

What can be learnt from Feminist interpretations of the Bible? (15 – 19 years)

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Emerging

- Offer an argument based on evidence as to how Christianity/ the Bible could be seen as sexist
- Explain two different interpretations of the Fall

Expected

- Using a feminist framing, critique a biblical text
- Set out and compare two contrasting interpretations of the Fall, referring to text
- Offer a supported answer to the question; 'what can be learnt from feminist interpretations of the Bible?'

Exceeding

- Compare and contrast two different feminist interpretations of the Fall

Key words and concepts

- **Hermeneutics:** How we read, understand and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a very different life context.
- **Biblical Hermeneutics:** The process of understanding the Bible using doctrinal, historical and critical approaches.
- **Biblical Criticism:** Making sense of the Bible through a better understanding of the history and culture of the times.
- **Demythologizing the Bible:** An approach to understanding that sought to remove the other-worldly outdated understandings in the Bible to find what was thought to be the essential ethical understanding.
- **The Fall:** the event in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2 and 3).
- **Feminism:** Movements which aim to establish women's equal rights. A feminist is an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women and so can be male or female.
- **Christian feminism:** This movement seeks to understand the equality of men and women in terms of morality, society, spirituality and Christian leadership. One major area of work is in the reinterpretation of Christian doctrine. Another is in the movement for ordination.
- **Feminist theology:** A movement found in several religions that reconsiders religion from a feminist perspective, reinterpreting existing interpretations of religion, which have tended to be exclusively or largely made by men.
- **Feminist theory:** Thinking that seeks to understand gender inequality examining women's social roles and lived experience.
- **Patriarchal/Patriarchy:** A system that puts and keeps women in submissive and/or subservient role to

men.

- **Reader response:** Making sense of the Bible through personal prayer and meditation and reflection on words from the Bible and life experience.
- **Sexism:** Beliefs, attitudes and actions that see women as second class to men.
- **Inequality:** A basic value position that gives more recognition and importance to one 'kind' over and against 'another'.
- **Women's liberation:** a movement that opposes inequality, patriarchy and sexism in an attempt to secure equal rights in all areas of life.
- **Women's ordination:** This practice of some religions and some Christian denominations is an area of dispute both across religions and within Christianity.

Learning activities

- Explain to the students that they are going to conduct two investigations to work out what can be learnt from feminist interpretations of the Bible. Each investigation has a focus statement and some 'tabloid headlines'. The headlines are used to characterise the learning investigation at each stage but could also be a template for producing media accounts of the examinations.
- The investigations should enable students, working in small teams, to produce TV style interviews with characters in the stories examined and with the Feminist commentators in the Resource. Newspaper stories can be written to reflect sexist interpretations of the stories, in the style of tabloid revelations, with follow up denials and alternative accounts of what really happened, generating the sense of the interpretation.

Learning investigation 1: Christian comments on women and feminist comments on Christianity

Tabloid Headline: SEXIST RELIGION OR RELIGION MADE SEXIST?

- Introduce the students to some of the controversy surrounding women and Christianity. Explain that they are going to investigate why some people might think the Bible, or Christianity, is sexist and to examine the thinking of some feminist theologians who in different ways respond to the question of sexism in the Bible or Christianity.
- Give the following quotations. Ask students to find three challenging or unexpected quotes. Encourage them to decide in small groups: which of the quotes are most striking to them and to write a written response.

Tertullian (about 155 to 225 CE):

"Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil's gateway: You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree: You are the first deserter of the divine law: You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert even the Son of God had to die."

Augustine of Hippo (354 to 430 CE). He wrote to a friend:

"What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman.....I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children."

Thomas Aquinas (1225 to 1274 CE):

"As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence."

Martin Luther (1483 to 1546):

"If they [women] become tired or even die, that does not matter. Let them die in childbirth, that's why they are there."

Matilda Joselyn Gage, et. al, "1876 Declaration of Rights" on the rights of women

"...we declare our faith in the principles of self-government; our full equality with man in natural rights; that woman was made first for her own happiness, with the absolute right to herself - to all the opportunities and advantages life affords for her complete development; and we deny that dogma of the centuries, incorporated in the codes of nations - that woman was made for man - her best interests, in all cases, to be sacrificed to his will. We ask of our rulers, at this hour, no special favors, no special privileges, no special legislation. We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all the civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States, be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever."

Pope John Paul II (1995)

"Woman's identity cannot consist in being a copy of man, since she is endowed with her own qualities and prerogatives, which give her a particular uniqueness that is always to be fostered and encouraged... To all in our age who offer selfish models for affirming the feminine personality, the luminous and holy figure of the Lord's Mother shows how only by self-giving and self-forgetfulness towards others is it possible to attain authentic fulfillment of the divine plan for one's own life."

