

Luther Seminary

Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary

Doctor of Ministry Theses

Student Theses

2020

Proclaiming Jubilee: Preaching that Sets Women Free

Jennifer Michelle Benson Moran

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/dmin_theses



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Benson Moran, Jennifer Michelle, "Proclaiming Jubilee: Preaching that Sets Women Free" (2020). *Doctor of Ministry Theses*. 63.

https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/dmin_theses/63

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Ministry Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact tracy.iwaskow@gmail.com, mteske@luthersem.edu.

PROCLAIMING JUBILEE:
PREACHING THAT SETS WOMEN FREE

by
JENNIFER MICHELLE BENSON MORAN

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2020

© 2020 by Jennifer Michelle Benson Moran

All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

*Proclaiming Jubilee:
Preaching That Sets Women Free*

by

Jennifer Michelle Benson Moran

In Luke 4, Jesus outlines his mission: to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and free the oppressed. Yet the marginalization and oppression of women have been structurally normalized throughout history, both in secular society as well as Christian culture. Through historical, cultural, biblical, exegetical, hermeneutical, and homiletical analysis, this study posits that a jubilee homiletic is a crucial part of embodying liberation from textual interpretations that have prioritized those who are privileged, so that women may reclaim scripture as a source of freedom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to many people for their love and encouragement as I engaged in this study. My family has given me the great gift of knowing what it feels like to be loved beyond measure and without reservation. My husband, Paul, is a steadfast partner in life with whom I share one mind. I have never had a day in our 19 years of marriage that I have not known how deeply we love each other. Our children, Evan, Emily, and Sophie, bring me joy that cannot be captured in words. Evan's huge heart, Emily's deep insight, and Sophie's relentless cheerfulness encourage me daily.

My parents, Rev. Sharon and Kim Benson, have nurtured my faith and theology along with providing a model of what a loving relationship looks like in God's kingdom. Thanks, Dad, for teaching me how to be content and to love gardening, Shakespeare, and sports. Thanks, Mom, for preaching with power and conviction and teaching me that I can do anything I feel called to do. My sister, Kristell Benson, has provided me with many opportunities to laugh and eat amazing food.

My grandparents, Rev. Richard and Winifred Michel, taught me what it means to lead lives of selfless sacrifice in the service of others and we had so much fun learning it. My grandmother, at 100 years old, is still teaching this to me. I am also grateful to the countless extended family members who have contributed to my perspectives on scripture and life. Thank you to Brian, Jane, Rick, Jeannie, Doug, Sharon, Gwyneth,

Terry, and Shirley. There are many more family members I could list than I have space to name here, but I hope you know how much you are appreciated and loved.

I would extend that same gratitude to my friends. I am often struck by the gift of being surrounded by strong, thoughtful, compassionate, interesting, and amusing friends. Penny, Sara, Michelle, Laura, Danielle, Tracy, Linda, Amy, Peg, Tiffani, Margaret, Bekah, Emily, Gail—thank you. Even when we haven't seen each other in a while, I often picture what you would have to say about the world and it keeps me whole.

I have wonderful colleagues to whom I also owe my gratitude. My sisters and brothers at Auburn Homes and Services, Waconia Moravian Church, my Parish Response Groups, the Board of Trustees of the Moravian Music Foundation, and the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Council of Churches have supported me without hesitation and taught me much about the work of justice. The Moravian Church in North America has provided financial support for which I am grateful. I had many wonderful professors and colleagues at St. Olaf College and Union Presbyterian Seminary who are still instrumental in my work today. The faculty, staff, my advisor, the Rev. Dr. Karl Jacobson, and my amazing cohort at Luther Seminary also deserve more gratitude than I can express for their encouragement and support of this project.

Finally, the theological insight of the Rev. Sharon Benson and the Rev. Dr. Amy Gohdes-Luhman were instrumental in the development of the methods and ideas of this study. Thank you for your sharing your wisdom, insight, and knowledge so freely.

