not only in terms of the dominant ethos but also in terms of alternative social movements for change.”\textsuperscript{25} In other words, we must take into account the social movements present during the time of the text that are not specifically present in the text themselves.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Sharing her Word}, 101.
\textsuperscript{25} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Wisdom Ways}, 185.
The final strategy of Schüssler Fiorenza’s hermeneutical method is her hermeneutics of change and transformation. This strategy is the culminating strategy which somewhat includes all the other strategies. It seeks to transform the current attitudes of domination into a just future. However, Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges that this cannot be done without working from our present experiences, and our present experiences are already predetermined by what has happened in our past. Therefore Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that we “analyze the past and the present in order to articulate creative visions and transcending imaginations for a new humanity, global ecology, and religious community.”

She adds that only when we are dedicated to working for a future of justice will we be able to change the elements of our past and present that restrict our overall vision.

Schüssler Fiorenza uses these seven strategies in order to practice critical feminist biblical interpretation. Overall, she seeks to find liberation for women in biblical texts through both the deconstruction (a hermeneutics of experience, domination, suspicion, and evaluation) and reconstruction (a hermeneutics of re-imagination, reconstruction, and change) of the Scriptures. In addition, there is another strategy that she uses in her writing that she does not explicitly state, and that is her stress on the importance of language.

The Limits of Language

A final important aspect of Schüssler Fiorenza’s Western feminist theological method deals with issues of language. While she does not include this in her hermeneutical strategies, it is certainly present throughout her works. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, language problems also stem from the limits of an androcentric

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26 Ibid., 186.
27 Ibid.
perspective. She makes a distinction between a grammatical gender and a natural one. For instance, she uses the example of the word “moon.” In such languages as Latin, Spanish, and English, the word “moon” is a grammatically feminine one, but in German it is a grammatically masculine one. However, Schüssler Fiorenza warns that that the process of giving words a gender does not reveal the important fact that “all linguistic gender classifications are grammatical.”28 This process creates the problem of the grammatical gender becoming the “natural” one. Even though a word cannot truly have a gender, the process of giving words a gender makes the word’s gender into a “biological fact.”29

In addition, making a word’s grammatical gender into a “biological fact” creates a hierarchy among gendered words by elevating the masculine words above the feminine ones:

This linguistically and socially produced gender system does not just divide humans into two equal, separate groups that exclude each other. It also ranks them in an asymmetric fashion, placing the “masculine” in the center while making the “feminine” the exception. In so doing, it ranks and valorizes the male gender. The English language commonly gives the masculine gender to nouns that are active as well as strong and efficacious. It gives the feminine gender to words that are particularly beautiful or amiable.30

This might seem like a generalization if taken at face value, but if we look once more to the example used above (the word “moon” is a feminine noun), we can see how grammatical genders put preference on typically masculine stereotypes: “In English the sun…is masculine, and the moon is feminine, because it is the receptacle of the sun’s light. The earth, a ship, a country, a city are also feminine in English, because they are

28 Ibid, 114.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
seen as receivers or containers.”

In addition, the use of such feminine words like mother, daughter, or bride as a way to celebrate women and emphasize femininity ends up reiterating the androcentric perspective, since these constructs come from the “dualistic gender politics” of androcentric language.

Furthermore, androcentric language not only creates a hierarchy between masculine and feminine terms, but it also makes many words generically masculine even though they are meant to include both masculine and feminine nouns. Masculine terms like “American,” “Christian,” or “Jew” are meant to include both men and women. An even better example of this is simply the word “man,” when it is used to signify “humanity.” This word is to include both men and women generically, but the word “woman” is considered an “exception to the rule.”

A biblical example is necessary to see the problem of language. Let us take a look at a popular passage used as an example of ways in which the biblical text does not portray women in a degrading way: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:25-28, NIV). This passage is usually seen as one that points to equality in the way that it uses three categories: “Jew and Greek as religious ethnic characterizations, slave and free as socio-political determinations, and male and female as biological sex/gender differences.” However, this type of reading ignores the fact that Jew, Greek, slave, and free are all gender-

31 Ibid., 115.
32 Ibid., 152.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 115.
specific words being used in a gender-inclusive way, and only “male and female” actually includes the feminine in its comparison. In other words, the words Jew, Greek, etc., are generic gender-inclusive terms that are male-gendered, similar to what was stated above with the word “man”: Even though it is a male term, it is used to include both genders. Basically, even in the case of Galatians 3:28, language falls short of avoiding the hierarchical nature of the grammatical gender.35

Another example of Schüssler Fiorenza’s hermeneutical strategy of the problem of language comes from how women might view Christ. Women may not read the Scriptures with Jesus’s gender in mind, but given the hierarchical nature of the grammatical gender, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that women might feel inferior:

If we read/hear such stories in a theological contextualization that emphasizes the maleness of Jesus, wo/men’s cultural kyriarchal self-identity will be shaped as masculine identity in and through such a reading. Focusing on the figure of Jesus, the Son of the Father, “doubles” wo/men’s oppression when reading the bible. In the act of reading wo/men suffer not only from the alienating division of self against self but also from the realization that to be female is neither to be “divine” nor to be “a son of God” (sic).36

Therefore, Schüssler Fiorenza instructs us to avoid reading from the androcentric grammatical-gender perspective and suggests that we look to the stories of Jesus with a “radical egalitarian contextualization,” which would allow us to go beyond the limits of grammatical language.37

Schüssler Fiorenza addresses and attempts to solve this problem of grammatical gender in her writings in a few subtle ways. For instance, the issue of God’s gender is a popular one within feminist theology. This is due to the fact that language makes God

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 152.
37 Ibid., 152-153.
into a man, even though it is generally agreed that the Divine does not truly have a gender in the sense that we may think of gender. Schüessler Fiorenza, recognizing the extreme limits of language, refuses to write out the word “God,” since the name of God is so sacred that it should not be written out in a way that forces a gender upon it. Thus, she writes the name “God” like “G*dst.”

Additionally, she addresses this grammatical gender issue in the way in which she handles the word “woman.” As stated above, “man” is used as both the generic term for humanity and specifically the term for the male gender. However, the word “woman,” while it denotes the female gender in general, has been used to mean only Western white women in the past. Thus the problem of exclusion that is present in masculine words that are used as generic terms for humanity also becomes present in the term “woman.”

As a result of this issue, Schüessler Fiorenza does something unique when she writes the word “woman” or “women.” Instead of the word “women,” she writes “wo/men,” in order to include the men who are hurt by the patriarchal structure in society and the Church. In addition, she uses the word “wo/men” in order to avoid excluding any group of women. She explains it as such:

My way of writing "wo/men" seeks to underscore not only the ambiguous character of the terms "woman" and "women" but also to retain the expression "women" as a sociopolitical category. Since the traditional rendering is often read as referring to white wo/men only, my unorthodox writing of the word seeks to draw to the attention of readers that those kyriarchal structures which determine wo/men's lives and status also impact those of men of subordinated race, class, country, and religion, albeit in different ways, "Wo/men" is therefore to be understood as an inclusive rather than as an exclusive universalized gender term (sic).

38 Schüessler Fiorenza, Speaking About G*d, 20.
39 Schüessler Fiorenza, Sharing Her Word, 186.
In other words, in the past the word “women” has been as damaging as the use of masculine terms as generic ones for humanity. Schüssler Fiorenza wants to include women who have been oppressed by the Western culture in general (for example, women in the Two-Thirds World) by changing the word to “wo/men.”

Finally, as briefly mentioned above, she also changes the word “patriarchy” to “kyriarchy.” Schüssler Fiorenza writes the word “kyriarchy,” as she thinks this is a more historically accurate version of the word. Kyriarchy implies that men and women are controlled and oppressed by the patriarchal system, since it “connotes a socio-political system of domination and subordination that is based on the power and rule of the lord/master/father.” For Schüssler Fiorenza, saying the word “patriarchy” does not suffice, since it affects men as well.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s Interpretation of Mark 5

Practicing a feminist biblical hermeneutic and going beyond the limits of language is a difficult concept to grasp if it is only in theory. Therefore I will demonstrate how Schüssler Fiorenza applies these concepts to actual biblical texts, using the biblical stories of the bleeding woman and the Samaritan woman.

First, let us take a look at the story of the bleeding woman in Mark 5:25-33 (NIV):

And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” “You see the people crowding against you,” his

41 Schüssler Fiorenza, Sharing Her Word, 190.
disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’” But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

In this passage, Jesus is in a crowd of people and a woman suffering from some sort of hemorrhaging problem touches Jesus’s cloak in order to be healed. Schüssler Fiorenza, while she only makes a brief mention of the passage, uses her hermeneutical methodologies to demonstrate how this passage can be read through a feminist lens.

First of all, she notes that in the past, feminist interpretation has suggested that the woman in the story should be emphasized in order to read it in a way that is liberating to women. However, Schüssler Fiorenza explains that this can cause the “immasculation of wo/men” (sic). In addition, she also explains that women characters in biblical texts serve as a sort of contrast to male figures. Schüssler Fiorenza says that men look to male figures in the texts and relate to them, and the female characters help create a bond between the male characters and male readers:

When men identify with a male in power such as Moses, David, or Jesus, the female characters in a story are the means by which the male reader is bonded with the male author. When we examine how a female character functions as such a “means of bonding” or as the “glue” that holds things together, then we can see that the wo/man character is often introduced in order to enhance the authority and power of the male protagonist (sic).

In Schüssler Fiorenza’s opinion, this situation applies to the Mark 5 passage because Jesus acts as the male protagonist while the bleeding woman becomes the contrast. The contrast between the bleeding woman and Jesus emphasizes Jesus’s power. The purpose is to make Jesus seem like a great prophet and teacher. However, the process of

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43 Ibid.
emphasizing Jesus’s power causes the disabled woman reader to be “doubly self-alienated because she realizes that she can never be like Jesus.”

This critique of the story, while it is brief, uses many of her hermeneutical strategies. The first and most obvious hermeneutical strategy used above is the use of hermeneutics of suspicion. Instead of accepting the normal reading of the text, she acknowledges that the portrayal of the bleeding woman in the story is not acceptable. If taken at face value, one sees the story of Jesus saving a woman. If one is looking at the text with suspicion, we can see why she comes to the conclusion that the story emphasizes the power of a man and the disability and weakness of the woman. Schüssler Fiorenza does not worry if her reading is considered “taboo”—she is only concerned with breaking down the androcentric barriers of the text.

We also see the strategy of a hermeneutics of domination in her reading of Mark 5. Schüssler Fiorenza, while acknowledging that Jesus is a powerful prophet, also demonstrates that there is a domination/submission aspect to the story. Jesus is the all-powerful male while the bleeding woman is merely a tool to emphasize Jesus’s greatness and glory. To put it bluntly, the male (while it is Jesus) is celebrated and the female is looked at in a negative way. Bringing this domination/submission issue to the forefront of our minds is how Schüssler Fiorenza practices a hermeneutics of domination with this passage.

Finally, Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges the limits of language with her interpretation of the Mark 5 passage. This domination/submission paradigm reflects on what was previously stated about the grammatical gender. Because Jesus is a male and because there is a hierarchy of grammatical gender, Jesus “doubly oppresses” women

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44 Ibid., 155-156.
because of the typical theological focus on how he is the Son of the Father.\textsuperscript{45} As stated above, the emphasis of the maleness of Christ causes women readers to feel “doubly self-alienated” because they can never be like Jesus.\textsuperscript{46}

SchüSSLer Fiorenza goes on to explain another way in which this passage can be read through her methodology. Passages like Mark 5 and others in which Jesus interacts with women can be read through a hermeneutic of re-imagination. In her re-imagination, she puts women at the center of the story:

> From its beginnings, feminist interpretation has sought to undo the power of the kyriocentric text by placing wo/men in the center of attention. To demonstrate this, when reading gospel stories about Jesus and wo/men one can trace out the kyriocentric dynamic of the text in order to decenter Jesus and to center attention on the wo/man protagonist. Placing the...wo/man in the center rather than Jesus, for example, has engendered a rich variety of interpretations. Imaginatively moving wo/men from the periphery of the kyriocentric text can undo its conscious, naturalized mechanisms of inscribing wo/men’s self-alienation and second-class citizenship (sic).\textsuperscript{47}

Essentially, when SchüSSLer Fiorenza uses the example of the Hemorrhaging Woman and acknowledges that the woman is seen as a weaker figure suffering from a disability, then the woman no longer goes unseen throughout history. Instead, we reimagine the text and see that she is a woman enduring a lot of pain and suffering. The story ceases to be one about a great prophet and hero and becomes a story about how a woman overcomes suffering.

