

*Dorothea Erbele-Küster*

## **Tell me more about gender trouble in Old Testament Studies!**

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Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Beitrag wurde 2011 an der Konferenz “Gender Studies in Theology and Religion: A Success Story?!” in Groningen präsentiert. Er bietet einen Überblick über die feministische Forschung bzw. die Genderforschung im Bereich der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft in den Niederlanden. Die Autorin definiert bzw. misst „Erfolg“ (success) daran, inwiefern herrschende Kategorien (immer wieder neu) in Frage gestellt werden. Erfolg liegt im „trouble“, wie der Titel des Beitrags suggeriert. Folglich kann der Erfolg der Gender Studies in der alttestamentlichen Forschung zum einen daran gemessen werden, wie Neudefinitionen von Kategorien wie Autonomie, Familie, Arbeit u.a.m. stattgefunden haben. Zum anderen geschieht dies auch in der kritischen Hinterfragung dichotomer Strukturen wie: Mann- Frau; Alt-Jung. Der Beitrag ruft die wichtigsten niederländischen Forschungsergebnisse auf diesem Gebiet in Erinnerung.

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The title of the conference at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in January 2011 “Gender – a success story?!” implies that gender is a story, but: What kind of story? Who is telling the story from which perspective? Are we asked to retell a gender his-story and not her-story? These questions correspond with what I have learned from the work of Dutch literary critic Mieke Bal,<sup>1</sup> who has applied insights from general literary criticism to the interpretation of biblical narrative texts from a feminist perspective. The future will show where the conference will lead us; today I would like to thank the organizers Anne Claire Mulder and Mathilde van Dijk for inviting us to reflect on the stories of gender studies. Stories are about persons, therefore I have contacted some scholars within the field. But first a sketch of the storyteller shall be given.

### **Who is writing this story?**

I received my theological training at Faculties of Protestant Theology in Tübingen and Heidelberg (both Germany) in the late eighties up to the mid-nineties. Later I wrote my dissertation in the German context as well.<sup>2</sup> I have been engaged in a German feminist

translation project of the Bible, called “Bibel in gerechter Sprache”<sup>3</sup>. Since 2004 I work in the Netherlands,<sup>4</sup> first as a postdoc-researcher on ‘Purity and body in Leviticus’,<sup>5</sup> and then as a lecturer at the Protestant Theological University of the Netherlands (PthU). I am also familiar with the Belgian context because I teach in Brussels at the Faculty for Protestant Theology. The story is thus told from both an insider and outsider perspective.

### **Statistics and success. Some observations beyond numbers**

A week before the conference was held in Groningen in January 2011, I attended the annual conference of the “Werkgezelschap Oude Testament” (Dutch speaking scholars in Hebrew Bible and cognate fields). Because of the presence of female PhD students the number of the women present was almost tripled. Otherwise there is just one female Professor in Hebrew Bible in the Netherlands: Ellen van Wolde (Radboud University, Nijmegen). The chair of Athalya Brenner on Old Testament/Hebrew Bible was canceled as part of the general policy of the University of Amsterdam to cut in religious studies. Besides, there are four female lecturers in Old Testament: Marjo Korpel, Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, Willien van Wieringen and myself.

In the last decennia at the PThU in Kampen (the former Theologische Universiteit Kampen ThUK) only one woman wrote her PhD in Old Testament (during the same period four dissertations were written by males – without any integration of feminist studies): Hennie Marsman defended in 2003 a reference work on the position of Women in Ugarit and the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

I still wonder why biblical studies in the Netherlands is such a male centered discipline, despite the fact that at least Old Testament studies and Judaica has been favorite among female/feminist scholars in the late eighties and nineties.<sup>7</sup> At the moment several women are writing a dissertation within the field of gender studies, combining various methods like ritual and cultural studies. My list is not exhaustive. The subjects of the female scholars from this next generation display the topics currently at stake: identity, relations between different cultures and generations. Anne-Mareike Wetter analyzes female literary characters like Esther as an embodiment of Israel. The working title of Ingeborg Loewisch’s PhD project reflects that in gender studies and in the Hebrew Bible the relation between the generations is of interest: *Memory Performance through Gendered Genealogy. Composition in Biblical Literature and Contemporary Documentary Film*.<sup>8</sup>

This interest in intergenerational relationships corresponds with places of intergenerational assistance and dialogue like the annual study week at the beginning of

January for all women doing research in theology, the so-called OPP-week (Onderlinge Promotie Promoting week). Three years ago the Protestant Theological University of the Netherlands offered the post-academic course: “Update in Feminist biblical exegesis.” Women of the age between 40 and 75 inscribed, three women stemming from three different generations, taught this course.<sup>9</sup>

On the level of master students at the Protestant Theological Faculty in Kampen, women stemming from Africa and Asia have been engaged in contextual and feminist readings of the Hebrew Bible. In order to illustrate this I refer to Yanghee Kim from South Korea, who wrote on “Reading Women in Leviticus with Women’s eyes”; Dorcas Chebet Juma did a contrapuntual reading of the Song of Songs with Kenyan female poetry. ““And she held him to her bosom”: An African feminist reading of 1 Kings 17 in the context of HIV/AIDS” was the title of Masego Makuruestsa’s master thesis. The work of the PhD and master students is stimulating – I am looking forward to the final outcome of their inspiring results so far.