My family and friends combine to create the lens through which I see and understand God's relationship with humanity. With their presence in my life, and God's constant love, I experience every day as jubilee.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	viii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Justification and Rationale	2
Secular Culture: The Little Red Riding Hood Myth	4
Christian Culture: The Esther Myth	8
Scriptural Interpretation and the Early Church	10
Impact through the Years Until Today	13
Time for Change.....	17
2. BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW.....	19
Primary Texts: Attestations of Jubilee	25
Luke 4.....	26
Deuteronomy 15.....	29
Leviticus 25	30
Isaiah 61	31
Daniel 9	33
Secondary Texts: Possible Practices of Jubilee.....	35
Leviticus 27	35
Numbers 27 and 36	37
Jeremiah 34	40
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	43
The Study of Hermeneutics	43
Feminist Hermeneutics	45
Jubilee Hermeneutics.....	48
The Study of Homiletics.....	50
4. DEVELOPING A JUBILEE HOMILETIC.....	53
Characteristics of a Jubilee Homiletic	54
Messianic Aspect.....	55
Freedom from Oppression.....	56
Community Expression	57
Questions to Ask When Engaging a Jubilee Hermeneutic for Preaching	59

5. A JUBILEE HOMILETIC: PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF A JUBILEE	
HERMENEUTIC	62
Genesis 3:1-24	62
The Text of Genesis 3:1-24	62
Initial Exegetical Questions	64
Jubilee Exegetical Questions.....	67
Jubilee Hermeneutical Lens	74
Genesis 16:1-16.....	78
The Text of Genesis 16:1-16.....	79
Initial Exegetical Questions	80
Jubilee Exegetical Questions.....	84
Jubilee Hermeneutical Lens	91
John 4:1-42	93
The Text of John 4:1-42	93
Initial Exegetical Questions	95
Jubilee Exegetical Questions.....	98
Jubilee Hermeneutical Lens	103
6. SIGNIFICANCE OF A JUBILEE HOMILETIC	107
How Might Communities Be Transformed and Liberated by a Jubilee	
Homiletic?	108
People Gifted with a Prophetic Voice	109
People Experiencing Ageism	111
Challenges for this Homiletic	112
Individual Perspective	112
Subjective Nature of Interpretation	113
Prophetic Nature of a Jubilee Homiletic	115
7. TRANSFORMING WOMEN’S NARRATIVES: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ...	117
Jubilee and Sight.....	119
Hoped-for Outcomes	121
Healing	122
Reclaiming	122
Conclusion.....	123
APPENDIX A.....	124
Jubilee Sermon: Genesis 3:1-24	124
Jubilee Sermon: Genesis 16:1-16.....	128
Jubilee Sermon: John 4:1-42	134

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Dan	Daniel
Deut	Deuteronomy
Es	Esther
Is	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Jn	John
Lev	Leviticus
Lk	Luke
Mk	Mark
Mt	Matthew
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Num	Numbers
Tim	Timothy

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Aemilia Lanyer was a 17th century poet who recognized the impact scriptural interpretation has on cultural narratives of gender. Lanyer was dismayed by the dominant religious interpretation of Eve as the source of all human sin and the lack of reasonable accountability ascribed to Adam. She wrote the following poem in defense of Eve:

But surely Adam can not be excused,
Her fault though great, yet he was most to blame;
What Weakness offered, Strength might have refused,
Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame: 780
Although the Serpent's craft had her abused,
God's holy word ought all his actions frame,
For he was Lord and King of all the earth,
Before poore Eve had either life or breath.

Who being framed by God's eternal hand, 785
The perfectest man that ever breathed on earth;
And from God's mouth received that straight command,
The breach whereof he knew was present death:
Yea having power to rule both Sea and Land,
Yet with one Apple won to loose that breath 790
Which God had breathed in his beauteous face,
Bringing us all in danger and disgrace.

And then to lay the fault on Patience' back,
That we (poor women) must endure it all;
We know right well he did discretion lack, 795
Being not persuaded thereunto at all;
If Eve did err, it was for knowledge' sake,
The fruit being fair persuaded him to fall:
No subtle Serpent's falsehood did betray him,
If he would eat it, who had power to stay him? 800

Not Eve, whose fault was only too much love,
Which made her give this present to her Dear,

That what she tasted, he likewise might prove,
 Whereby his knowledge might become more clear;
 He never sought her weakness to reprove, 805
 With those sharp words, which he of God did hear:
 Yet Men will boast of Knowledge, which he took
 From Eve's fair hand, as from a learned Book.¹

In this poem, Lanyer peels back the layers of interpretive lies about Eve's role by brilliantly suggesting other interpretations.

Lanyer argues that Eve tasted the fruit because she really believed it would make things better for her and her family. She hadn't heard directly from God not to eat it, although Adam had. Eve was misguided but selfless. Adam, however, knew that it was wrong to eat the fruit. God had told Adam directly not to eat the fruit, so by eating the fruit Adam was the one making a conscious choice out of self-interest to disobey God.