**SchüSSLer Fiorenza’s Interpretation of John 4**

Let us now take a look at how SchüSSLer Fiorenza interprets an additional passage using her strategies for biblical hermeneutics. In the story of John 4, Jesus is interacting

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
with another woman, similar to his interaction with the Hemorrhaging Woman, except he talks to this woman for an extended period of time. Let us look to the text:

Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”…The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”…Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

“I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him….Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged
him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world” (John 4:6-42, NIV).

Here we see Jesus talking to a woman in spite of her ethnic differences. Jesus reveals her sins to her, and as a result, he makes a believer out of her and other Samaritans. In this passage, Schüssler Fiorenza takes the focus away from Jesus, similar to what she does with the story of the bleeding woman. She emphasizes the fact that this Samaritan woman became a believer as a result of this meeting, and in turn converted many of her ethnic sisters and brothers. She does not focus on Jesus’s wisdom or power, but on the faith of the woman and the woman’s implied ministry:

If John 4:1-42 reworks a traditional mission legend about a woman’s primary role in the beginnings of the Christian community in Samaria, then there is evidence from two different strata of the gospel tradition that women were determinative for the extension of the Jesus movement to non-Israelites. Women were the first non-Jews to become members of the Jesus movement.48

In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that non-Jewish women, while normally overlooked in the text, were actually a key component in spreading the Jesus movement. Since this is not directly evident in the text, one can infer that Schüssler Fiorenza is practicing several of her hermeneutical strategies here. First, she is suspicious of the text in the sense that she does not assume that the normal interpretation is correct. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the story is not about glorifying Jesus, but about the “historical leadership” that women had in the early Jesus movement:

Although the Syrophoenician\textsuperscript{49} respects the primacy of the “children of Israel,” she nevertheless makes a theological argument against limiting the inclusive messianic table community of Jesus to Israel alone. That such a theological argument is placed in the mouth of a woman is a sign of the historical leadership women had in opening up Jesus’ movement and community to “Gentile sinners” (Gal. 2:15b).\textsuperscript{50}

This emphasis on the woman’s historical leadership is a remembering and reconstruction of the text. As previously mentioned, Schüssler Fiorenza holds that we should assume that women are fully present in Christian history unless explicitly stated otherwise. In this case, Schüssler Fiorenza is arguing that women did not have a miniscule role in the background. Even though the text makes them seem less important, she argues that they were on the forefront of the spreading of Christianity.

Schüssler Fiorenza is also practicing a hermeneutics of assessment, since she is looking to find more than one meaning of the text. The typical meaning demonstrates Jesus’s wisdom and his compassion towards those who are marginalized, but Schüssler Fiorenza finds a meaning that promotes and celebrates women in Christian history, and as a result, celebrates the dignity of women today.

\textit{Conclusions}

Schüssler Fiorenza argues for a radical change in biblical hermeneutics. Instead of taking the more historically traditional and androcentric interpretation of the biblical texts, she filters through the text with her eight-point hermeneutical method. She argues that androcentrism has affected language and biblical hermeneutics in a way that marginalizes women.

\textsuperscript{49} This is another term for “Samaritan” which more accurately describes the socio-ethnicity of the woman depicted in John 4.

\textsuperscript{50} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 138.
In order to end this problem, she wants the reader to start with experience, be aware of themes of domination, be suspicious of the text, evaluate, reimagine, and reconstruct the text, and eventually look towards a drastic change and transformation of biblical interpretation (and Christianity in general) in the future.

Schüssler Fiorenza stresses the importance of using these methods in order to look toward a tomorrow in which women are not marginalized. More specifically, she wants the actualization of the egalitarian community among Jesus and his female and male followers, or as she calls it, a “discipleship of equals.”

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51 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word*, 41.
CHAPTER THREE
MUSA DUBE

Introduction

Musa Dube is a postcolonial feminist theologian from Botswana. In her work, she seeks to tackle two social problems in light of biblical scholarship: Imperialism and patriarchy. As an African woman, she directly experiences the effects of colonialism and sexism in her daily life. More importantly, she sees a link between these two issues and the Bible. Dube argues that the Bible inherently encourages and inspires imperialist violence. For instance, if we look to the Old Testament, there are many texts of the Israelite people conquering other peoples with the approval of God.

In addition, while many feminist scholars such as Phyllis Trible or Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have already argued that the Bible has some inherently sexist elements to it, Dube argues that a double oppression exists for women of the Two-Thirds World, going beyond such commonly debated issues as female images of God or the lack of positive female characters in biblical texts. To be more specific, women in the Western World, especially in Catholicism, are far more concerned with issues that pertain to women’s power in the Church, whereas Dube looks a little deeper and argues that women

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52 In this chapter, the words “imperialism” and “colonialism” will be used interchangeably.
53 Musa W. Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 5.
in the Two-Thirds World are oppressed by Western institutions that do not give women authority, but also are oppressed by being a member of a formerly colonized nation.

Women in the Two-Thirds World have been oppressed by the Bible in the same way that women in the Western World have; however, they are also oppressed by imperialist structures that are encouraged by biblical texts. In other words, biblical texts and how they have been used throughout history have caused women in the Two-Thirds World to be oppressed not only by men of the colonizing and colonized nations, but by women in the West as well. This chapter seeks to expand on this concept. In particular, this chapter strives to elaborate on Dube’s theology of postcolonialism, explain how it is used in light of feminism, and, through her interpretation of two biblical texts, demonstrate how Dube makes a practical application of postcolonial feminist theology.

Postcolonialism

“When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, ‘let us pray.’ After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.”

Musa Dube cites this anonymous short story frequently in her work. This story depicts the struggle of the colonized peoples of Africa: Before the imperial powers of the West came, the native people had control of their land. However, when Western powers came to evangelize and colonize, the native people were robbed of their land and were only left with the Bible. The Bible cannot be separated from imperialism because of the

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54 This story is frequently cited by postcolonial scholars, but there is no known source.
way the white man used it as a tool to colonize foreign lands. Therefore the problem that arises in a postcolonial world is how one should read the Bible as a postcolonial subject.\textsuperscript{55}

In order to achieve this task, Dube first defines the word “postcolonial.” Initially, one can look at it as an umbrella term:

Postcolonial...is a literary technical term defining the setting, the use, and the classification of texts. In terms of setting, it covers the period beginning with the arrival and occupation of an imperial power, the struggle against it, independence, and post-independence—a continuity which remains valid with the persistence of imperial domination...Postcolonial is not a discourse of historical accusations, but a committed search and struggle for decolonization and liberation of the oppressed. In terms of classification, it refers to a complex collection of texts that are brought, born, and used in imperial settings, to legitimate, resist, or collaborate with imperialism. While this definition...includes the texts of the colonizer and the colonized, the phrase "colonial discourse" is also used to distinguish the former from the latter...A postcolonial approach is best understood as a complex myriad of methods and theories which study a wide range of texts and their participation in the making or subversion of imperialism.\textsuperscript{56}

As stated above, to be “postcolonial” means to continue to struggle for liberation and decolonization of the oppressed. It is not something static that merely looks at those who committed wrongdoings of the past with a judging eye, but rather it is something that looks to improve the present and the future. It is a rejection of imperialism and the oppression that it causes. In addition, Dube discusses the “postcolonial subject,” which can include both the former colonizers and the formerly colonized. The “postcolonial subject” “describes a people whose perception of each other and economic, political, and cultural relationships cannot be separated from the global impact and constructions of Western/modern imperialism, which still remain potent in the forms of neocolonialism,

\textsuperscript{55} Dube, \textit{Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible}, 4.
military arrogance, and globalization.” In other words, as a postcolonial subject, one cannot separate the imperialist structures from the current cultural, economic, and political institutions. One must recognize the link between them in order to move forward.

*Postcolonialism and the Bible*

The anonymous phrase about the white man and the Bible at the beginning of the chapter gives us an idea of how the Bible and colonialism are interconnected. However, it is important to note that these cultural, social, and economic structures that are mentioned above rely heavily on a Western interpretation of the Bible. Historically, much of the colonization was done by missionaries. It is true that the intention of the missionaries was to spread the Word of God. Unfortunately, the approach that was taken in order to accomplish this task included the oppression of another people’s culture and way of life. In addition, it is significant that missionaries received special protection from their home countries to spread Christianity. Dube points out that this implies three things: 1) that missionaries alarmingly had no moral objection to the colonizing of foreign lands, 2) that missionaries acted as an important tool in the promotion of imperialism, and 3) that missionaries cannot be separated from the conquering powers themselves. In other words, missionaries did not oppose infiltrating another culture and actually helped spread colonialism by doing some of the work of cultural imperialism for those in power by forcing foreign people into changing their religion and social norms. Therefore the missionaries are forever interconnected to the colonizing powers.

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57 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 16.
58 Ibid., 4.
Something else significant that Dube says about the relationship between colonialism and the Bible is that we rarely pay attention to the historical and cultural context of the biblical texts. In the past, the imperialist powers convinced the subjugated peoples that people of the West were the “chosen people” and that the Bible supported this fact. Conversely, if one puts the Bible in the proper historical and cultural context, one can see that the Bible is not an innately “Western” book. Dube explains the importance of recognizing the Bible for its cultural and historical nuances. She notes that this helps her get beyond imperialism:

For a start, it was liberating to know that biblical texts are not Anglo-Saxon books, but Jewish texts. It was also helpful to know that far from being pure (as the modern colonial Christian agents claimed), early Christianity borrowed from the non-Christian cultures of its origin. Dube explains that the Bible is a diverse, complex piece of religious literature that is bound by space and time. While imperialist powers claimed it as their own and attempted to make it a white man’s book, she points out that it was in fact a text meant for first century Jews. Also, since the Bible is bound by space and time, it is an abuse and a misread of the texts to use it as an excuse to colonize other nations. The biblical texts include both instances of liberation from imperialist powers and instances where colonization is morally justified, so one could not make an argument for one or the other. One must keep the text within its historical context and remember that it was written for Jews.

In addition, as Dube points out, a great deal of syncretism was involved in the forming of Christianity. Therefore the people of the imperialist culture were unjustified when they insisted that the subjugated culture was inferior and had to succumb to

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Western customs in order to be “moral.” Christianity was never a strictly “pure”
religion—it had elements of several different cultures; hence there was no substantial
argument for why African Christians had to abandon all of their former practices and
customs.

*Postcolonialism in Light of Feminism*

As we have seen, women in the Two-Thirds World have not been properly
represented in either postcolonialism or feminism. Feminism has traditionally come from
the perspective of the white Western woman and, generally speaking, postcolonialism has
left out the voice of women and focused on the colonized peoples as a whole. Dube calls
this a problem of “double oppression.”60 Not only is the woman of the Two-Thirds World
expected to submit to the colonizing forces of the West, but she is also expected to
submit to the patriarchal paradigms present in both cultures. In both situations, the
colonized woman comes second. Let us first take a look at the oppression that African
women experience from their African peers.

First of all, as African people struggled for their independence, the voice of
women was usually ignored because the attitude of the colonized people was to tackle
one task at a time: “The danger, as most postcolonial African women have found out, is
that by the time national liberation/s were won… women had no voice and their gender
empowerment battles had barely begun.”61 Here one can see that the African woman is
put in a very difficult position. She desires the liberation of her people as a whole, but she

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also desires to be freed from the severe gender discrimination that she experiences on a daily basis. In the struggle for independence from the imperialist powers of the West, the voice of the African woman gets swallowed up in the mess.