Statement by "**Christians for Biblical Equality**" a conservative Christian organization

"...the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings of scripture as reflected in Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'"

Jerry Falwell

"Most of these feminists are radical, frustrated lesbians, many of them, and man-haters, and failures in their relationships with men, and who have declared war on the male gender. The Biblical condemnation of feminism has to do with its radical philosophy and goals. That's the bottom line."

Randall Terry, head of Operation Rescue

"...make dads the godly leaders [of the family] with the women in submission, raising kids for the glory of God."

Anon, "*Why women need freedom from religion*," pamphlet

"The various Christian churches fought tooth and nail against the advancement of women, opposing everything from women's right to speak in public, to the use of anesthesia in childbirth...and woman's suffrage. Today the most organized and formidable opponent of women's social, economic and sexual rights remains organized religion. Religionists defeated the *Equal Rights Amendment*. Religious fanatics and bullies are currently engaged in an outright war of terrorism and harassment against women who have abortions and the medical staff which serves them."

- Ask students to write a newspaper column under this headline:

SHOCK REVELATIONS. EQUALITY HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION INVESTIGATES ACCUSATIONS OF SEXIST DISCRIMINATION IN SO CALLED COMPASSIONATE RELIGION

Alternatively, they could produce a report on an investigation into what Christianity is really all about, identifying aspects of the Christian tradition that seem sexist.

- Now introduce some responses to misogyny in Christian thought. For example search online for 'Mary Daly quotes'. Other Christian feminists are Daphne Hampson, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible. Search You Tube for modern Christian feminist posts and videos.
- Can students define the term 'thealogians' (with an 'a' instead of an 'o')? Teach that the Greek word for Goddess is Thea or Theia, rather than Theos (the masculine 'God'). Are Christian feminists Thealogians?
- Thealogians argue the job of Feminist Thealogy is to:
 - Correct mistaken patriarchal interpretations of the Bible;
 - Search the Bible for anti-patriarchal sources;
 - Provide a better ethical framework to change Christian understanding of all creatures;
 - Reinterpret religion from a feminist perspective based on women's experience and not tradition;
 - Move away from religion as something which upholds patriarchal systems.
- Make the 'Five Feminist Theologians/ Thealogians' Resource into separate cards for each of the five thinkers. Divide students into small groups and issue each group with one card. Ask them to express in a single sentence or two how their **thinker** has responded. This could be done with groups looking at the information on their card and responding initially to what they seem to be saying. For example, instruct them to 'read the card with the information on your thinker and try to agree with your group on the three key things your person is saying'. So students might suggest, for example, 'I think she is saying'
- In a plenary session, ask each group to report on their three key things to the whole class, listen to each other's reports and then give some initial responses. [Until the students have sought to apply these interpretative perspectives that the thinkers have, it may be difficult for them to see the

implications of these perspectives but this provides an opportunity to ask the class, ‘how do you think each of these women might view x or y?’ for some hypothesis work.]

- Ask students to write a magazine column under this headline: WE TALK TO FOUR INSIDERS WHO REVEAL THE TRUTH ABOUT CHRISTIANITY’S SEXISM! Here, the article author (or news item presenter) interviews four of the feminist thinkers capturing their beliefs about Christianity and their feminism.

Learning Investigation 2: Adam and Eve

Part A: Tabloid Headlines:

SULTRY TEMPTRESS SEDUCES ADAM AND LOSES EDEN FOR ALL OF US! WAS IT ALL EVE’S FAULT?

- Ask students to apply the different kinds of feminist thinking introduced in Investigation 1 to interpret the Adam and Eve text, and to evaluate some questionable representations of Adam and Eve and the ideas they convey.
- Read, with students, the account of the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:4-25 and her role in the Fall in Genesis 3. It is important to read the actual text and begin there, in a suitable translation, instead of beginning with an enactment or video impression of the account for example, as these inevitably involve interpretation.
- Ask the whole class for their thoughts on the following questions:
 - Why do you think this story is so important in Christian tradition? [Some reference to the place of the creation story in wider Christian belief could be made if they are unfamiliar with it: that it is commonly read from at Church; that some Christians believe it to be the literal account of the creation of the world; that others see it metaphorically or symbolically as having meaning but not actually happening as if it was history.]
 - What is meant by ‘The Fall’? [It is essential that the doctrinal importance of the Fall is understood. If women play a key role in the fall then their status is affected for all time. Theologically, the Fall is the reason for the corruption in the world as we experience – the fallen world is a terrible place with all of its imperfections. Christians say that people need saving from this place but there was once a time and a place when life was good, back in the garden of Eden.
 - Is it important to believe that the Adam and Eve narrative reflects an historic event that really happened? [Many Christians see the story simply as an expression of the Jewish people trying to understand the world as they saw it, and trying to find a reason for life being hard while at the same time believing in a creator God.]
 - Which parts of the story appear to support the authority of men over women, i.e. patriarchy?
- Ask students then to work in pairs or threes to consider briefly the following ‘unpacking questions’:
 - a. How and why is Eve made, according to the text?
 - b. What is the role of Eve in this account?
 - c. How is she punished? What do you think about that?
 - d. What questions does this story ask about the place of women in Christianity? Is it their fault?