This poem and Lanyer's scriptural interpretation are fascinating, particularly for the time and place in which she was writing. Her logic and interpretive skills are incisive and accurate. Interpreters throughout the history of the church did not have to judge Eve so harshly, or at the very least could have equally judged Adam. Instead, interpreters chose to place the burden of blame on Eve, a choice which has contributed to centuries of marginalization and oppression of women as part of the foundational story of Christian faith.

Justification and Rationale

Aemilia Lanyer's poem has been percolating in my mind and heart for many years. Her insight invites me to question the interpretive decisions that theologians and

¹ Aemilia Lanyer, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, Susan Woods ed., (Oxford, Oxford University Press, Inc., 1993), 84-86.

church leaders have made throughout history, particularly regarding how those interpretations have impacted preaching. Preaching is a powerful act that embodies narratives about God and human relationship with God in the people who hear the Word proclaimed. Preaching is informed by the interpretive choices the preacher makes, choices which then in turn contribute to accepted cultural and societal narratives. Some of these interpretive choices have perpetuated narratives that blame women for the oppression they suffer at the hands of people more powerful than they, with cultural repercussions evident today.

The purpose of this project is twofold: first, to examine how interpretive choices have contributed to a cultural narrative in the western world that marginalizes women and their stories and has led at times to oppression and abuse of women; and, second, to suggest the consistent use of a hermeneutic that leads to a transformative homiletic by interpreting scripture through the lens of the year of the Lord's favor, the lens of jubilee, as described by Jesus in Luke 4.² This lens can be applied to any text in conjunction with additional lenses.

Miguel De La Torre describes clearly the need for scripture to be interpreted and proclaimed through lenses that bring about abundant life and freedom from oppression. He writes, "If verses within the Bible advocate the subjugation of one person to another and hence prevent life from being lived abundantly by a segment of the population, then

² It is important to note that I write from the perspective of a white American woman who has the privileges of education and financial flexibility. For the purposes of this project, when I refer to "culture," I am referencing my own western culture, which is solidly American with significant Northern European influences. When I refer to "church" I am referencing Protestantism as practiced in Europe and the United States of America, with some intersection with Australian culture. Encompassing additional cultures and religions is beyond the scope of this project, although it would be a fascinating and fruitful addition to the work.

those verses are anti-gospel and must be reinterpreted in light of the fullest revelation of God found in Christ.”³ This understanding of the gospel message encompassing freedom for all people and never oppression leads to Christ-followers adopting an ethical posture of jubilee that transforms scriptural narratives for women.

A jubilee hermeneutic keeps as its focus the ability to see freedom from oppression inherent in a text. A jubilee homiletic embodies narratives of freedom so that all people, including women, may experience scriptural texts as liberating expressions of God’s deep love rather than a source of marginalization and oppression.⁴

Secular Culture: The Little Red Riding Hood Myth

Gender based marginalization and oppression is a reality that women face in both secular and religious culture. “Marginalize” can be defined as “to relegate [someone] to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.”⁵ Oppression can be defined as the “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power” and a “sense of being weighed down in body or mind.”⁶ Both of these definitions describe the narrative of many women’s experience in American culture today.

³ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016), 13.

⁴ The distinction between hermeneutics and homiletics is important to note clearly at the outset of this study. Hermeneutics is the study of scriptural interpretation. Homiletics is the study of preaching and proclaiming the Word of God. Hermeneutics informs homiletics. This study will examine hermeneutics, homiletics, and their intersectionality in subsequent chapters.

⁵ *Merriam-Webster*, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalize>.

⁶ *Merriam-Webster*, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppression>.

Women experience marginalization and oppression in secular culture through a variety of ways, including sexual objectification, harassment, and assault. In a Psychology Today online article entitled, “Why Don’t Victims of Sexual Harassment Come Forward Sooner?” the author, Beverly Engel, addresses the issue of oppression of women that is structurally present in American culture. When a woman is sexually harassed or assaulted, the following are still common responses that both reflect and contribute to a harmful narrative: “What did she expect when she dresses like she does?” and “She shouldn’t have had so much to drink.”⁷ These statements reveal an underlying belief that when bad things happen to women, we have ourselves to blame and therefore must accept the consequences. This narrative absolves the perpetrators of accountability and lays it squarely at the feet of the women who are harmed.