Next, one must acknowledge how the oppression that African women experience differs from the experience of Western women. There is certainly evidence of sexism in many different cultures (both Christian and otherwise). However, one cannot deny that there are varying degrees of oppression. The experience of women in the Western World is entirely different than the experience of women in the Two-Thirds World, and in particular, Africa. While Western women are oppressed by patriarchal structures, they also have certain privileges as Western women that women in the Two-Thirds World do not experience. This causes a problem with feminist theology, because there are significant issues being ignored. Paying close attention to one feminist issue might result in ignoring several issues that affect African women—such as the oppression from colonization.\(^{62}\) When talking about women in the Two-Thirds World, Dube notes that men and women suffer from the influence of colonialism. She indicates that it is a problem for men and women: “Postcolonial African women, together with their men, are facing a higher enemy flying high above them: the former colonizers who now wear the gowns of neo-colonialism and globalisation.”\(^{63}\) This acknowledgement of a damaging neo-colonial influence is oftentimes not a concern in the West, in feminist literature or otherwise. Furthermore, the issues that are considered feminist in the West may not even be concerns for women in the Two-Thirds World, not because the two perspectives


\(^{63}\) Dube, “Searching for the Lost Needle,” 213.
disagree, but rather because women in the Two-Thirds World have not been liberated from their oppression enough to consider such issues.

For example, a feminist issue for Christian women in the West is the matter of women’s ordination. This would surely be a concern of women in the Two-Thirds World, but women in the Two-Thirds World are still trying to obtain their innate rights as human persons, such as the right to education and the right to have sexual agency. To give a specific example, the practice of female genital mutilation, or the removing of parts of the female genitals, is prevalent in some parts of Africa. Some countries have statistics as high as eighty percent of their female population being forced into this practice.\footnote{Margaret A. Farley, \textit{Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics} (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2010), 88.} When African women face issues like these, the matter of women’s ordination could not be a realistic concern for women in the Two-Thirds World. To be concerned with such a topic implies that women already have equal opportunities and full agency in other aspects of their lives. Therefore, Dube’s criticism for Western feminist theologians is that they do not sufficiently address the voices of women in the Two-Thirds World and formerly colonized nations.

Also, something vital to note regarding African women as double-oppressed is the notion of patriarchy as a Western issue in general. In other words, prior to the colonization of African countries, African women did not experience patriarchal oppression in the same way that Western women experienced it. There were certainly sexist constructs, but African women had agency before the presence of the white man:

\begin{quote}
Pre-colonial African women may not have understood themselves as secondary citizens to their male counterparts…The private and the public sphere were not necessarily gender exclusive, neither could such boundaries be easily drawn. Women were not only valued for their ...
\end{quote}
reproductive powers, but they were also active participants and producers in the agro-based economy. The African worldview was by no means egalitarian... Yet women were not alienated from their products. It does not seem they experienced themselves as second class citizens. In my view, the position of women in African societies, which can neither be defined as inferior to men, superior, nor equal, reflects its worldview, which was/defined as more wholistic than dualistic.65

Here Dube demonstrates that in an agricultural-based community, African women were appreciated and respected by their male counterparts. “Traditional” gender boundaries that were drawn in the West were not drawn in Africa. Consequently, the problem of patriarchy also came from colonization, which imposed roles that were considered “gender normative” on women. African women shared agricultural roles with their male counterparts, but more traditionally “domestic” roles were forced on them exclusively, as this is what was seen as “feminine” in the West.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Bible

We have already briefly looked at how postcolonialism is linked to the Bible, but there is also an important link between postcolonial feminism and the Bible. It largely pertains to how the Scriptures are interpreted. Women of all nations and colors that use the Bible as their religious text can easily see the sexist themes: Women cause sin, women are forced to sell their body to protect themselves, women characters are frequently nameless, etc. One can also see what is liberating in these texts, such as the heroic stories of Ruth, Judith, and Esther, or the great importance that is placed on Abraham’s wife, Sarah. However, these stories are often interpreted in light of Western feminism, thus they do not pick up on several important themes that could be seen as liberating or oppressing to women in the Two-Thirds World.

65 Dube, “Searching for the Lost Needle,” 222.
For instance, Dube sees the story of Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho (Joshua 2:1-22), as a story about a colonized woman. Dube uses her interpretation of Rahab, which she refers to as “Rahab’s reading prism,” as her primary example for how postcolonial feminist theology should operate. Unlike Western feminists, when she interprets Rahab’s story, she does not prioritize issues of sexism over issues of colonization, but rather points out how they go hand-in-hand. Rahab is exploited in two ways—both because of her status as a person in a colonized culture and as a woman in a patriarchal society. Rahab’s experience of double oppression “works together with other systems of oppression such as racism, ethnicity, class, culture, military arrogance, and religious and sexual differences.” As a woman in a territory to be colonized, Rahab experiences all of the oppression that goes with being colonized as well as all of the oppression that goes with being female. Unfortunately, when reading Rahab’s story, we are stuck seeing it from the perspective of her oppressors, as it was the oppressors who wrote the story.

However, instead of simply reading Rahab’s story in the perspective of her dominators and looking at her as a weaker subject, Dube seeks to let Rahab speak for herself. Reading from Rahab’s perspective means reading the passage with a small glimmer of hope. It means that we, like Rahab, must “hang a red ribbon to some powerful aggressors.” Rahab stands up to her aggressors with love—“she challenges the powerful, through her words and acts.” Dube points out that when one read this story from Rahab’s perspective, one can see that in spite of Rahab being a prostitute, she is not a helpless victim that one must pity, but a woman who clings to life and acts out in love.

66 Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 121-122.
67 Dube, “Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon,” 179.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
She is not a woman of questionable morals who sells her body, but she is a woman who is trying to hold on. As Dube puts it, Rahab literally chooses to “make love and not war.”  

One might point out that even though Rahab “hung a red ribbon,” she still does not save her whole community—only herself and her kin. Dube is aware of this problem. She points out that one cannot deny that Jericho falls. One also cannot deny that on the surface, Rahab’s request to only save herself and her family is a very selfish act. However, Dube argues that the city fell because not enough people were willing to do what Rahab did. She was the only one who clung to a small glimmer of hope, and the only one who was willing to fight for her life. In addition, there were not enough people from the oppressor’s camp who were willing to do what the two spies did—bond with the people who had less power than them. In other words, Dube points out the cooperation that took place between the spies and Rahab—a cooperation that does not typically take place between the colonized and the colonizer.

Reading the Bible from the perspective of people like Rahab instead of the perspective of their oppressors is a significant trait of postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation because it allows women of the Two-Thirds World to see themselves in the Bible and it allows them to move beyond the patriarchal and imperialist structures. It is not difficult to see the similarities between the story of Rahab as a prostitute and the stories of women in the Two-Thirds World. From an outsider’s perspective, women of the Two-Thirds World might seem like helpless victims, but many of them also struggle

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70 Ibid., 180.
71 Ibid.
for survival like Rahab does. Many of them, instead of giving up, fight for their lives in any way possible, and come from places of strength and bravery.

When we read the Scriptures from a postcolonial feminist perspective, we can see the characters that are normally seen as outsiders as people of depth with their own struggles. Rahab is a wonderful example of how postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation works, but there are several more passages that take into account other aspects of postcolonial interpretation, such as the very real problem of debilitating and life-threatening diseases that are present in Africa.

*Dube’s Interpretation of Mark 5*

In the story of Mark 5:21-43, Jesus saves two female characters: he ends the bleeding of a hemorrhaging woman and he raises a dead girl from the dead. From a feminist perspective, one can say much about the fact that these characters are female, that Jesus helps them, that the unnamed woman demonstrates bravery, etc., but Dube emphasizes three main things: that Jesus stands up against colonialism in this text, that the females in this story serve as a negative metaphor for colonialism, and that the females in this story serve as a metaphor for women in the Two-Thirds World that experience serious disease, such as HIV/AIDS.

First of all, in this story of Jesus’s healings, Jesus acts as the end to imperial oppression. Dube points out that in the text, the number twelve is used as a metaphor to reference the “significant twelve” in the Old Testament—the twelve tribes of Israel. The story explains that the woman has been hemorrhaging for twelve years and the little girl who died was twelve years old. This relates to the twelve tribes of Israel because the suffering of these two female characters represents the suffering that the Israelites

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experienced under the hand of imperialism. However, Jesus puts an end to the suffering and liberates the colonized from their oppression. Dube points out that “the narrative insists the empire has not and will not have the last word. Hope for liberation is embodied in...healing the sick and bring the dying back to life. Hope for liberation lies in the oppressed pushing and pressing for power.” In other words, Jesus heals the spiritual wounds of the colonized people by standing up to the colonizers and putting an end to the pain.

In addition to reading this passage as work of postcolonialism, it can also be read from a feminist perspective, and with a “negative” read to it (in other words, it can be read in a way that stresses the negative aspects that pertain to women). Some feminists point out that the hemorrhaging woman shows great bravery, but Dube emphasizes other parts of the story. First of all, she notes that all of the women in the story remain unnamed. Even the father of the dead girl is named, but the mother and the girl remain unnamed. Two of these three women are only identified by their weaknesses—their ailments. The third woman is only identified as the mother of the sick girl. In addition, they are limited to their gender stereotypes—the sick girl and the wife of Jairus are found in the home, and the bleeding woman is found in the public sphere, but by being there she is breaking a purity law. Even though it is unusual that she is in the public square, it is fair to assume that she is not welcome there, since her ailment makes her ritualistically unclean.

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73 Ibid., 127.
74 Ibid., 129.
In addition, the mother and daughter never speak, and the bleeding woman only has inner monologue, but is not quoted when she speaks to Christ.  

In contrast, the father of the dying girl, Jairus, pleads with Jesus to heal his daughter. He goes to Jesus directly and is very forward about it, unlike the bleeding woman who essentially sneaks up on Jesus and touches his cloak to be healed while remaining unseen. The men in this story are welcome to approach Jesus directly and speak, while the women must remain silent. Finally, the most obvious sexist nuance is that the women are placed in the story as weak subjects that need to be saved. This contrasts with the common feminist approach that Western women take on this passage—they celebrate the fact that the woman breaks the purity law and goes in public and the fact that Jesus does not treat the woman poorly in spite of the patriarchal structures in his culture that tell him that he should. Dube explains that one must recognize these women as metaphors for a conquered nation. Even after the nation becomes liberated, Dube argues that history shows us how gender relations are not mended when colonization ends. Dube also argues that focusing on women empowerment in this story excludes the “oppressive international relations that are addressed by this story.”

For a postcolonial feminist reading of a text, one must recognize the gender constructs in conjunction with the colonial constructs.

A final and very significant topic that she brings up regarding Mark 5 is the parallel between this story and the story of those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. One can see the parallel particularly in the story of the bleeding woman who spends all of her funds to receive healing but she is unsuccessful. This parallels with “those who are under economic and political oppressions [who] are not able to run effective health services and

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 131.
77 Ibid., 132.
The bleeding woman in Mark’s gospel is synonymous to the oppressed nations who cannot afford proper healthcare to their people, and as a result, these people stay ill and oppressed.

While Dube does not truly state a solution to this problem of a lack of healthcare, she does point out the important part of the story for the bleeding woman: healing. Jesus acts as a liberator and a healer, and poor nations can “touch” him to be freed of their illnesses. He does not exclude people based on their medical conditions—he embraces them with open arms. Dube emphasizes that Jesus brings hope in the midst of despair and death and explains that this is “a fitting duty for all of us who live in the HIV/AIDS era and who read for healing and liberation.” 79 We also should seek to empathize with those who experience these physical and spiritual terrors. As postcolonial people we should seek to be more like Jesus, and bring about healing, hope, liberation, and life to people who experience a world that is oftentimes ridden with death. 80

**Dube’s Interpretation of John 4**

In the story of John 4, we see Jesus engaging in conversation with a Samaritan woman by a well, in spite of it being highly unusual and taboo. As we will see in later chapters, this passage is sometimes read as an example of Jesus’s understanding and compassion towards women and people who are considered sinners or unclean. 81 However, a postcolonial feminist perspective takes into account the imperial undertones that are not directly addressed.