Gather feedback. Ask students to discuss then suggest interpretations of the myth of Eve.

Part B. How is the story of Adam and Eve depicted in medieval pictures? Tabloid Headline:

DODGY ARTISTS BESMIRCH HONOURABLE EVE WITH 'PAGE 3' PAINTINGS OF GENESIS!

- Move students' focus to how some Christians in medieval times interpreted and depicted this story. This will show how it was interpreted in different times and places.
- Explain that in medieval Christianity no one really questioned the existence of Adam and Eve or the Garden of Eden. The depictions of the story in paintings of the time provide an impression of what artists thought about the Creation story. Within these depictions certain attitudes and interpretations can be perceived. [Students may well have engaged with the idea of propaganda in history which could be drawn upon for comparison.]
- Show the students a selection of mediaeval depictions of the creation story, such as:
 - Adam and Eve, from the 'Stanza della Segnatura':
 - Adam and Eve - Lucas Cranach the Elder:
 - Adam and Eve - Hans Holbein:
 - The Temptation of Adam – Masolino:
 - The Fall of Adam - Hugo van der Goes:
- Explain that the pictures chosen here are an example of one of the things feminist thinkers are concerned about so they illustrate the problem. Ask students to look at these images alongside the text and (a) pick out any ideas that appear to have been placed into the story and (b) decide whether the artist was reading other things into the account or was he revealing the implicit messages in the text itself?
- Explain that this discussion is a key question for feminist theology – is it that the interpretation is wrong, or is it the source itself that is the problem? [These could be looked at together as a class or in groups if the images are printed. These could be compared with traditional easily available images on Adam and Eve which do not so clearly reveal elements that feminist thinkers are concerned about.]
- Encourage students to write down their answers to the following questions:
 - What messages might the artists be trying to convey in these images?
 - Why might it be argued that these images reflect patriarchal or sexist images of God?
- Ask all the students to then produce their own caricature of the Genesis account emphasising the text and the interpretation. They could use a tabloid-style headline such as, "IT WAS EVE WHAT DONE IT!" with a by-line such as, "While the Bible just says she offered the fruit to him, insiders speak out in our exclusive report to reveal she was starkers at the time and the serpent was her sister."

Part C. How might Christian feminists respond differently to these images and texts?

- Give pairs 5 minutes to sketch or write 'Genesis 3 from Eve's point of view' in four frames, images or

sentences. Share ideas. Is the story changed?

- Ask students for their reflections on the Genesis accounts so far: are the stories in themselves sexist or is it the interpreters throughout history (usually men) who are sexist in their interpretation? Are they in need of reinterpretation or do they need to be rewritten?
- Return to quotes or texts from the Christian feminists studied previously. Using these views, work in pairs to evaluate the myth of Eve: what is the main message, what is its purpose, what is its value?
- Break the students up into small groups made up of individuals who had been studying different feminist thinkers so all are represented in the groups. Supply them with very large sheets of paper with the Genesis text inserted in the middle and some of the mediaeval Adam and Eve images round the outside. Ask each group to build an ideas map of feminist interpretations of the creation story by writing in notes on the interpretations of the feminist thinkers around the key phases of the story and next to the images. What might each thinker say, at each point? These could be highlighted in different colours. Students should demonstrate where the different feminist thinkers might agree or disagree about the interpretation of each significant part of the text by making connections on the sheets. The groups should aim to depict the possible interpretations of the story.
- Once the ideas maps are complete, students should share their findings with the rest of the class.
- A final report on their investigations will then enable students to demonstrate their ability to analyse and evaluate the biblical text in relation to feminist and other points of view. Ask them to compile their reports under the key question: **What can be learnt from Feminist interpretations of the Bible?** Ask students to include in their reports (which could be presented in a variety of ways) the following features:
 - their own research into sexism in the Bible, with comments on methods used;
 - different interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve in different times and places;
 - personal views on the importance of feminist interpretations of the Bible.