In *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza summarizes the abuse against women that is the consequence of these cultural assumptions about women. She writes that “practices of overt physical and sexual violence are not isolated incidents or perverse behavior but must be explored as structural normative practices.”⁸ Nadia Bolz-Weber describes some of the ways women experience structural oppression:

Each day, women endure male acts of dominance in countless ways. When a woman is forced to either laugh at dirty jokes made by the men in her workplace or face social or professional repercussions, it is an act of domination. When a man stands over a woman, taking up her physical space, explaining something to

⁷ Beverly Engel, “Why Don’t Victims of Sexual Harassment Come Forward Sooner,” *Psychology Today*, November 2017, accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-compassion-chronicles/201711/why-dont-victims-sexual-harassment-come-forward-sooner>.

⁸ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 98.

her she already knows, it is physically reminding her of how easily dominated she is; it is a reminder of her place.⁹

Narratives that marginalize or oppress the person being harmed, both through overt forms of violence as well as through more subtle acts of dominance, contribute to a broader societal structure that itself perpetuates even more harm.

Athlete and author Abby Wambach aptly describes an underlying cultural narrative that forms part of the foundation of the broader narrative that blames survivors of abuse for the harm committed against them.

Like all little girls, I was taught to be grateful. I was taught to keep my head down, stay on the path, and get my job done. I was freaking Little Red Riding Hood. You know the fairy tale—it's just one iteration of the warning stories girls are told the world over. Little Red Riding Hood heads off through the woods having been given strict instructions: Stay on the path. Don't talk to anybody. . . . And she follows the rules . . . at first. But then she dares to get a little curious and she ventures off the path. That's, of course, when she encounters the Big Bad Wolf and all hell breaks loose. The message of these stories is clear: Follow the rules. Don't be curious. Don't say too much. Don't expect more. Otherwise *bad things will happen*.¹⁰

This narrative marginalizes and oppresses women by limiting opportunity and causing women to question our own judgement. It is manifested in all spheres of women's experience, from the workplace to educational settings, from places of worship to boardrooms, from athletic fields to the media, from politics to the domestic sphere.

The business field offers a stark example of the marginalization of women that is inherent in the structure of the field. The 2006 study, "Study of California Business Leaders," offers a snapshot of the limited role women have in business and technology.

The study found that,

⁹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless* (New York, NY: Convergent, 2019), 40-41.

¹⁰ Abby Wambach, *Wolfpack* (New York: Celadon Books, 2019), 17-18.

Women account for 11.7% of the 2,979 executive officers in the 400 largest public companies in California. Nearly half, just over 48%, of these companies have no women executive officers. Only 89 (22.3%) of the companies have two or more women executives. Only 11 of the 400 largest public companies in California have a woman serving as CEO.¹¹

While these statistics reference women executives, the numbers were not better for women holding positions on Boards of Directors. Of the 400 largest public corporations in California, more than 50% (202) of them did not have a single woman on the Board of Directors, including companies like Yahoo and Apple.¹² In 2014, both Yahoo and Facebook had tech workforces that were only comprised of 15% women.¹³ Without women in the places that cultural narratives are fashioned, like the overwhelmingly influential and wealthy business and technology industries, women will continue to be marginalized and oppressed.

These examples illustrate the structurally normative ways that women are marginalized and oppressed in culture today, from sexual abuse to underrepresentation in industry, to a lack of control over our own bodies, to being “put in our place” in all spheres. It would be possible to consider endless ways this marginalization and oppression is manifest in the world, but for the purposes of this project, these examples provide a reasonable foundation to establish that structural marginalization and oppression are, indeed, a present and significant issue.

¹¹ Katrina Ellis, “UC Davis Study of California Women Business Leaders” (PDF) UC Regents, 2006, 6. Archived (PDF) from the original on April 2, 2015, retrieved March 25, 2015, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://gsm.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ucdaviswomenstudyfull.pdf>.

¹² Ellis, “UC Davis Study,” 14.

¹³ Maxine Williams, “Building a More Diverse Facebook,” Facebook, June 15, 2014, at <https://about.fb.com/news/2014/06/building-a-more-diverse-facebook/>.

Christian Culture: The Esther Myth

Much as secular culture has created narratives that expect women to remain on the path, stay safe, and above all meet the expectations of others or suffer serious consequences, religious culture has also contributed to these narratives. Religious communities have contributed to laying the groundwork for the marginalization and oppression of women through interpretation of scripture, and the subsequent preaching that embodies oppressive interpretations.