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78 Ibid., 136.
79 Ibid., 137.
80 Ibid., 138.
First of all, the story of John 4 is a story of colonization within a story of colonization. First, one can take John’s gospel as a whole and read it as a colonizing text. Dube explains it as such: “The local leaders who plan the death of Jesus, for instance, are characterized as in genuine fear that his fame will bring a Roman attack on the nation.”

In other words, the entire Jesus narrative revolves around the notion that Jesus is a political leader who is trying to rise up against the empire. He is a member of the oppressed group of people.

Next, one can see another layer of colonization nuances in John 4 in a rather ironic place—with Jesus and his followers. Dube argues that Jesus is in the Samaritans’ land in order to spread the word where Jesus and the disciples failed to do so elsewhere. In other areas, Jesus’s words were rejected, thus Jesus and his followers began to travel.

Also, the fact that he and his disciples are attempting to evangelize the Samaritans is significant due to the hundreds of years of tension between the Jews and the Samaritans, going back to the Assyrian Empire. Samaritans were seen as heretics and “half-breeds” as a result of intermarrying with Assyrian peoples. Dube explains that this damaged relationship emphasizes “the extent to which imperial domination has affected and influenced the relationship of different people at different centuries in the world.”

Even many years later, there are still ethnic tensions between the two groups.

Since the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans is one of conflict, one might think that this is a good thing that Jesus and his disciples are interacting with them.

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83 Dube points out that this is not truly an example of Jesus acting as a colonizer, but rather a result of the later Johannine community, their “missionary vision,” and their contributions/reactions to colonialism. See John and Postcolonialism, 61.
84 Dube, “Reading for Decolonization,” 62.
However, Dube points out that they are interacting with foreign peoples because of competitive reasons. The Christian Jews and the Pharisees are both trying to define their Jewish identities up against the Roman Empire. Dube claims that this story of the Samaritan woman shows how complex imperialism really is and how it affects all people involved: “it leads the colonized to fight back, to collaborate with the enemy, or to fight among themselves, as in the case of Pharisees and Jesus’s disciples.” In short, colonization causes the colonized peoples to go to great lengths in order to protect themselves in some manner of speaking.

On the other hand, this story has many sexist nuances that go hand-in-hand with the problem of imperialism. Dube argues that Jesus and his followers have designated their divine authority to evangelize and colonize, and the only way to do this successfully is to portray the people of the lands that must convert and learn the colonizer’s ways as somehow lesser than those who are doing the colonizing. Dube explains that this can be seen in the characterization of the Samaritan woman herself.

Dube then expresses how “imperialism expounds an ideology of inferior knowledge and invalid religious faith for those who must be colonized.” In other words, the people who are to be colonized must be seen as having an incorrect religion and insufficient knowledge of proper customs and cultural norms. They are treated as people who are ignorant to the “correct” way of life, culture, and religion. In terms of John 4, the Samaritan woman fits into this paradigm perfectly. She is portrayed as “an ignorant native (v. 10) and in need of help (v. 10). She is constructed as morally or religiously lacking something; that is, she has had five husbands, and the one she has now is not her

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85 Ibid., 63.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
own (vv. 17-18). Furthermore, she does not know what she worships (v. 22).” In contrast to her ignorance, Jesus is portrayed as all-knowing and powerful, giving advice to her community and teaching her people the “correct” way of life. Dube very harshly describes the Samaritan woman as “pathetic.” She points out that even after Jesus explains many things to her, she remains ignorant.

In addition, it is significant that she is a female and that she is the first person Jesus comes in contact with when he enters the Samaritan community (one might even draw a parallel between this story and Rahab’s story). In this story, the Samaritan woman, like the targeted land, “must be entered, won and domesticated.” The woman and the foreign land are synonymous. They are both weak and ignorant, and they both must succumb to a more powerful force. In addition, like a colonized nation, she is to put forth the work while the male disciples gain all of the benefits of her labor: “Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor” (John 4:37-38, NIV).

Overall, the imperial themes cannot be separated from the sexist ones, since the woman is seen as a metaphor for the conquered land. This also demonstrates how the colonized woman is double-oppressed. She is used as a metaphor for something to be conquered, and yet she is also a member of the conquered population.

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 68.
Conclusions

Musa Dube does not take a “traditional” feminist point of view on Scriptures. In fact, she might disagree with using the phrase “traditional” in general, since “traditional feminism” is typically associated with Western feminism. Instead of merely looking at biblical texts and attempting to find what could be seen as empowerment of women, she goes a step further. She acknowledges the historical context, the cultural norms, and the political structures in light of postcolonialism. Western feminist theologians may take a note of the historical context or cultural norms (as they pertain to women), but they do not tend to emphasize the political structures that oppress certain ethnicities in general. They focus more on women in relation to their social positions, and do not take note of the oppressive nature of colonialism, how it oppresses entire races and ethnic groups, and how it is present in the Bible and in Christianity as a whole.

In contrast to Western feminists, Dube combines feminism and postcolonialism, which solves the problem of double oppression that women in the Two-Thirds World experience. Postcolonial theology was previously insufficient because it only sought to accomplish the task of liberating colonized peoples as a whole and it did not seek to end the gender inequalities. Feminist theology was equally insufficient since it did not consider oppressive institutions in its critical evaluation of patriarchal texts. If one combines both, then one can evaluate biblical texts for all that they are and all that they are not. Once we can recognize the problems of the biblical texts and the consequences of using the biblical texts improperly has caused, then we can prevent ourselves from falling into the trap of perpetuating colonialist anti-feminist ideals. Like Dube explains of
postcolonialism, it is not about punishing the crimes of the past, but moving forward to a better future.
CHAPTER FOUR

JOHN PAUL II

Introduction

Unlike the sections on Dube and Schüssler Fiorenza’s theology and biblical hermeneutics, this section will not have a clear-cut “method.” Instead, this chapter will focus on John Paul II’s use of Scripture in his theology of women, using the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* as a primary source. *Mulieris Dignitatem* is an appropriate primary source because John Paul II celebrates women in the document and supports his argument by looking to the scriptural texts. This chapter will be broken up into four sections. First, this chapter will give a small amount of background information on the document *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Next, this section will look at the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum*, in order to suggest, in part, where John Paul II’s methodology seems to originate. Then there will be a discussion on John Paul II’s theological anthropology and his emphasis on women’s vocation. Finally, the chapter will close with John Paul II’s Christ-centered interpretation of the passages Mark 5 and John 4.
Mulieris Dignitatem and John Paul II’s Theology of Women

Before one can understand the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, one must first have background knowledge of the document.\(^91\) Given in Rome by Pope John Paul II on the feast of the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1988, *Mulieris Dignitatem* was the first of its kind. It was not the first apostolic letter to be written, but it was the “first document from the pontifical magisterium to be dedicated entirely to women.”\(^92\) Prior to this, all documents pertaining to women were merely included in works regarding the laity or the religious life. Therefore, this document is extremely significant and had a large part in shaping the Church’s theology of women for the past 25 years. In addition, the document uses a typological methodology that is not explicitly stated. John Paul II’s theology seems to be influenced by mid-twentieth century theology, stemming from the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum*.

*Dei Verbum*

John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* uses a typological method when he practices biblical hermeneutics. *Dei Verbum* perhaps provides some insights into John Paul II’s methodology. This makes sense given John Paul II’s desire to interpret and push forward Vatican II’s emphasis. There are a few important things to take from *Dei Verbum* in relation to John Paul II’s apostolic letter. One significant part of *Dei Verbum* is that the Bible is to be considered a work of God’s Revelation, and that it is

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91 To understand the purpose of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, one must recall that it is an apostolic letter, therefore it is a document written to a finite group of people to expand on a Church teaching. It is not a legislative text, but rather it is an exercise of the pope’s ordinary teaching authority, therefore it can be changed. See: Francis G. Morrisey, “Papal and Curial Pronouncements: Their Canonical Significance in Light of the 1983 Code of Canon Law,” *The Jurist*, 50 (1990): 102-125.

Christocentric. Fr. Pol Vonck describes God’s Revelation in relation to the Bible and *Dei Verbum* as such:

Revelation is presented not so much as a store of supernatural truths but as a divine *self*-disclosure, as God initiating a “colloquium” with us in order to transform us (nos. 2, 4…). …God speaks in and through our human history, through the stuff of real life, and above all the experience of Jesus (no. 3). *Dei Verbum* is unambiguously Christocentric.93

In other words, *Dei Verbum* explains that God is revealed through the life of Jesus (in the Gospels). Revelation comes to us ultimately through Jesus. Another aspect of *Dei Verbum* that is significant is how we are to interpret God’s Revelation through the Scriptures. Without forgetting that the Bible is God’s Word, we must use “literary and historical study” in order to interpret them correctly.94 As Avery Cardinal Dulles puts it, “Literary and historical study, as understood in… *Dei Verbum*, aims to disclose what the sacred writers wanted to say and did say.”95 Let us look to the text of Dei Verbum itself to further expand on this idea.

In, *Dei Verbum* emphasizes the need to read Scripture in historical context. In paragraph twelve, it reads:

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men

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95 Ibid.
normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.\textsuperscript{96}

In this passage, we see that one must pay attention to historical context when practicing biblical hermeneutics. In order to interpret the Scriptures correctly, one must consider what the original author meant. The reader should take into account the author’s historical perspective, the context in which he lived and the historical events that took place in his writings. In this way of interpreting, the biblical texts are not to be taken literally in the sense that one might normally assume. Instead, the interpreter tries to listen to the original author’s voice. In other words, one should take the \textit{literal meaning intended by the author}, instead of the taking the actual text as a literal, historical passage.

John Paul II attempts to do this frequently in his biblical hermeneutics while still keeping in mind the Christocentric perspective that is prevalent in \textit{Dei Verbum}. We see an example of his use of historical context in his interpretation of Genesis 1-3.

An additional important aspect of \textit{Dei Verbum} which we will see is present in John Paul II’s document is the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and how the covenant is fulfilled through Christ. The questions of the Old Testament are answered or made clearer through the New.

The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy (see Luke 24:44; John 5:39; 1 Peter 1:10), and to indicate its meaning through various types (see 1 Cor. 10:12). Now the books of the Old Testament, in accordance with the state of mankind before the time of salvation established by Christ, reveal to all men the knowledge of God and of man and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with men. These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy. These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful

\textsuperscript{96}Paul VI, \textit{Dei Verbum}, 12.
treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.

16. God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the new covenant in His blood (see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom. 16:25-26; 2 Cor. 14:16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it.97

Here we see how the Old Testament is incomplete without the New Testament. It has value and wisdom, but it is nevertheless not enough on its own. God inspired the Old Testament, and God intended the Old Testament to make sense through the reading of the New and through Christ’s fulfillment of the covenant. With this in mind, as well as the notion in Dei Verbum that one must pay attention to literary forms, historical context, and the author’s intention, this allows John Paul II to have a Christ-centered typological methodology when he interprets Scriptures. His typology, influenced by Dei Verbum, helps him emphasize the inherent worth of women, mainly through his interpretation of the interactions between Jesus and women, and through the Virgin Mary’s part in the fulfillment of the covenant.

*Historical Context and the Author’s Intention*

Pope John Paul II utilizes the idea of listening to the voice of the original author frequently in his biblical work. It allows for him to have a unique theological anthropology stemming from Genesis 1-3 which differs greatly from the ideas that came before him. Unfortunately, the common theological anthropology of the twentieth century stemmed from the notion that women were not equal to men. In fact, early twentieth century theologies, coming from the theological perspectives of Aquinas and Augustine,  

97 Ibid., 15-16.
promoted the notion that only men could be created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). According to Susan Rakoczy, before John Paul II’s theology of women, the common twentieth century Augustinian argument was that the “woman becomes the image of God when she is joined to her husband.” Also, the man is in the image and likeness of God without the woman. To better understand this theology, let us look to Augustine:

> The woman with her husband is in the image of God in such a way that the whole of that substance is one image, but when she is assigned her function of being an assistant, which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God, whereas in what concerns the man alone he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined to him in one whole.

