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Where Energy Sparkles in Hebrew Bible Studies Today: A Response to Athalya Brenner and Dorothea Erbele-Küster

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Beitrag ist eine Replik auf die Vorträge von Athalya Brenner und Dorothea Erbele-Küster auf der Konferenz “Gender Studies in Theology and Religion: A Success Story”, die 2011 in Groningen stattgefunden hat. Der Beitrag will zu kontroverser Diskussion anregen, indem er Thesen zu drei Themenkomplexen aufstellt, die in der rezenten feministischen Bibelwissenschaft zentral sind: die Fokusverschiebung von Identität zu Handlungskapazität (agency); die Notwendigkeit für Kompetenz in der Kulturanalyse; und die Frage nach hermeneutischen Strategien zur Aneignung der auf Männer fokussierten Texte der Hebräischen Bibel. Zudem thematisiert der Beitrag die Notwendigkeit Differenzen zwischen feministischen Bibelwissenschaftler/innen in den Blick zu nehmen und daraus resultierende Auseinandersetzung zu führen.

At the 2011 Groningen conference on “Gender Studies in Theology and Religion: A Success Story?” three contributions for each subject area were given: one from an international angle, one representing the Dutch perspective, and one forming the basis for a general discussion.¹ The papers by Athalya Brenner and Dorothea Erbele-Küster (see their contributions in this issue) as well as my response to their contributions were delivered in the session on the Hebrew Bible.

In their papers, Brenner and Erbele-Küster demonstrated the profound success of feminist Hebrew Bible studies in the last decades, indicated the positions still to be occupied, and located key issues of the recent debate. My response ties in with the latter focus. In close reference to the papers, I make a case for three issues that spotlight innovation and controversy in feminist Hebrew Bible studies today. These issues concern the conceptual shift from the notion of identity to the notion of agency; the need of expertise in cultural analysis for effectively entering the ‘cultural arena’; and the hermeneutical challenge of dealing with male-centred texts. Finally, and in view of the conference as a whole, I advocate for the importance of engaging differences and analysing the foundations of conflict as a resource that may further scholarship.

Identity versus agency

In her paper, Erbele-Küster identified identity, relations between cultures, and relations between generations as the central themes of recent Hebrew Bible studies. I agree that identity has been a central issue for quite some time. However, I believe that identity as a broad umbrella concept has already lost energy and is about to be replaced by the notion of agency. The notion of agency focuses less on who I am than on what I do and with whom.

The replacement of the notion of identity by the concept of agency is already in full swing in cultural studies and will eventually influence Bible studies and theology. Central in this shift is the work by the sociocultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood. Mahmood aims at moving the notion of agency beyond a Western emancipatory concept, such as that proposed by Judith Butler. Based on her research on women in Egyptian piety movements, Mahmood seeks to reconceptualise agency in order to account for the agency and subjectivity of women who might easily be perceived as oppressed and unemancipated from a prescriptive Western standpoint.²

Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency is extremely relevant for feminist Hebrew Bible studies. It is critical that we engage with new approaches to the question of agency, and to strategize how we might transfer their results to biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.³ For example, in biblical literature, we are constantly confronted with ambiguous woman figures who act in subversive and powerful ways, while being fully enmeshed in a generally androcentric scene. The shift from identity to a nuanced concept of agency facilitates alternative approaches to the texts and a revised assessment of such female characters.

Expertise in Cultural Analysis as an Entry Card to the 'Cultural Arena'

In her paper, Brenner suggested that the field of cultural studies and the study of culture in a more general sense – the 'cultural arena' as she called it – has become a crucial location for feminist Hebrew Bible studies, a view with which I fully agree. My second claim is that cultural analysis has become a crucial context for Bible studies and feminist criticism. Yet we need to acquire the needed expertise to operate in this context in order to know which strategies are most effective for our field, and what kinds of cooperation with other fields are desirable. The dissertation projects mentioned by Erbele-Küster demonstrate that this work is already underway.⁴ We all engage concepts from the Humanities and cultural studies, for example, literary studies and fantasy studies (Emma England), gender and ethnicity studies (Anne-Mareike Wetter), and

memory studies and archival theory (Ingeborg Löwisch). The reasons for these engagements are first of all content-related: this is what we think interesting and important. But there is also a pragmatic side to it: engaging these discourses might convince others to hire us. In fact, I believe that a vital factor in getting Anne-Mareike Wetter and me paid positions at the University of Utrecht was that the hiring committee perceived us as pioneers, that is, as people who would be able to build both theoretical and practical bridges between Bible studies and cultural studies.

Part of bringing Hebrew Bible studies to the cultural studies arena means to confront the text with particular discourses that have been developed elsewhere. Notions of identity, agency, performance, hybridity, embodiment, and so on, are transferable notions, which are at home in various disciplines. As Mieke Bal has put it, they are ‘travelling concepts’.⁵ But they are more at home elsewhere than with us. They belong to an interdisciplinary discourse outside our field and we are gradually becoming part of this discourse, as newcomers. I believe that it is extremely important to enter the ‘cultural arena’ from a knowledgeable standpoint, that is, by engaging in interdisciplinary studies.

My view differs from the one Brenner advanced in her paper in one crucial respect. I think that the discipline of gender studies is the most critical location for the transfer of theoretical notions between the disciplines from a feminist perspective. I do not see gender studies as a ghetto, but rather as an important ‘transshipment centre’. To illustrate this point: the University of Utrecht has a gender studies department that is a vibrant intellectual centre, with faculty who are major figures in interdisciplinary research groups of the University. For example, Rosi Braidotti works in gender studies and is also a founding member and the director of the Centre of Humanities. The situation in Berlin is similar.

