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10 Years of *lectio difficilior*

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Zusammenfassung:

Mit der 22. Ausgabe der *lectio difficilior* feiern die Herausgeberinnen, alle Frauen des editorial board und die AutorInnen das 10-jährige Jubiläum eines erfolgreichen Projekts. Wir verstanden das kurze Treffen beim internationalen Kongress der Society of Biblical Literature in Tartu (Estland) als Beginn einer Reflexionsphase, die nicht nur für das Projekt unserer Zeitschrift, sondern insgesamt für die feministische Exegese von Bedeutung sein dürfte. Was haben wir in den letzten 10 Jahren geleistet? Inwiefern hat sich das Forschungsfeld verändert? Sind wir zufrieden mit unseren Erfolgen? Oder stagniert die Entwicklung? Was bedeutet “feministisch“ im Bezug auf unsere Exegese, Hermeneutik, Theologie? Wie verhalten sich Feminismus und Genderforschung zueinander? Schließlich: wie steht es mit der Präsenz von feministischen ExegetInnen in Lehre und Forschung?

Wir betrachten es nicht als unsere Aufgabe, diese Fragen zu beantworten, aber vielleicht doch einige Langzeitbeobachtungen beizutragen, die für eine noch zu leistende Analyse wichtig sein dürften. Mit solchen Beobachtungen befassen sich die Artikel dieser Ausgabe der *lectio difficilior*.

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With the 22th edition of *lectio difficilior* the editors, all the women on the editorial board, and the authors celebrate the tenth anniversary of a successful project. It has been a great experience to participate in the anniversary panel for our electronic journal at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Tartu, Estonia. We would like to thank especially Hanna Stenström, who co-organized the panel, as well as the speakers Cheryl Exum, Jorunn Økland, and – represented by Hanna Stenström – Caroline Vander Stichele who co-founded *lectio difficilior* and served as first co-editor. We understood the brief gathering in Tartu as the beginning of a phase of reflection that may be significant not only for the project of our journal but also for feminist exegesis more generally. What could we achieve in the last ten years? In what respect has the field of research changed? Are we content with our accomplishments? Or, has progress come to a standstill? What does “feminist” mean with regard to our exegesis,

hermeneutics, and theology? What is the relationship between feminism and gender studies? Last but not least: how are feminist exegetes present in teaching and research? Our task is not to answer these questions, yet perhaps to contribute some long-term observations that may be important for a required potential analysis. The idea of launching a feminist exegetical journal was born at a meeting of contributors to the “Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung”, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, which took place in Münster (Germany) in December 1998. Yet, the idea was also deliberated and discussed at the conference of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR) in Hofgeismar (1999). The goal was to have an independent journal that would provide articles of high quality for feminist biblical scholars to read and a forum for authors to publish. At that time, the only journal in the field of feminist theology was the “Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion“, which, however, covered religion and theology more generally and published few articles on biblical interpretation. Since the means for a print journal were lacking anyway, from the beginning we thought of launching an electronic journal as well as to circulate it on the internet free of charge. While more electronic journals have emerged in the meantime, our decision was notably courageous in 1999. At that time, there was hardly any experience with electronic journals so that we broke new ground. The editors and their team had the courage to implement it while Rhea Sturm (bureau moka) contributed the technical skills and served as webmistress of *lectio difficilior* for many years. The women who participated in the planning of the project took some time to search a good name for the new journal and decided in favor of the programmatic and bold name, which profoundly transforms a technical term of text criticism into a feminist message. Not all scholars of textual criticism were or are pleased that we scrounged a term from their serious toolbox and used it for a somewhat different purpose. In the beginning, it was necessary to make fundamental decisions, for example, that we would publish articles of male authors if their contributions were feminist, while we would not include men into the decision-making bodies. In *lectio difficilior* no articles appear that were already published elsewhere, yet we explicitly support to publish our articles later in print journals (with reference to *lectio difficilior* as venue of first publication), in order to avoid disadvantages for younger scholars who need to publish also in non-feminist journals. From the beginning *lectio difficilior* was meant to be an interdisciplinary and Jewish-Christian or rather nondenominational journal and both characteristics are still essential. Many articles refer to subject areas such as classical philology, archeology, Egyptology, ancient Near Eastern studies, ancient history, Jewish studies, history of art, pedagogy,

music history, literary studies etc. Additionally, the articles may appear in English, French or German, and focus on various regions in and, often, beyond Europe. It is hardly possible to systematize the approximately 80 articles published so far with regard to hermeneutics, methods, and contents, or to highlight any specific trends among them. Surely, these contributions document that their authors discovered feminist exegesis like a new ocean, searched it and started to measure its depths in all points of the compass – thus a decade of exploration. There are some recurrent themes in this variety, for example: the constant interest in deuterocanonical scriptures, in texts and topics around violence and rape, in female biblical prophets.¹²