Here Augustine essentially explains that the woman needs her husband in order to be completely in the image and likeness of God, but she is not made in God’s image apart from her relation to him.

In addition to a prevalence of Augustinian thought in the early twentieth century, Thomistic theology was also popular. Aquinas was influenced by Augustine’s theological anthropology, but he added to it. As Rakoczy puts it, Aquinas claimed that “the male possesses the image of God in a different and superior way to that of a woman. He identifies her essence as her sexuality and, using the perspective of the mind-body dualism inherited from Greek philosophy, argues that she has a weaker and more imperfect body which then affects the mind and intelligence.” Aquinas’s point of view is relevant because it demonstrates the twentieth century mindset of the woman in her

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99 Ibid.
101 Ibid. For more on this theology, see also: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* (II-II. q. 70, a. 3, reply), vol. 10, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oats and Washbourne Ltd., 1929), 270.
relation to the image of God. Women do not reflect the image of God in the same way that men do because they have imperfect bodies.

In stark contrast, Pope John Paul II’s argument (through the use of *Dei Verbum*) promotes the notion that both men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. John Paul II argues that

Man is the highpoint of the whole order of creation in the visible world; the human race, which takes it origin from the calling into existence of man and woman, crowns the whole work of creation; both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image.  

John Paul II looks to the Scriptures to make this argument while attempting to take into account the original author’s intention. As we recall, in Genesis 1:27, it reads “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (NASB). In this passage, we see that both women and men were considered *imago Dei* from the beginning. John Paul II holds that in Genesis (verse 1:27 in particular), humans are “described as articulated in the male-female relationship. This is the humanity, sexually differentiated, which is explicitly declared the ‘image of God.’” In other words, while the two genders are distinct, they are both equally important. In this quotation, we can see how John Paul II looks to Genesis for its true meaning, as *Dei Verbum* instructs. The purpose of the Genesis story is not to argue that women are lesser than men, but rather that God created humanity and loves all of humanity, regardless of gender.

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103 This chapter will be referencing the NIV, excluding this Bible passage. The NASB is the translation used in the document *Mulieris Dignitatem*, thus the NASB is the one that is cited above.
In addition to using the first creation story to establish the inherent worth of both genders, John Paul II looks to Genesis 2 to further his typological theology. He argues that woman and man are not meant to exist alone. The pope explains that being in the image and likeness of God “involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I.’”\(^{105}\) This relationship between woman and man, realized in spousal love, is a “prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”\(^{106}\) In other words, the relationality and mutual love between a woman and man resembles the relationality present in the Trinity.

This theology of the relationality between woman and man is not in the creation accounts of Genesis directly, but it is revealed through the New Testament and Christ (as Dei Verbum suggests). Christ is our door to the “inscrutable mystery of God’s inner life.”\(^{107}\) Christ and the “unity of the Trinity” or the “unity of communion,” sheds new light on the creation stories.\(^{108}\) John Paul II states that

The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as the “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.\(^{109}\)

Essentially, John Paul II argues that humans are created in the image in likeness of God, and because of this “image and likeness,” human beings must live in relationality to each other. Humans live in a loving communion as the Trinity does.

\(^{105}\) John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem, 7.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
\(^{107}\) Ibid.
\(^{108}\) Ibid.
\(^{109}\) Ibid.
In addition to this concept of *imago Dei*, John Paul II also emphasizes that in the Genesis story, women and men are equally responsible for the existence of sin. While this idea might seem obvious to the 21st century person, many people in history have used the story in Genesis to put the blame on women for sin. However, John Paul II takes a different approach. He explains that Genesis “distinguishes the roles” between women and men, but that both are guilty of committing the sin:

The biblical description of original sin in the third chapter of Genesis in a certain way “distinguishes the roles” which the woman and the man had in it….But there is no doubt that, independent of this “distinction of roles” in the biblical description, *that first sin is the sin of man*, created by God as male and female. It is also the sin of the “first parents,” to which is connected its hereditary character. In this sense we call it “original sin.”

For John Paul II, female and male are equally responsible for the existence of sin, and each of us has original sin since we are all connected to the “first parents.” No one is exempt and neither gender is more responsible than the other. This is just another example how both women and men are created in the image and likeness of God—both genders have freedom and free will. However, this choice of sin, while it is an exercise of our free will, is how humans express our “non-likeness” to God. In other words, we are inherently like God, but our sin is what makes us unlike God.

Altogether, while John Paul II uses the creation stories to make his argument about theological anthropology, he does not use a traditional “proof-text” to make his claim. Instead, he uses the theological concepts of *Dei Verbum*: he sees the theological continuity between the Old and New Testaments and he opens it up to a comparison on the inner life of God. It does not simply end with the fact that we are made in God’s image, but rather we are meant to relate to one another. This is achieved most perfectly

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110 Ibid., 9.
111 Ibid.
through the relationship between a woman and a man. Women and men are literally “meant for each other,” thus the inherent worth of the woman cannot be denied. It is a partnership between genders rather than a hierarchy (as one may conclude from Augustinian or Thomistic theologies on women). In addition, John Paul II agrees that female and male are equally responsible for original sin, since both genders are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore have free will. There is a sense of equality between women and men in this theological anthropology that places an emphasis on the need to be relational and the responsibility of both women and men.

From this typological reading of Genesis, one can see a glimpse of the importance of the dignity of women in regard to their unique vocations. John Paul II explains that this spousal relationship reflected in the Genesis story serves as an explanation for the “two particular dimensions [motherhood and virginity] of the vocation of women in the light of divine Revelation.”

*The Dignity of Women through Vocation*

The dignity of women is also a significant theme in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. John Paul II explains the two distinct yet equally important vocations of women, actualized most perfectly in the Virgin Mother. While she possesses the vocation of both motherhood and virginity, they are not mutually exclusive in her, but rather they “co-exist in her.” Because of Mary, the vocation of motherhood is a fulfillment of the covenant between God and humanity.

We see that through Mary—through her maternal “fiat,” ("Let it be done to me")—*God begins a New Covenant with humanity*. This is the eternal and definitive Covenant in Christ, in his body and blood, in his Cross and

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112 Ibid., 7.
113 Ibid., 17.
Resurrection. Precisely because this Covenant is to be fulfilled “in flesh and blood” its beginning is in the Mother. Thanks solely to her and to her virginal and maternal “fiat,” the “Son of the Most High” can say to the Father: “A body you have prepared for me. Lo, I have come to do your will, O God” (cf. *Heb* 10:5,7).\(^{114}\)

Here John Paul II argues that Mary’s motherhood plays a part in God’s covenant with humanity through Jesus Christ, which makes motherhood forever related to the covenant, and therefore forever important.\(^ {115}\) Once again, we see a typological reading at work. The New Testament fulfills the Old, and a woman contributed to making this fulfillment happen. Furthermore, John Paul II’s typological reading of the Bible recognizes Mary as the “New Eve.” Eve was the first mother under the old covenant, but Mary became the New Eve when the covenant was fulfilled through Christ’s birth:

Eve, as "the mother of all the living" (Gen 3: 20), is the witness to the biblical "beginning", which contains the truth about the creation of man made in the image and likeness of God and the truth about original sin. Mary is the witness to the new "beginning" and the "new creation" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), since she herself, as the first of the redeemed in salvation history, is "a new creation": she is "full of grace."\(^ {116}\)

In summation, Mary is the New Eve through her fulfillment of the covenant, which is directly related to her vocation as a mother.

After John Paul II stresses the immeasurable significance of motherhood due to the woman’s role in fulfilling the covenant, he discusses the importance of virginity. First of all, if we look to the Scriptures, we see that Jesus himself saw celibacy as a special calling, differing from married life: “For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (Mt. 19:12, NIV).

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\(^{114}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^ {115}\) Ibid.

\(^ {116}\) Ibid., 11.
Those who are called to celibacy are both making a free choice for the Kingdom of Heaven and accepting a special grace from God. This free choice of celibacy is valuable for women and men equally. Just like the vocation of motherhood, the vocation of celibacy, or virginity, is most perfectly represented in the life of Mary. She is the first to fully understand and “accept” it: “Mary is the first person in whom this new awareness is manifested, for she asks the Angel: ‘How can this be, since I have no husband?’ (Lk. 1:34). Even though she is ‘betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph’ (cf. Lk. 1:27), she is firm in her resolve to remain a virgin.” If we look to the Gospel, we can see that the Virgin Mother makes the vocation of virginity, once reserved for men (the eunuchs that Jesus refers to), a vocation for women as well.

This new vocation that Mary gives women also allows women to embrace motherhood in a different, unique way. John Paul II argues that virginity does not deprive women of the motherly privilege, but rather virginity allows women to manifest their motherhood through spirituality. Giving up physical motherhood opens up the door to a “motherhood ‘according to the Spirit’ (cf. Rom 8:4).” A woman’s spiritual motherhood can include helping those who need it the most (the sick, the poor, the marginalized).

In addition, the vocation of virginity still relates to the marital relationship that John Paul II frequently highlights. Virginity is a spousal gift akin to that of marriage, as it is a free choice and a total gift of self love—a gift of self love “for God who has revealed himself in Christ, a gift for Christ, the Redeemer of humanity and the Spouse of souls.”

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117 Ibid., 20.  
118 Ibid.  
119 Ibid.  
120 Ibid., 21.  
121 Ibid.  
122 Ibid., 20.
This is not the same as simply remaining single, since virginity is a “profound ‘yes’ in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner.” In addition, the choice to remain celibate helps “the Church and all mankind to experience a ‘spousal’ relationship to God, one which magnificently expresses the fellowship which God wishes to establish with his creatures.” In other words, the vocation of virginity helps everyone experience the “spousal” love with God, at least in the sense that the Church is the Bride of Christ, and that consecrated virgins lead by example. Once more, John Paul II uses his Christ-centered typological method in his explanation of the importance of virginity. Virginity is a complete gift of self to God who has revealed Himself in Christ.

Altogether, John Paul II emphasizes the dignity of women through their vocation by using his typological method that puts Christ at the center of things. Women have two unique vocations—motherhood and virginity. Both vocations are most perfectly realized in the Virgin of Nazareth, who, as the New Eve, contributes to fulfilling the covenant because she is the mother of Christ. However, there is an additional way that John Paul II demonstrates the dignity of women and the importance of their vocation, and once again, it goes back to Christ. The dignity of women and the importance of their vocation become quite obvious when one looks to how Christ treats women in Scriptures. Just like chapters one and two, we shall now take a look at John Paul II’s scriptural interpretation of the passages Mark 5 and John 4.

123 Ibid.
124 John Paul II, Letter to Women, 2.
John Paul II’s Interpretation of Mark 5

Before we look at Mark 5, there are a few things to note. First of all, in a general sense, John Paul II points out that Jesus Christ promotes the dignity of women in the Gospels “and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity.” Jesus meets various women throughout his lifetime and ministry, and he is always consistent in his affirmation of their human dignity and worth. As the pope puts it, “his meeting with each of them is a confirmation of the evangelical ‘newness of life….’”

In terms of a woman’s dignity through vocation, Jesus encourages this through his condemnation of divorce: “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt. 19:8). John Paul II notes that Jesus is appealing to the fulfillment of the covenant by referring to the “beginning”: “Jesus appeals to the ‘beginning,’ to the creation of man as male and female and their ordering by God himself, which is based upon the fact that both were created ‘in his image and likeness.’” Christ confirms the notion that women and men are both imago Dei, and he actively opposes the tradition that discriminates against women. Christ stresses that women and men are created to have a relationship of mutuality, and he references Scripture to prove this.