Dealing with Hermeneutics: How to Disclose the ‘Male-Male’ Texts

My last claim is that feminist biblical hermeneutics needs to more thoroughly engage with what I would call ‘male-male’ texts. Feminist Bible criticism has long focused on texts that stage positive female characters, provide traces of a female voice, or suggest a critique of patriarchal imagery and practices. However, much of biblical literature escapes these criteria, because they primarily address male concerns. These texts include large parts of the genealogies and legal texts, but also numerous narratives. Rather than featuring female figures or voices within an androcentric context, these ‘male-male’ texts portray males at the very centre of their androcentric agenda. In post-secular societies, negotiating the meanings of biblical literature in a broad cultural

context has become critical. This especially concerns these exclusively male-centred texts, the interpretations of which have too often been left to fundamentalist circles. There is already an interest in bringing feminist hermeneutics one step further and to appropriate these wider domains of the canon. For example, Klara Butting, who has previously worked on Ester and Ruth, now works on Saul. She is interested in the notions of failure and rejection and therefore seeks inroads to disclosing the narratives centring on this male character.⁶ Another example is the increasing interest and expertise in priestly concerns within feminist scholarship. The works of Claudia Camp and Deborah Rooke are cases in point.⁷ Finally, starting to occupy genres like commentaries, as Brenner has emphasized, likewise implies the confrontation with texts that feminist scholars have had the privilege to push to the margins.

To be sure, the challenge of disclosing the vast corpus of overwhelmingly male-centred texts of biblical literature has recently been faced by individual scholars in the field of feminist Bible studies. However, this needs to be accompanied by broader hermeneutic reflection on how to read these ‘male-male’ texts from a perspective sensitive to issues of gender and power. And the question needs to be raised what form feminist hermeneutics can or should take if it has no female figures, no female voices, and no power relations between men and women on which to focus.

Afterthought on the Potential for Conflict as Indicative of a Success Story

The last session of the Groningen conference was devoted to summing up and assessing what had been reported and discussed. Angela Berlis (Professor of the History of Old Catholic Theology and general Church History at the University of Bern) delivered the concluding note. She summarized the conference under the headers ‘success’, ‘ambiguities’, and ‘strategies’. I thought her conclusion was both wise and fair. Still, I would like to add an important point, namely, a reflection on the potential for conflict. After all, there would be no success story to tell if the story had not opened up space for conflict.

Examples of the potential of conflict are as follows. In a tea break a colleague summed up a controversial plenary discussion with the statement, “Well, I am a fundamentalist, and I am proud of it.” I am familiar with this statement and usually ignore it. Now, for the first time I thought, “Well, I am a secularist, and this is what I am proud of.” The short conversation shows the potential for conflict between women inside and outside the churches, between religious and secular women, and between evangelicals and others. This potential may be used to stimulate discussion and reflect about political engagement and agency.

Another point concerns those aspects of feminist theory to which individual scholars and discourses refer. Some conference participants identified coarse ethnocentric feminist approaches as *the* feminist position in their respective field. Others identified postmodern gender studies with its highly theoretical yet extremely nuanced positions as the benchmark for talking about any feminist position. There is thus ample potential for conflict concerning the questions of which (feminist) heritage we claim and which shoes we aim to fill. This raises the question of which interests we pursue in highlighting certain aspects of the history of feminist theory and gender studies and in repressing others.

These are but two examples of potential arenas of conflict, and undoubtedly, there are more. I thought it fair that the lectures and discussions focused on our joint success and that the conference participants showed generosity in listening to each other throughout the conference. Still, I think it to be important to bear in mind differences and the need to face conflict.

¹ The conference was held at Groningen University on January 27-28, 2011. Subject areas discussed included (in order of the programme) Hebrew Bible, Systematic Theology, History of Christianity, New Testament, Practical Theology, Religious Studies. The topic Gender Studies, University and Church was also included on the agenda.

² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), and Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001), 202-236.

³ During the conference discussion, Jorunn Økland (director of the Centre for Gender Research at the University of Oslo) took up the proposed shift from identity to agency. Økland critiqued the practice of clinging to lists of identity positions, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or class, for its tendency to blur necessary differences and to inhibit collaboration on actual projects. For example, the identity position of being gay is problematic for men in churches, but to a much lesser extent for men in academia. Hence, rather than foregrounding the identity position, focusing on agency facilitates a nuanced view of context.

⁴ Emma England, “The Genesis Flood Story retold for children in English printed books published between 1837 and 2006”, PhD project, University of Amsterdam; Anne-Mareike Wetter, “Judging by Her – Female Literary Characters as Embodiment of

Israel”, PhD project, University of Utrecht; Ingeborg Löwisch, “Memory Performance through Gendered Genealogy Composition in Biblical Literature and Contemporary Documentary Film”, PhD project, University of Utrecht.

⁵ Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

⁶ Klara Butting, “Zwei Brote für Saul: Ein Einspruch gegen die Stilisierung Sauls zur tragischen Figur,” in *Essen und Trinken in der Bibel: ein literarisches Festmahl für Rainer Kessler zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Michaela Geiger, Christl M. Maier, and Uta Schmidt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2009), 49-59.

⁷ Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2009); Deborah W. Rooke, „Breeches of the Covenant: Gender, Garments and the Priesthood,“ in *Embroidered Garments: Priests and Gender in Ancient Israel*, ed. Deborah W. Rooke (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 19-37.

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