### **Success on the level of publications**

Especially in comparison to the German speaking academic circle, I observe differences between both situations which may partly be due to the fact that the circle of women in the Netherlands is much smaller in numbers. In addition, the Dutch language has a more limited public readership in terms of numbers compared to the English or German ones. German speaking feminist scholars have published a feminist Bible commentary,<sup>10</sup> and a feminist Bible translation.<sup>11</sup> In the Netherlands, the series published by Meinema: “De Bijbel literair”, “De Bijbel spiritueel”, “De Bijbel vertaald”, “De Bijbel cultureel”, “De Bijbel theologisch” so far did not produce a volume entitled “De Bijbel feministisch”. However feminist/gender perspectives are included by several authors. Feminist perspectives, female authors and editors did find their way in malestream publications, but is it a success that male scholars started to write on women in the Bible? Such books are often written without integrating methods and insights of feminist studies. The risk is that stereotyped images of women are repeated.

The only encyclopedic feminist publication in Dutch – “Met eigen ogen” (“With one’s own eyes”) is a translation of the *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Dutch feminist scholars, pastors and laypersons often need to rely on English and German publications. When it comes to queer Bible reading since recently, a collection of articles written in Dutch is available.

There are a lot of publications to be proud of or that display the proud existence of feminist scholarship, as I will show in the next paragraph. Last but not least: Dutch

scholars are prominent in international feminist projects and publications. As a woman raised and trained in Israel and a scholar working and living from the nineties onwards in the Netherlands, Athalya Brenner set up the *Feminist Companion of the Bible* (first volume appeared in 1993; with republication from 2004 onwards). The outcome of a second series (last volume in 2001) proves the productiveness and the success.

### **Gender – a success story?! What is success in terms of gender studies?**

First I want to define the notion of success that is often used in such a casual way.

Success is about troubling categories. Success means not merely that a stereotype of the suppressed and or the beloved woman is repeated. Feminist critique deploys women not just as subordinated objects or victims. They show women as agents. In line with this was the response of a male colleague: For sure! Feminist studies have changed our perspectives. We are aware of and beware of the power relations.

Therefore success according to gender studies is trouble. Feminist studies began as a critique of categories and a de- and reconstruction of women's lives. The success of gender studies in Hebrew Bible could thus be measured in the manner in which such re-definitions of categories as autonomy, family, work, etc. took place, or the dichotomy between men and women was analyzed. Gender studies include age, race and class in the discussion. Likewise the detailed investigations muddied such clear-cut and casual statements as: women were subordinated in the Hebrew Bible/Ancient Israel. Feminist study is about ambiguities and conflict.

I want to recall some of these findings within the Dutch context which troubled, covering various areas of the field of Hebrew Bible. Behind the names and titles of books dramatic and empowering stories are hidden:

#### *In the field of hermeneutics: Troubling the male voice/author of the text*

Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes revealed in her dissertation the double voice in biblical texts. Biblical texts stemming from a patriarchal and androcentric context do not only talk with a male dominated voice but female voices may be overheard as well.<sup>12</sup> The cooperation and dialogue with Athalya Brenner resulted in the monograph "On gendering texts".<sup>13</sup> They exposed the gender-bias mainly in songs, wisdom literature and so-called prophetic literature.

#### *Troubled water in the concept of canon*

Jonneke Bekkenkamp questioned the concept of canon in her dissertation in 1993 at the University of Amsterdam. The fact that her promoters were not from the biblical field

may have given her critique more freedom. She confronted the biblical book Song of Songs with twenty-one poems of Adrienne Rich.<sup>14</sup> As female reader and theologian she questions the concept of canon, trying to take both identities into account. The urgent question in her thesis is: How to deal as a female reader with male centered texts that do not illuminate experiences of women? According to her reading model “the reader is not located in the centre of an interpretation community but she moves, drawing her own circle, in several circles. She reads books circulating there as the Holy Scripture. These books effect change or leave her untouched. She is a woman, looking for the woman she wants to be. She is a theologian, formed by but not tied up with theological discourse. Theology as a hermeneutics of existence gives up its compliance with specific religious tradition. [...] by its openness the model sustains a promise of a more universal, pluralistic, canon”<sup>15</sup>.