The Esther narrative provides a clear, concrete example. The dominant narrative the church has taught and preached around Esther's story is that she was a beautiful young woman who lived in a time of great uncertainty for the Jewish people. Because of her beauty and obedience, she captures the favor of the powerful king and is consequently placed in the right place "for just such a time as this."¹⁴ She goes on to foil the king's advisor's plot to kill all the Jewish people. She remains obedient to God (presumably, although God is never mentioned), to the king, and to her cousin, Mordecai, even at great risk to her own life, and is rewarded by being declared a hero for embodying all these characteristics so faithfully.

However, this narrative does not capture the full reality of Esther's situation. Esther is removed from her family, kept secluded in the king's harem, submits to his desires regardless of her own, is emotionally manipulated by her cousin to risk her life for the opportunity to save her people, and likely continues to live a life focused on sexually gratifying the king or risk losing her own life.

¹⁴ Es. 4:14 (NRSV).

D.L. Mayfield notes, “Esther didn’t win a beauty pageant, as I had been taught when I was young—she was trafficked and earned the king’s favor through sexual activities.”¹⁵ By interpreting Esther’s experience as one that allowed her power, wealth, and privilege and that reinforced the importance of making the best of the status quo, rather than immediately and honestly recognizing it as a dark tale of abuse, fear, and oppression, the church tacitly opened the door for culture today to minimize the horror of sexual crimes, to interpret sexual crimes as somehow not the fault of the perpetrators, and even to claim that women somehow benefit from them.

If the church had chosen to present the Esther story with this more honest interpretation, the cultural reality women face today could be quite different. The Esther story and its interpretation over the centuries contributed to creating a culture that allowed women to experience significant abuse and oppression. The 2018 firing of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary president, Paige Patterson, for his perpetuation of rape culture reveals the undeniable impact the church has had on women’s sexual experiences and how deeply entrenched attitudes of blame and abuse of women are in religious culture.¹⁶ While this example is a sign of the damage that can be done by interpretive choices, it also serves as a sign that denominations are beginning to cease to tolerate the most egregious of the abuses women have suffered.

¹⁵ D.L. Mayfield, “Claims of ‘Sexual Immorality’ Have Been Used to Diminish or Discredit Female Religious Figures for Ages. Here’s How—and Why,” *The Lily*, April 20, no year listed, <https://www.thelily.com/claims-of-sexual-immorality-have-been-used-to-diminish-or-discredit-female-religious-figures-for-ages-heres-how-and-why/>.

¹⁶ Sarah Smith, “Baptist Leader Told Victim it was ‘Good’ She was Raped: Lawyer Says,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 2, 2018, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/fort-worth/article212356699.html>.

My purpose is not to berate the church or judge choices made in different times and places. The reasons behind why the church has marginalized and oppressed women is outside the scope of this study. It is nonetheless necessary to be honest about the church's actions and complicity in the perpetuation of patriarchy in ways that marginalize, oppress, and harm women. When we engage in honest reflection we can then imaginatively consider the possibilities for change. We see this happening today as women and men in secular culture are more visibly pointing to the structurally normative ways gender injustice is experienced. Christian culture in turn is also becoming more vocal in working towards more faithful understandings of God.¹⁷

Scriptural Interpretation and the Early Church

While the church was at times unintentionally complicit in this marginalization and oppression of women, it has also at times intentionally interpreted scripture in ways that would subjugate women and maintain male dominance and power over them. Nadia Bolz-Weber refers to this reality as a “heresy.”¹⁸ In *Shame-less*, she writes,

The nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defines *heresy* as “that which preserves the *appearance* of Christianity, and yet contradicts its *essence*. There heresy is this: with all the trappings of Christianity behind us, we who seek to justify or maintain our dominance over another group of people have historically used the Bible, Genesis in particular, to prove that domination is not actually an abuse of power at the expense of others, but is indeed part of “God’s plan.”¹⁹

¹⁷ A study of how Judaism has handled the Esther narrative would be interesting, but is beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁸ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 41.

¹⁹ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 41.

It is a source of deep pain that the church has perpetuated this narrative, given Jesus' declared mission to free people from oppression in Luke 4.

The marginalization, oppression, and abuse of women became structurally normative at a very early point in Christian history. The apostle Paul notably interprets scripture in a way that contributes to the oppression of women in his first letter to Timothy. Paul writes, "...Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."²⁰ Paul's handling of the role of women is a subject well beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to note the very early influence of his interpretive work.