If we look to the story of Mark 5:21-43, we can see how John Paul II draws these conclusions about Jesus’s relationship with women and his emphasis on their inherent dignity. As previously stated, the story of Mark 5 starts off with the Hemorrhaging Woman who is cured by touching Jesus’s cloak. John Paul II notes that Jesus emphasizes

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126 John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem, 12.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
her dignity through ignoring her infirmity and celebrating her strong faith. In Jesus’s
time, a woman with a continuous flow of blood would have been considered “impure,”
but Jesus does not see it this way. Instead, he praises her for her great faith (cf. Mk.
5:34). As the story goes on, Jesus encounters another female in need, this time one who
seems passed the point of his healing assistance:

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of
Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why
bother the teacher anymore?”

Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just
believe.” He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John
the brother of James.

When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a
commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said
to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but
asleep.” But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and
the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He
took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means
“Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and
began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were
completely astonished.

He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about
this, and told them to give her something to eat (Mk. 5:35-43, NIV).

John Paul II notes that this story (as well as other healing stories like it) does not
represent the usual sentiments of people living in Jesus’s day. He stresses that “his words
and works always express the respect and honour due to women.” Many times in the
New Testament, we see Jesus appealing to the Old Testament to prove the worth of
women, but he is always doing something different than what society says. In Jesus’s life,
women were not treated as full persons, but Jesus did not follow society’s standards. John
Paul II gives some examples of this:

The woman with a stoop is called a "daughter of Abraham" (Lk 13:16),
while in the whole Bible the title "son of Abraham" is used only of men.

130 Ibid., 13.
131 Ibid., 13.
Walking the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha, Jesus will say to the women: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me" (Lk 23:28). This way of speaking to and about women, as well as his manner of treating them, clearly constitutes an "innovation" with respect to the prevailing custom at that time.\textsuperscript{132}

As John Paul II points out, using the idea of emphasizing historical context in \textit{Dei Verbum}, Jesus is perpetually breaking down social barriers and stereotypes, and acting in a loving manner towards women that was totally new for his culture, through both his words and his deeds. John Paul II is showing the reader how the historical context of Jesus’s life was a world where women were treated poorly, so Jesus went against the normal social standards. The suffering women and sinful women were not cast aside by Christ. Even though the little girl, the Hemorrhaging Woman, and many other suffering women probably seemed like hopeless causes and not worth the time of other members of society, Jesus never turned them away. Instead, he gave them physical and spiritual healing. He clearly treats women, even the ones who society has given up on, as reflections of the image and likeness of God.

\textit{John Paul II’s Interpretation of John 4}

John Paul II stresses how Jesus emphasizes the dignity of women through his treatment of women who have been labeled as sinners, even more so than his treatment of women who are infirmed. In particular, he treats the Samaritan woman in John 4 with the utmost respect and kindness, even though he knows that she is a sinner. As we recall from previous chapters, Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well, having full knowledge of her personal life (she has had five husbands) and that she is a Samaritan (Jews and Samaritans did not interact). Instead of casting her aside based on the

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
information he has about her personal life, he does something very interesting—he speaks about the mysteries of God with her:

He speaks to her of God’s infinite gift of love, which is like a ‘spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (Jn 4:14). He speaks to her about God who is Spirit, and about the true adoration which the Father has a right to receive in spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4:24). Finally, he reveals to her that he is the Messiah promised to Israel.\(^\text{133}\)

In addition, he also addresses that she is a sinner, but he does not condemn her. The woman sees this, combined with the exchange about the mysteries of God, as a holy sign. She “recognizes him as the Messiah and runs to tell her neighbours.”\(^\text{134}\)

John Paul II describes his enthusiasm for this exchange (he calls it “one of the most beautiful in the Gospel”)\(^\text{135}\) and also explains how extremely unique it is. He explicates that what takes place in this Gospel story is

An event without precedent: that a woman, and what is more a “sinful woman,” becomes a “disciple” of Christ. Indeed, once taught, she proclaims Christ to the inhabitants of Samaria, so that they too receive him with faith (cf. Jn 4:39-42). This is an unprecedented event, if one remembers the usual way women were treated by those who were teachers in Israel; whereas in Jesus of Nazareth’s way of acting such an event becomes normal.\(^\text{136}\)

The pope points out that the notion of a woman disciple goes from being a social taboo to a normal occurrence because of Jesus. He makes it possible through his treatment of women. None of Jesus’s interactions with women indicate that he was for anything but the promotion of the dignity of women. John Paul II sees Jesus’s personality as one that admires women because of their unique perspective and understanding of things about God: “Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there

\(^{133}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{135}\) Ibid.

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 15.
is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response to faith. Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly ‘feminine’ response.” Jesus appreciates women for their distinct experiences and values their voices. He sees a distinction between men and women, but he does not put one gender over the other. Once again, we can see that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament by throwing out the old gender stereotypes and by creating relationships with women based on love and respect for them and their unique vocations.

As stated above, John Paul II argues that Christ’s attitude towards women reveals the truth about gender equality. In this section of Mulieris Dignitatem, he reiterates once more that they are essentially equal because they are both created in the image and likeness of God. He closes his discourse on Jesus’s treatment of women with a very profound statement:

Gospel “equality,” the “equality” of women and men in regard to the “mighty works of God”—manifested so clearly in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth—constitutes the most obvious basis for the dignity and vocation of women in the Church and in the world. Every vocation has a profoundly personal and prophetic meaning. In “vocation” understood in this way, what is personally feminine reaches a new dimension: the dimension of the “mighty works of God,” of which the woman becomes the living subject and an irreplaceable witness.

In this passage, John Paul II explains how a woman’s vocation is prophetic in nature and should be considered a “mighty work of God.” Jesus calls women and men equally to spread the Gospel message, even though the vocational call is manifested differently between the genders.

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid., 16.
139 Ibid.
Conclusions

Pope John Paul II has a typological methodology that allows for women and men to be on “equal footing.” He looks to the fulfillment of the Old Covenant through Jesus Christ. In Jesus’s eyes, the old stereotypes are not necessary. Even though women and men are biologically different, that does not mean that one gender is more important than the other. Both genders are considered *imago Dei*, as the two stories in Genesis tell us. In addition, woman and man are meant to relate to each other through spousal love, reflecting the mysterious love of the Trinity. From this Christ-centered typological method, John Paul II stresses the dignity of women through their vocational calling. Using the Virgin Mary as the ideal example, he demonstrates how a woman helps to fulfill the Covenant and complete the Genesis story of the Old Testament by bringing Christ into the world through her motherhood. Mary’s assistance in fulfilling the covenant gives all motherhood an inherent worth.

In addition, he claims that the Virgin Mary opened up a new vocation to women through her own virginity. Consecrating one’s virginity, he argues, is not a passive “no,” but an active “yes” to God. It is embracing the spousal relationship between a woman and a man through the embrace of a spousal relationship with Christ. This spousal relationship through virginity helps all humankind experience a spousal relationship to the Church. Also, John Paul II says that the vocation of virginity opens one up to a “spiritual motherhood,” where one’s “children” are those in need—the sick, the poor, the imprisoned, etc.

Finally, Pope John Paul II argues through his use of the Gospels that Jesus himself celebrates the dignity of women. Through Jesus’s very actions, he affirms the
importance of their vocations, since he does not cast them aside, but discusses the
mysteries of God with them. John Paul II sees Jesus affirming their worth, and he sees
that through their vocations they are performing the “mighty works of God.”
CHAPTER FIVE
THEOLOGIANS IN CONVERSATION

In the past three chapters, we have overviewed three different theologians with three very distinct approaches to biblical hermeneutics. While there are obvious strengths in each perspective, there are also shortcomings in all three biblical interpretations as well. This chapter is meant to show the contrast between each perspective and demonstrate how all three can come in conversation with one another. Each voice has an element that the other two voices do not have in their biblical scholarship, and with the correct combination of the three, one can have a more comprehensive feminist biblical hermeneutic. Let us first take a look at some useful arguments that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes in her work pertaining to androcentrism and the problem of a singular voice interpreting Scriptures.

*Changing the Conversation*

From Schüssler Fiorenza’s perspective, women have been at a disadvantage throughout the history of biblical hermeneutics. As stated previously, Schüssler Fiorenza is fully aware that the Bible and academia are results of what she calls the “androcentric perspective.” She acknowledges that to truly be outside of androcentrism, one must create
new ways to do biblical scholarship. Schüssler Fiorenza lays out seven hermeneutical points. I have also argued that there is an eighth point that deals with language and the problem of grammatical gender. These hermeneutical points are important for issues of gender in Christianity and feminist biblical hermeneutics because they all point to the same idea: that the Scriptures have not always been read in a way that is liberating to women, and that the Scriptures can and should be read in such a way.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s seven hermeneutical points in addition to her perspective on language lead us to how she interprets the two passages, Mark 5 and John 4. In her interpretation of Mark 5, when she puts the female character in the forefront of the story, she uses a combination of a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of domination, a hermeneutics of re-imagination, and she also applies the limits of language to the passage, explaining that women are doubly-alienated by Mark 5. While putting the woman at the forefront of the story, she notes that women are usually used as a sort of “pawn” to make the male reader bond with Jesus, who is acting as a male authority figure.

In her interpretation of John 4, Schüssler Fiorenza looks at the text with suspicion, she reassesses the text, and she remembers and reconstructs the text. Through her methods she concludes that the meeting between Christ and the Samaritan woman shows us the importance of non-Jewish women in the early church—the Samaritan woman goes

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143 Ibid., 156.
144 Ibid., 155-156.
145 Ibid., 155.
out into her own community and evangelizes to her people, and as a result, she gains followers of Christ.\footnote{146}

Bringing women to the forefront of the story and emphasizing things other than Christ’s power are important for feminist biblical hermeneutics and issues of gender within the Christian Church in general. These hermeneutical lenses allow Schüssler Fiorenza to escape the androcentric paradigm that has, until recently, controlled academia. She has unique ways to study the text and find new meanings. Her new ways to look at the text help avoid following the historically traditional androcentric paradigm. Escaping the androcentric paradigm helps avoid the presence of sexism in biblical scholarship. The Scriptures are an infinite source of wisdom for the Christian religion, so how we interpret the texts have a large effect on how we practice Christianity. If we escape sexism when we interpret Scriptures, then we can escape sexism in the ways that we practice Christianity, as well.

While Schüssler Fiorenza successfully addresses the problem of a singular androcentric perspective in academia and biblical scholarship, she still fails to address some necessary issues. Although her eight-point hermeneutical method allows for new interpretations, it does not critique the Western perspective sufficiently. In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza thoroughly analyzes the gender issues in biblical texts, but she does not speak enough on the racial, ethnic, social, or class issues, particularly in global context, which Musa Dube might criticize. Dube points out that feminism is meant to be cross-cultural and international, but in reality, it is often only the experience of Western white women. Dube might even call Schüssler Fiorenza’s perspective “early feminist,”

since it only occasionally mentions the perspective of Two-Thirds World women or women of color:

Early feminism used women's experience to argue that women were universally oppressed by “patriarchy.” The approach construed an analytical category “a universally oppressed woman” as a worldwide identical entity. Although strategically useful to resist patriarchal oppression, this approach was questioned by women of color who showed that women were differently empowered: some women were indeed oppressors of other women and men because of their privileged races and classes. The supposedly universal women's experience was thus shown to be a middle class white women's experience and not universally applicable.\(^{147}\)

Essentially, Schüssler Fiorenza claims to represent the voice of women, but she falls short of actually putting this into practice, since she fails to include the voice of all women and is limited by her own perspective.

In addition, her methods assist the reader in avoiding sexist conclusions, but they do not stress the importance of Christ and his actions enough. In fact, she actively avoids emphasizing Christ, in order to avoid making it be a story of “male power.”\(^{148}\) In contrast, While John Paul II does not necessarily criticize feminist theology for not emphasizing Christ, he certainly comes from a perspective that emphasizes the importance of women through a Christological reading of the Scriptures, which is something that Schüssler Fiorenza could use in her theology. For instance, John Paul II points out that:

Man's Redemption, foretold in Genesis, now becomes a reality in the person and mission of Jesus Christ, in which we also recognize what the reality of the Redemption means for the dignity and the vocation of women. This meaning becomes clearer for us from Christ's words and from his whole attitude towards women, an attitude which is extremely simple, and for this very reason extraordinary, if seen against the background of his time.\(^{149}\)


\(^{148}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 156.