#### *Trouble in the field of narratology*<sup>16</sup>

I have already mentioned the groundbreaking work of Mieke Bal as an in- and outsider within the field of narrative studies. The title of Jopie Siebert-Hommes’s work “Let the daughters live!” – a quote from Pharaoh’s order in Exodus 1 – reflects the prominent position women/daughters play not just on a literary level but also within the narrative in Exodus 1 transforming it at the same time into a programmatic slogan.<sup>17</sup> According to Willien van Wieringen the syntactic and narrative analysis of the Simson cycle is fruitful for a gender-oriented study in which female characters are central.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Troubled water in Septuagint studies and text criticism*

The Belgian scholar Kristin de Troyer wrote main parts of her thesis living and working in Kampen/the Netherlands within a still utterly male dominated field: the Septuagint studies. She reveals again and again the theology and ideology of the Greek texts (translators), and how the Septuagint translator softens the male bias of the Hebrew text in the Greek versions of the Esther text.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Gender trouble in the field of Bible translation*

In her post-doc research Anneke de Vries stated: Translations should not insert stereotypes not inherent in the text.<sup>20</sup> She was, next to Caroline Vander Stichele and Manuela Kalsky, one of the three supervisors of the Dutch Bible Translation Project that raised their voices against the “translation” of the name of God with HEER (Lord).<sup>21</sup> This is a fine example of feminist (biblical) scholars mingling in and stimulating the public debate. Even if their slogan and demand “De Heer dat kan niet meer!” was not full-filled, it provoked a discussion. And last but not least: in the study

edition of the new Bible translation the rendering of the name of God is changed into JHWH and the mostly male translators generally tried to take gender issues into account.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Gender trouble in the field of religious history*

Marjo Korpel investigated the metaphors used for God in Ugarit and Israel.<sup>23</sup> Hennie Marsman in her volume of more than 700 pages investigated the social and religious positions of women in Ugarit, Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible.<sup>24</sup> Indeed one has to read all the details she has collected to be troubled and/or stimulated, because such questions as: was the position of women in Israel better or worse than in Ugarit, tend to simplify things. I want to repeat here her proposition number 12 from the oral defense, i.e. that women's studies should receive a place of its own in the curriculum.

#### *Troubling body, sex and gender<sup>25</sup>*

The basic categories within gender studies were brought up for discussion in the wake of Judith Butler's theoretical studies. Athalya Brenner published *On Gendering Desire & Sexuality in the Hebrew Bible*.<sup>26</sup> I myself deconstructed how discursive practices while reading Leviticus establish gender, purity and body.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Queer studies*

Gender studies could sometimes be perceived as the study of and by heterosexual women but this is not fully true. The book, which I mentioned earlier, "*Onder de Regenboog*" *Queer readings of the Bible*, edited by two scholars not working in the field of Biblical studies, problematizes our categories of sexual identities and gender, combining critique and humor.<sup>28</sup> However, we still miss a critical approach from male scholars to male stories deciphering gender-injustice and the male impact in these stories.

### **Concluding remarks**

As a conclusion I would like to state that feminist studies within the Netherlands have contributed to the classical malestream fields within biblical studies. Their voices are heard beyond the Dutch context. However, I am longing for more gender and more trouble! The Dutch context seems to be an attractive and fortuitous place both for Dutch and so-called foreign wo/men doing gender studies. As I heard Athalya Brenner say during the Society of Biblical Studies in Atlanta 2010: "Amsterdam is a wonderful exile". By another former co-traveler living abroad we are addressed as "bijbelhoek". At

the same time she acknowledges what the scholarly discussions within the biblical field once did teach her. Are we still thought-provoking troublemakers providing the different (scientific) communities with food?

The need for contextual biblical scholarship has been sensed more recently. This is displayed by the series edited by Athalya Brenner, Archie Lee, Gale Yee and others on contextual and intercultural Bible readings.<sup>29</sup> I am looking for more specific Dutch/European feminist readings taking postcolonial and migrant studies into account as well.

Is there dis-continuity in feminist scholarship? I come back to the issue of gender and generation because gender studies are only a success story if there is succeeding trouble. Success is likewise the critical reaction to earlier studies within the field of feminist studies! “On gendering texts” can serve as a model: it was written together and separately.<sup>30</sup> I have experienced kindred attempts in trouble; for example the project of co-writing on the issue of Daily Life and Holiness within a group of women from different fields within Theology (Dwaarsverband Vrouwenstudies of Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion/Noster).