Tertullian developed this perspective further in his writings. Tertullian was an influential early Christian from Carthage who lived in the second and third centuries.²¹ He was unequivocal in his relegation of women to a second-class status in Christianity. In *On the Apparel of Women*, Tertullian declares the following:

Do you not believe that you are [each] an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives on even in our times and so it is necessary that the guilt should live on, also. You are the one who opened the door to the Devil, you are the one who first plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree, you are the first who deserted the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not strong enough to attack. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, man. Because of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.²²

²⁰ I Tim. 2:12-15.

²¹ Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph, and Edwin A. Quain, trans. *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, The Fathers of the Church 40 (New York, NY: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959), 13.

²² Arbesmann, Joseph, and Quain, *Tertullian*, 117-118.

Nadia Bolz-Weber concisely describes the effects of this teaching, writing that Tertullian clearly “interpreted the Eden story as saying that women destroyed the *imago dei*—the image of God—in men. He also believed . . . that women are to blame for the death of Jesus. Because of this, he wrote, it is ‘God’s will’ that men exert dominance over women.”²³

Furthermore, Tertullian claims in this passage that women are weaker than men for listening to the Devil, despite the Devil never being mentioned in Genesis 3, and that while one man was strong enough to resist the Devil, that same man was not strong enough to resist a woman. This interpretation of scripture sets women up as more threatening than the Devil himself. Women are not merely hapless weaklings, easily swayed and not very intelligent. Women are actually agents of evil who exist to destroy God himself. The God image resides only in men, not in women. It is not hard to imagine how these teachings led to a structural marginalization and oppression of women.

Augustine of Hippo, another early Christian writer and theologian who lived from 354 CE to 430 CE, offered his own interpretation of Genesis 3, one that bears some relation to Tertullian’s interpretation.²⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber summarizes Augustine’s perspective when she writes, “every person born after Eve inherited her original sin, and so it is essential that men should be dominant—controlling women so they don’t screw over humanity any more than they already have.”²⁵ Not only has scripture been interpreted in marginalizing and oppressing ways from very early in the beginnings of Christianity, but

²³ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 44.

²⁴ Miles Hollingworth, *Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xv-xvii.

²⁵ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 42.

the interpreters intentionally did so by using the very beginning story of God's relationship with humanity. The result is that for centuries these interpretations have remained dominant and have caused a great deal of harm.

Impact through the Years Until Today

In *Bread Not Stone*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains in general terms how scripture has been interpreted to do great harm to many powerless groups, including women. She writes,

The history of the church and its appeal to the authority of Scripture shows that biblical traditions are not only life giving but also death dealing. The appeal to Scripture has authorized, for example, the persecution of Jesus, the burning of witches, the torture of heretics, national wars in Europe, the subhuman conditions of American slavery, and the antisocial politics of the Moral Majority. The political appeal to the moral authority of the Bible can be dangerous . . . if the Christian community is shaped by the remembrance of 'the historical winners' while abandoning the subversive memory of innocent suffering and of solidarity with the victims of history."²⁶

Schüssler Fiorenza goes on to assert that the Bible "and its subsequent interpretations are sources for both liberation and oppression."²⁷

In *Eve's Bible*, Sarah S. Forth notes the oppression of women both by the writers of scripture as well as by subsequent interpreters. She writes,

The Bible . . . fabricates women's lives to serve theological ends, distorts women's actual contributions to Israel's history, and bad-mouths women who don't toe the party line. No mention of a woman in the Bible can be taken at face value, but negative depictions of women especially should ring alarm bells."²⁸

²⁶ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 66-67.

²⁷ Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 67.

²⁸ Sarah S. Forth, *Eve's Bible: A Woman's Guide to the Old Testament* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 35.

When an interpreter is tempted to offer a surface interpretation that blames or oppresses women, she or he should indeed stop and consider the text more carefully.

One of the most visible examples of structural systems of marginalization and oppression in culture today is the ordination of women. The earliest modern Protestant denomination that formally ordained women into the ministry of Word and Sacrament was the United Methodist Church, and this ordination occurred in 1956.²⁹

Given that women have only been in ordained leadership positions in the church for 64 years, the following statistics are not surprising. In 2012, only 11.4% of religious leaders were women.³⁰ This number has changed little since 1998, other than a significant drop in 2006-2007.³¹ These numbers suggest that while women are technically able to be ordained, there are still many structural barriers, such as scriptural interpretations that blame women for human sin, that prevent women from full inclusion in the life of the church. Indeed, as these statistics have revealed, there are more women in leadership positions in the business and technology industry than there are women in leadership positions in the church.