In view of this broad spectrum of topics and approaches the question came up consistently – and also in the panel discussion in Tartu – what actually was “feminist” in the articles. Indeed, we (editors and members of the editorial board) have rejected articles that seemed to be hardly “feminist”. Yet, what does “feminist exegesis” mean? Linked to the theoretical question is a cultural one. In our discussion in Tartu, the variety and breadth of feminist interpretation became apparent as well as the different situations, in which scholars pursue feminist exegesis at universities and in the public domain. Therefore, different strategies are needed to add more weight to feminist exegesis. The contributions to the panel in Tartu that are published in this issue also raise this question in multiple ways.

1. Around the time when *lectio difficilior* was launched, the term “feminist” was replaced by “gender” at universities and research communities. Terms like “gender studies”, “gender-specific” etc. were introduced as more appropriate descriptions of the issue with regard to reality and gender relations, and especially with regard to political correctness, although at this point, especially feminist theologians had already clarified that “feminist” did not just mean “relating to women”, but was meant to be a comprehensive category of gender analysis (cf. e.g. E. Schüssler Fiorenza’s definition of patriarchy, or rather kyriarchy). There was hardly any discussion whether it was prudent with regard to the policies of universities and women to substitute the term “feminism” by “softer” expressions. For more than ten years identifications and concepts of both fields have overlapped significantly; likewise many contributions in *lectio difficilior* are more interested in gender research than in a clearly stated feminist approach. In the same time period, also liberation theology has lost its contours so that hardly any authors would currently identify themselves with this approach. Therefore it seems urgent to fill the attribute “feminist” in a new way. Beyond dispute, the attribute implies an interdisciplinary approach and a plurality of methods. As a

political term, “feminist” awaits its reformulation without becoming an instrument of exclusion.

2. Since 2000, feminism, feminist theology, and feminist exegesis have been institutionalized to very different degrees within European countries. Jorunn Økland is able to speak of some sort of state feminism with regard to Scandinavian countries. In German speaking regions, some feminist theologians obtained regular university chairs, especially in biblical studies. The percentage of women, however, is still small in many sectors of academic life, e.g. among chairs of institutions, in conference and public lectures, and in articles of mainstream publishing. Whereas in Europe a backlash is clearly perceptible in numerous places, feminist theology seems to develop dynamically and with promise in many regions outside Europe. The sometimes disillusioning summaries of the last decades demonstrate in any case that our progress in many European countries is vulnerable and by no means secured. What needs to be done that women and feminist issues will not stay at the margins of the academic discourse but reach the center? At this point, questions of power, and therefore politics, clearly come to the fore. As a concrete example, the rating of journals, which is developed and employed according to criteria set by committees of predominantly male scholars, has been mentioned in Tartu. A journal like *lectio difficilior* meanwhile pays a price for its independence in the way that it cannot ascend to the A-category in the international rating of theological journals regardless of its proven high academic standard and internationality.
3. The basic concern of all critical theology, namely to alert to a dangerous and subversive memory (J.B. Metz), with regard to feminist theology and exegesis still means: to commemorate women, to inscribe women into history, to relate oneself to women, to read and cite the works of women of former and contemporary times, and to take up their questions.

Having said this, we (the editors, the women of the editorial board and authors) are looking forward to many more successful years of *lectio difficilior*. At this point, special thanks go to Dr. Ulrike Sals who since 2004 undertook with utter commitment and great consistency the copy-editing of articles and many more tasks in planning, organizing, and implementing the journal. After her appointment ends, Ulrike Sals will leave the University of Berne and turn over the editorial work to Sophie Kauz. Many thanks, Ulrike, for this excellent contribution to feminist scholarship. As a new member of the editorial board Ulrike Sals will remain closely linked to the *lectio difficilior*.

¹ Cf. Ulrike Sals, Reading the Difficult Way – for Ten Years. In: Annette Esser et al. (eds.): *Feminist Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue* (*Journal of ESWTR* 17), Leuven 2009, 209-214.

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