Besides Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes who died in 1994, we are missing sources and voices that are no longer part of the public discourse. I sense the need to reconnect with other wo/men who are dealing with familiar issues and who are sharing kindred visions. Specific of feminist studies is the interaction with other studies. This conference might have been a first step. Success is the favorable outcome of what we have hoped and are striving for; it will never be trouble-free. I am thus deeply grateful for the “companion/s” we have in feminist studies on the Hebrew Bible in the Netherlands and elsewhere – wo/men and their writings alike.

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (Toronto/Buffalo/London, <sup>2</sup>2002); Id., *Femmes imaginaires: L’ancien testament au risque d’une critique* (Utrecht: H&S Publishers / Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens. Eine Rezeptionsästhetik der Psalmen*, WMANT 87 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Ulrike Bail et al. (eds.), *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (Gütersloh 2006, 4<sup>th</sup> revised edition 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, at the end of 2012, I have stopped my work at the PThU.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Körper und Geschlecht. Studien zur Anthropologie von Lev 12 und 15*, WMANT 121 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 2008; english

version in: The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, T@T Clark/Continuum 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Other women who recently did their PhD in Old Testament Studies are: Marieke den Braber at the Free University, Amsterdam; Helen Leneman on Ruth and Music at the University of Amsterdam.

<sup>7</sup> To mention a few names: Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, Jonneke Bekkenkamp, Mimi Deckers-Dijs; Jopie Siebert-Hommes, Richtsje Abma and in the field of Judaica Chana Safrai, Dineke Houtman, Birke Rapp-de Lange, Hanneke Reuling.

<sup>8</sup> Emma England is writing a dissertation on the flood story, with feminist affiliation at the UvA.

<sup>9</sup> Anne-Claire Mulder (Systematics/Practical Theology) and Magda Misset-van de Weg (New Testament Studies) and myself (Old Testament Studies).

<sup>10</sup> Luise Schottroff/Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus <sup>2</sup>1998).

<sup>11</sup> Ulrike Bail, et al. (eds.), *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2006, <sup>4</sup>2011).

<sup>12</sup> Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *Sporen van vrouwenteksten in de Hebreeuwse bijbel*, Utrechtse Theologische Reeks, 16 (Utrecht 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes/Athalya Brenner, *On Gendering Texts. Female & Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden / New York / Köln: Brill 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Jonneke Bekkenkamp, *Canon & Keuze. Het bijbelse Hooglied en de Twenty-One Love Poems van Adrienne Rich als bronnen van theologie* (Kampen: Kok 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Bekkenkamp, *Canon & Keuze*, 298 (in her English summary).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, 'A Short Story of Narratology in Biblical Studies', in: *Stories we live by* (ed. R. Ganzevoort/M. de Haardt) forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> Jopie Siebert-Hemmes „Let the daughters live!” *The literary architecture of Exodus 1-2 as a key for interpretation*, Biblical Interpretation Series, 379 (Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Willien van Wieringen, *Delila en de anderen: een syntactisch georiënteerd Bijbels-theologisch onderzoek naar de rol van de vrouwen in de Simson-cyclus (Richteren 13-16)* (Vught: Skandalon 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Kristin De Troyer, *The end of the alpha text of Esther: translation and narrative technique in MT 8:1-17, LXX 8:1-17, and MT 7:14-41* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Anneke de Vries, *Het kleine verschil. Man/vrouw-stereotypen in enkele moderne Nederlandse vertalingen van het Oude Testament* (Kampen : Kok 1998).



<sup>21</sup> Caroline Van der Stichele, ‘Hoe is Uw Naam? Waar zijt Gij te vinden?’ Het vertalen van de godsnaam in een interconfessioneel project, in: *De bijbel vertaald*, ed. K. Spronk (Zoetermeer: Meinema 2007), 100-119.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the way the name of God is transliterated/translated/spelled out in the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* and *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaption of the JPS Translation*, ed. David E. S. Stein (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006). Cf. <http://www.jewishpub.org/product.php?id=38> and <http://www.bibel-in-gerechter-sprache.de>.

<sup>23</sup> Marjo C.A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds. Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit Verlag 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel. Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dorothea Erbele, Gender Trouble in the Old Testament. Three Models of the Relation between Sex and Gender, in: *SJOTS* 13 (1/1999) 131-141.

<sup>26</sup> Athalya Brenner, *Intercourse of Knowledge. On Gendering Desire & Sexuality in the Hebrew Bible*, BIS 26 (Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Erbele-Küster, *Körper und Geschlecht* (see n. 5).

<sup>28</sup> Adriaan van Klinken / Nienke Pruijsma (eds.), *Onder de Regenboog. De Bijbel queer gelezen* (Vught: Skandalon 2010).

<sup>29</sup> The new series is called *Texts@Contexts* (Fortress Press).

<sup>30</sup> By this token I would like to thank especially the two co-travelers Akke van der Kooi and Magda Misset-van de Weg.

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