A specific example of one of the structural narratives that leads to the justification of marginalization and oppression of women is the idea that women are primarily supporting objects to the male work of the church. This perspective on women's roles is an insidious part of the foundation that creates the space for marginalization and oppression

²⁹ David Masci, "The Divide Over Ordaining Women," September 9, 2014, accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/09/the-divide-over-ordaining-women/>.

³⁰ Association of Religious Data Archives, *Congregation QuickStats: Gender of Religious Leader*, accessed September 17, 2019, http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_236.asp.

³¹ Association of Religious Data Archives, http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_236.asp.

to thrive. Rosemary Radford Ruether offers a glimpse into the active oppression that women have experienced in order to prioritize men in the church. She writes that while Harvard Divinity School accepted women in the Master of Divinity program in 1954, “school officials were reluctant to give the only two women in the graduating class the top honors that they had earned, on the grounds that this would put the men in a bad light.”³² Even when women have a presence and voice in the church, our experience is often one of marginalization.

In my home congregation, women had been ordained for more than a generation by the time I was a teenager, so “women’s rights” were perceived to be well-established and women were not spoken of as having merely supporting roles. However, the unspoken, underlying perceptions about the work women have to do in the church were not so progressive.

In high school, I served as a youth representative on a church board. I had arrived for a meeting after everyone else, but was still a few minutes early. A pastor was in the church entryway and said, “Oh good, you’re here. You can come in and give us something pretty to look at.” That statement was one that both my secular and my religious culture had taught me to laugh off as merely meaningless banter, to justify as a well-meaning compliment from a person I still admire and respect today, and to deny and minimize the impact its message had on me. However, this comment revealed the fundamental reality that the church still perceived women to be objects of support in the work of the kingdom rather than called and chosen by God to do the same kingdom work that men do. This type

³² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 210.

of comment was one mark among many in my experience of the church slowly erasing my value as a beloved child of God because of my gender.

It is my experience that these kinds of comments can sink in deeply and stay with women throughout their lives, leading to circumstances where oppression is more likely to be experienced by women. This pastor's comment remains with me to this day. The impact has been necessary to address as I've developed my identity as an adult and as a pastor. "Embodiment" aptly describes the effect of this experience. "To embody" means "to give a concrete form to (what is abstract or ideal)."³³ "Embodiment" can be understood then as the expression of "principles, thoughts, [or] intentions in an institution, work of art, action . . . etc."³⁴ In other words, the ideas that we are taught take on a physical presence in our bodies. Women hold the tangible effects of comments such as these in our bodies, so that we believe on a deep level that we may, in fact, be just something "pretty to look at."

Words from scripture that are interpreted in ways that oppress women have even more power than personal comments. One of my professors shared that as a young woman she took her scissors and cut out sections of the New Testament that seem to advocate for the subordination of women.³⁵ They were so painful to her that she physically had to remove their presence from her Holy Scripture in order to not be harmed further by the text. The impact of scriptural interpretation and proclamation is lasting and profound.

³³ J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s.v. "embody" (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 506.

³⁴ Simpson and Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "embodiment," 506.

³⁵ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), x.

Time for Change

Since words are embodied to this degree, whether as Holy Scripture or as personal comments, since they remain with women throughout their lives in embodied ways, and since scriptural interpretation has historically chosen narratives that marginalize and oppress women, preachers must do all in their ability to be sure that the words they speak from the pulpit do not perpetuate these narratives but actively present more faithful interpretations of these narratives.

If words spoken in a church entryway can remain in my body my entire life, how much more do words proclaimed from the pulpit in preaching remain with women throughout our lives. Words from the pulpit are heard with an implied authority, and if they include blaming women who are oppressed, or marginalizing them as peripheral members of the Christian community, then those attitudes will become even more deeply embodied in women, as well as men, and thus the culture as a whole.

In order to change these attitudes within the church, it is necessary to address “the institutional, cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression that sustain discrimination.”³⁶ Through a jubilee hermeneutic that informs a jubilee homiletic, preachers can be part of transforming all three of these systems from ones that perpetuate oppression to ones that embody freedom. Through faithful scriptural interpretation and faithful biblical preaching, preachers can “problematize the access (or not), the use (or misuse) of power manifested through the hierarchical and androcentric structures of the

³⁶ Elaine Neuenfeldt, *Gender Justice Policy*, Elaine Neuenfeldt, ed. (Lutheran World Federation, 2013), 7, accessed February 7, 2020 at https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf.

church.”³⁷ Preachers embody and convey the Word of God and thus speak from the pulpit with power to make this kind of change.