In other words, Christ’s actions show us the worth of women and how sexism is not a fundamental tenet of Christianity. Therefore, Schüssler Fiorenza's method of taking the focus away from Jesus to specifically emphasize the women in the story is not entirely effective if she intends to do a feminist reading of the Scriptures, since Christ goes against the status quo of his time by demonstrating that women are of equal worth to men. Schüssler Fiorenza only includes a critique on the androcentric nature of the Gospels, which is one-sided. Schüssler Fiorenza should also include more of why Christianity is something valuable (and not sexist), using the Gospels and the actions of Christ as an example.

Overall, Schüssler Fiorenza has her strengths, but she falls short when it comes to including the voice of the Two-Thirds World, and she does not highlight the importance of including Christ and his actions in her feminist argument. Dube and John Paul II deal with these issues much more sufficiently, as we will see further on in this chapter. First, let us look to Dube’s method of reading Scriptures.

Adding to the New Conversation

In Musa Dube’s feminist hermeneutic, she stresses both the sexism and the cultural and economic imperialism represented in biblical narratives. As we recall from previous chapters, she sees women of the Two-Thirds World as “doubly oppressed”: They are both oppressed by the colonizing powers and they are oppressed by sexism.\(^{150}\)

In both cases, they are oppressed twofold: Through sexism in their own culture, and through the sexism imposed on them by the colonizers. \(^{151}\) We see her addressing these issues when we look at her interpretations of Mark 5 and John 4. First, when we look to Mark 5, we see evidence of an attack on imperialism, when Dube points out that Jesus is standing up against imperialism. Dube holds that Christ goes against imperialism when he helps the two female characters, who are both representations of Israel suffering under imperialist rule. \(^{153}\) Also, we see her address feminist issues when she notes that the female characters remain unnamed, and she further addresses the voice of those in the Third World by pointing out the similarities between the bleeding woman and an HIV/AIDS victim. \(^{155}\) Finally, she notes that Christ acts as a liberator, since he heals the sick and oppressed, and Dube also notes that we should act as healers ourselves to those who are oppressed. \(^{156}\)

In John 4, she points to the issue of colonization once more when she calls Jesus (in relation to his contention with the Roman Empire) a symbol of those who are oppressed by colonizing forces. \(^{157}\) She also remarks that Jesus’s followers act as colonizing forces when they spread the Gospel. \(^{158}\) In addition, she stresses the significance of the poor relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews in that time period, which also points to the problem of colonization. Simply because the Samaritans

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 222.
\(^{154}\) Ibid.
\(^{155}\) Ibid., 136.
\(^{156}\) Ibid., 138.
\(^{158}\) Ibid., 61.
bred with the colonizing Assyrians, the Jews and Samaritans had a very ethnically-divided and combative relationship, which Dube blames directly on colonization.\(^{159}\)

Finally, Dube makes a distinctively postcolonial feminist point\(^{160}\) when she discusses how the Samaritan woman is a representation of colonized nations. She is portrayed as ignorant, unsure of what to believe, and immoral, while Jesus is considered wise and powerful.\(^{161}\) In contrast to her stress on Jesus’s liberating aspects in Mark 5, Dube says that Jesus acts as a colonizing force when he tries to show her the “correct” way to live. This is where we can see an overlap between Schüssler Fiorenza and Dube in regards to emphasizing Christ’s “powerful” nature.

Even with this brief summary of Dube’s analyses, it is already easy to see the stark contrast between her and Schüssler Fiorenza. She emphasizes a variety of things that could be beneficial to feminist biblical hermeneutics. First, she indirectly stresses personal experience, which is an important theme in many forms of liberation and feminist theologies. However, she does this differently than Schüssler Fiorenza, since she has a different perspective.

Dube highlights the voice of the colonized peoples, which helps feminist theology because it fights against the androcentric paradigm that Schüssler Fiorenza discusses. In other words, the androcentric, white, Western voice is the voice that Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to avoid, and Dube’s work is also doing this. However, she is critiquing a different aspect of the Western perspective than Schüssler Fiorenza is. Dube is speaking from the voice of the Two-Thirds World, thus she does not focus solely on gender and patriarchal

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{160}\) It is both distinctly feminist and postcolonial because it uses a woman specifically for a metaphor of a colonized nation.

\(^{161}\) Dube, “Reading for Decolonization,” 63.
structures, but also on socio-economic and political structures that colonize. This is obvious when we recall how Dube emphasizes the ethnicity and socio-economic status of the Samaritan woman, demonstrating how it would have been a struggle for her to engage in conversation with a Jewish man, but Schüessler Fiorenza only emphasizes the fact that the Samaritan woman was an example of women in power in the early Church.¹⁶² There is no mention of this Samaritan woman’s personal struggle, or the struggle of her people, but rather Schüessler Fiorenza only aims to point out that she was probably a woman in a position of power.

We can also see a contrast when we look to both theologians’ stress on the “power” of Jesus. They both agree that his power is emphasized, but they come to different conclusions as to why he is powerful. For Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, Jesus is powerful because he is male, but for Musa Dube, Jesus is powerful because he is a member of the colonizing force. Both theologians point something important out about the text that is not a “traditional” reading, but they come to their conclusions in completely different ways. This is why Dube’s perspective helps add to Schüessler Fiorenza’s. Dube gives a voice to the women of formerly colonized nations who are often not heard, and this brings something more to feminist biblical hermeneutics, since it pulls us away from having one singular, myopic view of the Scriptures.

Unlike Schüessler Fiorenza, Dube does not focus on the role of women in the early Church, but rather she focuses helping those who are gravely in need and who are ignored by society—even today. This is clear when Dube looks at Jesus as a liberating force who has come to save those who are infirmed and cast aside by society. Schüessler Fiorenza might critique this view and see it as an emphasis of male power. However, it is

¹⁶² Schüessler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 138.
important to note that Dube does not always see Christ as a figure that emphasizes power. Dube critiques the influence and power of colonialism, but she also sees how Christ can liberate, like in the instance of Mark 5. Thus, while the text can be read to criticize Jesus as a figure that merely emphasizes “male power,” it can also be read to reveal the importance of helping the “other.” This could help Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument because women are undeniably a part of this “other” group.

Even though Dube makes very good arguments that Schüssler Fiorenza does not include in her reading of Scriptures, she still has shortcomings. First of all, she is perhaps too harsh toward Schüssler Fiorenza’s Western concerns. While it is unfair to only include the Western voice when talking about feminist theology, it is also unfair to exclude it. Schüssler Fiorenza does not properly include the voice of the Third World, but she does acknowledge problems that still resonate today. Even women in the West are still victims of sexism in Christianity, and Schüssler Fiorenza points out that in the early Church, this was simply not the case. Schüssler Fiorenza’s perspective calls to mind that there was a time when the Church was less sexist and women had more authority. This should not be a feminist theologian’s only concern, but it is a significant one that both women in the Two-Thirds World and women in the West can benefit from. Furthermore, it is unfair to trivialize anyone’s suffering, and to truly be in solidarity with each other, both feminist voices should include each other. Therefore Schüssler Fiorenza’s point that the early Christian Church was more egalitarian is an important point to apply to today—women in the West, the Two-Thirds World, or anywhere else should be treated as full human persons. Dube does not stress this concept of egalitarianism in early Christianity,
and she does not acknowledge sufficiently that we are far from the egalitarian Church that we started from.

Moreover, Dube does a better job of emphasizing Christ than Schüessler Fiorenza, but she only emphasizes his humanity when she stresses his liberating traits. She points out how he liberates the oppressed (like the women in Mark 5 and John 4) through physical and spiritual healing, which stresses his prophet or Messiah-like traits, rather than his divinity. Dube puts much more weight on Christ than Schüessler Fiorenza, since Schüessler Fiorenza does not want to put males at the center of the story. However, simply emphasizing Jesus as a liberator is falling short of why we should follow his actions. Jesus sets a good example for us, but the reason that his example matters for Christians is because he is simultaneously human and divine. John Paul II emphasizes how Christ fulfills the Scriptures and how Christ demonstrates continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus is not simply a political liberator, but rather he is divine and he completes God’s plan for humanity. It is important that he liberates the oppressed, but what is more important is why he liberates the oppressed. As Christ, he is showing us how to live the lives that God wants us to live—this is an important point that is not sufficiently acknowledged in the writings of Dube.

Altogether, Dube successfully gives a voice to the Two-Thirds World—especially women. In addition, she critiques the colonizing aspects of the Bible, and she emphasizes the fact that Christ is a liberator. However, she does not sufficiently acknowledge the problems that Western feminists deal with, and she does not emphasize Christ’s divinity. John Paul II better stresses the importance of Christ and his actions, as we will see in the next section.

163 John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem, 12.
Adding Christ to the Conversation

In John Paul II’s apostolic letter, we remember through his typological reading of Scriptures that women have dignity through their vocations and the fact that they are created in the image and likeness of God. John Paul II rereads Genesis 1-3 and explains how Christ fulfills the Old Testament. Through this he demonstrates that women are full human persons, since they are in the image and likeness of God. John Paul II also celebrated the vocation of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and we can see this in his interpretation of Mark 5 and John 4.

In John Paul II’s interpretation of Mark 5, he tries to go back to the author’s original message while noting the historical context of Jesus’s lifetime. First, John Paul II looks to the fact that Jesus always acts with kindness towards women. The culture was a very unfair and negative atmosphere for women, but Jesus simply ignored that fact. In Mark 5, the author intended to demonstrate how important women were by Jesus’s actions.

John Paul II makes similar conclusions with his interpretation of John 4. In John 4, Jesus treats a woman with kindness that is of a different ethnicity and a known sinner. Instead of judging her for her sins, he discusses the mysteries of God with her. She then becomes a disciple, which is unusual because of her gender and because of her sinfulness.

John Paul II, through the use of *Dei Verbum*, notes that Christ does not put one gender over the other. He recognizes the differences between the two, but still sees both of them as representative of the image and likeness of God. His reading of Scriptures

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164 Ibid., 13.
165 Ibid.
comes from a Christological typology. John Paul II may not plainly say so, but he most certainly centers all of his arguments around Jesus Christ and his teachings. For each argument he makes about the dignity of women and their vocation, he goes straight to Scriptures to show how Christ points to the argument in some way. John Paul II comes from this Christological approach in order to prove that Christianity is a welcoming faith for women. His emphasis on Christ actually demonstrates that women are important, since Jesus sees them as important.

These episodes [where Jesus interacts with women] provide a very clear picture. Christ is the one who "knows what is in man" (cf. Jn 2:25) - in man and woman. He knows the dignity of man, his worth in God's eyes. He himself, the Christ, is the definitive confirmation of this worth. Everything he says and does is definitively fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery of the Redemption. Jesus' attitude to the women whom he meets in the course of his Messianic service reflects the eternal plan of God, who, in creating each one of them, chooses her and loves her in Christ (cf. Eph 1:1-5). Each woman therefore is "the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake". Each of them from the "beginning" inherits as a woman the dignity of personhood. Jesus of Nazareth confirms this dignity, recalls it, renews it, and makes it a part of the Gospel and of the Redemption for which he is sent into the world. Every word and gesture of Christ about women must therefore be brought into the dimension of the Paschal Mystery. In this way everything is completely explained.\footnote{166 Ibid.}

Here we see John Paul II strengthen his argument for the dignity of women by referring to the Paschal Mystery. Jesus’s kindness and positivity towards women reflects God’s overall plan for humankind. Jesus Christ treats women with love in reflection of the fulfillment of the covenant and the Paschal Mystery of the Redemption. Christ’s actions reaffirm women’s dignity and his actions are significant to God’s plan. Therefore it is in God’s plan to treat women with love and respect.

This greatly differs from Schüssler Fiorenza’s perspective, which takes Jesus away from the focus of the story in order to celebrate women. This is problematic, since
she is ultimately trying to overcome sexism in Christianity in particular. Without a strong Christocentric foundation, her analysis becomes less theological in nature and more secular. Thus highlighting Christ’s treatment of women is essential to a feminist biblical hermeneutic.

Musa Dube does not quite fall into the same problem as Schüssler Fiorenza, but she does succumb to a similar problem. As stated above, she emphasizes Christ as a representation of the colonizer, but in her more positive read of Jesus’s actions, she emphasizes Christ as a liberator. This is a significant aspect to Christ’s nature and should not be ignored. However, for Christians, Jesus is divine, and it is his divinity that shows us the suitable and loving treatment of women in the Church. For instance, Christ does not ostracize the Samaritan woman for the sin relating to her sexuality, he merely forgives her and tells her to stop sinning. This trait of forgiveness demonstrates Christ’s divinity, and it is essential to treatment of women in the Church who have been judged for sins concerning sexuality. Therefore Dube’s perspective still needs to be more Christocentric than it presently appears to be in order to include such important divine traits of Christ.

Although John Paul II’s Christocentric point of view makes a good argument for the proper treatment of women in the Church (and in the world), his argument is far from perfect. His theology celebrates the vocations of women, but the main problem in his theology of women stemming from his biblical interpretation is that it does not properly take into account the perspective of women. This is a tremendous issue when it comes to feminist biblical scholarship and feminist theology in general, since many types of feminist theology emphasize one’s personal perspective. It is important to utilize the
The perspective of women because their voice has so often been ignored in the past, and as a result, negative or degrading aspects of biblical texts have been emphasized and used to argue for women’s submission (for instance, misreads of Ephesians 5:21-33 have argued for women to submit to men, rather than a mutual submission in marriage). As we recall from Dube and Schüssler Fiorenza’s theologies, a singular, Western, androcentric perspective has been harmful to women in the past, therefore a use of other perspectives is necessary.

This problem of the lack of the voice of women in John Paul II’s perspective does not end with the biblical texts being used to justify sexist ideals. Since John Paul II does not acknowledge that using the perspective of women is a useful way to do theology and practice biblical hermeneutics, he ends up having several other problems in his theology of women. Without using the voice of women in his theology, he limits how one views women’s vocation. John Paul II limits the woman vocation to two things: Virginity and motherhood.\(^{167}\) It is true that he defines “motherhood” in a broad sense and he includes in his definition a “spiritual motherhood,”\(^ {168}\) but this is still not quite sufficient, since he does not go into enough detail on what it truly means to be a spiritual mother, and he does not include how broad and inclusive this term may or may not be. This notion of a “spiritual motherhood” needs to be better developed—John Paul II should clarify what sorts of careers\(^ {169}\) are included in the “spiritual motherhood” vocation. He makes mention of the consecrated religious representing this “spiritual motherhood,” but he does not tell

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\(^{167}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{169}\) The term “career” here is referring to vocations, but since John Paul II does not include many occupations in his definition of “vocation,” I simply say “career.”
his readers whether or not this spiritual motherhood is limited exclusively to these
women.

In addition to his lack of description of what it means to be a spiritual mother, he
also does not take into account that a woman may see her own vocation very differently.
While each woman’s vocation may include some form of virginity and/or motherhood in
her vocation, she may not see it as her only vocation. At the very least, a woman simply
may not define “motherhood” in the same way that John Paul II does. For example, a
female theologian may see her job as her vocation, but she might not necessarily consider
it a form of “motherhood.” She could consider herself a leader, a teacher, or a spiritual
director of some kind, but the word “mother” may not be something she associates with
her vocation. This is why the perspective of women is necessary to help form these
definitions. Both Musa Dube and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza might argue that the
Magisterium’s notion of a woman’s vocation is faulty because it comes from an
androcentric, largely Western perspective. The definition of “motherhood” cannot simply
be defined by male terms—the voice of women contributes to the definition of the
vocation, as well.

Let us now go a little deeper into John Paul II’s scriptural interpretation
specifically, and the problem of the lack of the woman’s voice in his hermeneutics might
be a little more obvious. First, in Mark 5, John Paul II celebrates Christ’s kindness
towards the bleeding woman and the dying girl.\(^\text{170}\) However, he fails to notice what
Schüssler Fiorenza does. He does not point out the fact that the women in the story are
depicted as weak, and can even be read as pawns to get the story moving forward and

\(^{170}\) John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem, 13.
enhance the power of the male figure of Jesus.\textsuperscript{171} Surely this idea could be pointed out in his interpretation while still commending Christ’s actions. It is possible that an interpreter may see no real repercussions by not pointing out this flaw, but it is a problem. Acknowledging the flaws of the Bible, specifically the sexist ones, helps prevent us from misreading the Bible as a text that justifies sexism. John Paul II’s interpretation should keep Christ in the main focus, but should not overlook the flaws of the text.

An additional problem with John Paul II’s Scripture interpretation is that he does not truly emphasize the nature of the bleeding woman’s life. He notes that she would have been considered “impure,” but if he paid attention to the perspective of women, or more specifically, infirmed and shunned women, as well as women oppressed by colonialism, then he might have spoken more at length about the bleeding woman’s condition. In Musa Dube’s work, she notes that the bleeding woman is a good representation of what women in the Two-Thirds World experience. The bleeding woman has used all of her money for an incurable disease, much like any person in Africa who spends all of his or her money on healing from AIDS. If John Paul II made this connection, he might have been able to improve his Christocentric argument, since it would further demonstrate how Christ treats women with love and respect, and it would further give an example of women’s dignity through Christ’s actions.

At first glance, it might seem like focusing on the woman in the story would take away from the focus of Jesus, but if one makes the comparison to a victim of AIDS or any woman experiencing violence and oppression in the Two-Thirds World, then it actually strengthens John Paul II’s argument. John Paul II’s perspective stresses that

\textsuperscript{171} This “enhancing of power” is not an emphasis of Christ’s power through his divinity, but rather it is an emphasis of the power of Christ’s gender.
Christ shows us how we are to treat women, especially women who are generally seen as undesirables by society. If the interpreter emphasizes the woman in the story’s life and her situation, and if the interpreter can make the connection between the bleeding woman and a woman in the Two-Thirds World, then it shows us how Christ would treat women in the Two-Thirds World today. As a result, we can act as Christ and help these women and men who are suffering in the Two-Thirds World. This way of interpreting makes Christ our shining example that can be specifically applied to the 21st century.

The same argument could be made for John Paul II’s interpretation of John 4. As previously stated, John Paul II points out that Jesus treats a woman with total love and kindness even though she is considered sinful and of a different ethnicity. This shows us how we should treat women of different ethnicities who society deems as “sinners.” However, since he does not take into account the female perspective, and he does not use the hermeneutical methods of Schüssler Fiorenza, he does not see that the Samaritan woman’s role in John 4 points to the possibility of women having a significant role in the early Church.

Even without getting into such controversial matters as women’s ordination, one can still benefit from acknowledging the importance of women and their leadership roles in the early Church. It is just another way that Jesus demonstrates love towards women—he made women some of his first disciples. If John Paul II considered this possibility through the re-imagining method and by listening to the voices of women, then he might be able to further prove that society and the Church should treat women as equals.

This also applies to Dube’s argument that John 4 is a colonizing text. If John Paul II listens to the voices of the women in the Two-Thirds World, and looks to the text as
one in which Jesus goes against the colonizing powers, then he would further emphasize the notion of how Jesus sets an example for how we should treat women—especially the marginalized women who are victims of colonization. If we recognize the problem of colonization as Jesus does, then we have the opportunity to be in solidarity with those who are affected by colonization. We can properly critique the Western World and begin to change the social structures that are results of colonization.

In addition, John Paul II could benefit from Dube’s argument that Jesus is depicted as a person of power and the Samaritan woman serves as a metaphor for the colonized. This seems as though it would only further hurt John Paul II’s argument, because it does not put Jesus in a “good light,” but it can still be helpful. Some may read this interpretation as too secular and possibly “anti-Christian,” but if we recall Dube calling Jesus a colonized person, a liberator, and one who colonizes, then we can see that it is beneficial. Thinking of all three example together demonstrates that she is not “anti-Christian” (since she points out that Christ is a liberator, which is a positive depiction of him), but she also does not overlook the harmful messages in the text, either. She manages to see depictions of Christ as both positive and negative. Therefore she is neither too critical nor too forgiving. John Paul II should be more critical with the Gospel texts for the sake of women’s dignity. In other words, if he focused on the negative aspects as well as the positives, and if he was critical of the texts where it is appropriate, then he would be able to further demonstrate women’s dignity, but in a different way that simply using Christ as an example. He would demonstrate the dignity of women by not justifying the texts that have been used as a way to keep women in submission. His criticism of certain aspects of the texts would indicate that he does not approve of the
sexist nature of the texts. This could still tie in to his argument coming from Christ’s actions, since Christ too, criticized sexism when he criticized his peers for ostracizing women.

Altogether, John Paul II does better at focusing on Christ in his biblical interpretation than either Dube or Schüssler Fiorenza. However, when he does not include the voices of women, his theological perspective is at a disadvantage because he would even further strengthen his argument that Christ celebrates women, and that sexism should be rejected. In addition, he would further his argument that women have dignity in general by being critical of those texts that reveal elements of sexism.

Conclusions

These three perspectives of biblical interpretation all have their strengths and flaws. No single theologian gets everything right. However, with the appropriate dialogue between the three theologians, a more cohesive Christian feminist biblical hermeneutic can be accomplished. Taking a piece of the methodologies from each scholar will create a better biblical reading of such passages as Mark 5 or John 4. For instance, if we use Schüssler Fiorenza’s strategies to avoid the androcentric paradigm that has been prevalent in academia, then we are able to liberate marginalized women and avoid sexism that is justified by the Bible. If we add Dube’s emphasis on the voice of the Two-Thirds World and reading texts to “decolonize” them, then we get even closer to an ideal biblical hermeneutic. Now we are including the voices of those who are rendered voiceless—even by the women in the Western World. Finally, if we combine the Christocentrism of John Paul II with the inclusion of the woman’s perspective as well as the non-androcentric and decolonizing elements of Schüssler Fiorenza and Dube, then we can see
the texts for what they truly are: stories that tell us of Jesus’s life and his ministry, and his unique double-nature: Human and Divine. For Christians, Jesus’s life is the ultimate example for how we are to act, thus a better interpretation of the texts will teach us how to improve our lives and live in solidarity with others.

The Bible should not be used as a form of sexism or bigotry in any capacity, and it is clear that each theologian seeks to overcome this issue in his or her own way. However, without dialogue between the three very different voices, we may never see an egalitarian Church that respects the voices of all people, regardless of their gender, class, race, or geography. Constant dialogue between different perspectives helps us become aware of problems that we might not have considered on our own. We are all limited by our own perspectives and unique life situations, and we must be aware of that when we practice feminist biblical hermeneutics. If we can successfully listen and learn from each other, then we can move towards a better Church.

In order to listen with sincerity, we have to pay attention to each other’s arguments and personal perspectives. It is not enough to say that we celebrate the dignity of everyone—we must actually consider what other people are saying about Scriptures and why they are saying it. This makes it much easier to come to a common ground, because we are coming from a place of understanding rather than a place of judgment or confusion. Schüssler Fiorenza, Dube, and John Paul II all certainly come from a “good place” and have good intentions in mind. All three seek to improve the lives of women in Christianity by how they interpret the Scripture texts. However, their points of views are considerably different, and without cooperation and communication between the three
perspectives, they may even appear to be combative towards one another. Luckily, this can be solved with dialogue.

So much of Christianity comes from the Scriptures, and there are so many things about the Scriptures that we still do not understand. If we continue to interpret the texts with the use of many voices, then we will have a tiny glimpse of understanding of the Word of God, and we can help to improve the lives of women and all those who are marginalized in God’s Church.


John Paul II, “Letter to Women,”


John Paul II, “Mulieris Dignitatem,”