While the church has harmed women in the name of God, we are God’s people, a people rooted in redemption and resurrection, and the church does not need to remain an instrument of marginalization and oppression. Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds people that there are those in the church who have long been fighting against the ways in which the church perpetuates abuse. She writes, “[Martin] Luther dared to think that the Gospel—the story of God coming to humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, and speaking to us the words of life—could free his parishoners from the harm their own church had done them.”³⁸ A jubilee hermeneutic embodied through a jubilee homiletic is one more rock in the new foundation of freedom that so many faithful people strive to build, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

³⁷ Neuenfeldt, *Gender Justice Policy*, 23.

³⁸ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 5.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

This project takes seriously the interpretation of scripture by opening up the possibilities of different perspectives in such ways that the structural marginalization and oppression of women in secular and religious culture begins to change. The intent is not to make the text “more relevant or more acceptable,” but to make sure to “study it and [to be] faithful to it.”¹ The concept of jubilee offers a biblical model that counters oppressive structures.

Religious communities’ understanding of the jubilee year has developed and been reinterpreted in different times and places based on the communities’ needs. Throughout these developments, the jubilee year has consistently captured people’s imaginations. Jubilee embodies a sense of freedom from that which binds humanity, including but not limited to freedom from financial debts, freedom from civil injustice, and freedom from social oppression.

Jubilee is related to the practice of sabbath. Sabbath is a “tradition of socio-economic justice” in that it is “a practice of control within the context of economic

¹Sandra Glahn, *Vindication the Vixens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017), 22.

sufficiency for all.”² By incorporating a universal day of rest within the community, ancient Israelites were part of a system that prevented any one group of people from taking advantage of another group of people. The wealthy and powerful people in the community could not demand constant labor from the poor and marginalized. All people rested on the sabbath. It is a logical move to recognize that the “fullest expression of Sabbath meaning may be found in the legislation of Jubilee (Lev. 25). The Jubilee intended to dismantle the formation of socio-economic inequality by releasing each community member from debt, returning lost land to its original owners, and freeing slaves (Lev. 25:13, 25-28, 35-42, 47-55).”³ Sabbath, and thus jubilee, embody “God’s provisional grace and” and a “communal ethic of redistribution.”⁴

The biblical text offers ample guidance and support for developing a jubilee hermeneutic for preaching. Jubilee traditions vary throughout scripture, with threads of jubilee found in the Sabbath Codes, Holiness Codes, and Deuteronomic Codes of ancient Israel. The scope of this project does not allow for a detailed study of these codes, but it is helpful to note that the “Jubilee traditions are related to one another in their affirmation of God’s sovereignty and their mandating of deeds of justice and liberation.”⁵ Sharon Ringe observes that the foundation of the Jubilee tradition is the Israelite’s “experience of liberation at the hand of God that is the basis of their subsequent actions, and these

² Lidjia Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible: Using the Theology of Jurgen Moltmann to Find a New Hermeneutic*, Biblical Interpretation Series, Volume 156 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 143.

³ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 143.

⁴ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 143.

⁵ Sharon Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 17.

actions in turn are their expression of allegiance and obedience to the God who is sovereign over them.”⁶ Because the Israelites experienced freedom through God’s miraculous work, offering such undeserved freedom to others was important to their theology and faith.

It is not clear, however, if the practice of jubilee actually occurred in ancient Israel as described in Leviticus 25. John S. Bergsma writes,

The most frequently asked question is invariably whether the jubilee was actually observed in ancient Israel. Unfortunately, neither the biblical nor the archaeological data enables us to give a definitive answer to that question. What the biblical data does indicate, however, is that the meaning of the jubilee for the people of Israel developed over time.⁷

Bergsma continues by noting that jubilee was “*intended* as earnest legislation reflecting the values and structures of pre-monarchic tribal Israel, regardless of the extent to which it was practiced or enforced.”⁸ Whether or not jubilee has been enacted in cultures, the ubiquitous aspirational value of its theological convictions reveals a fundamental understanding in religious communities that freedom from oppression is central to what it means to belong to the kingdom of God. Therefore, it is essential to claim the biblical vision of jubilee, regardless of whether it has actually been practiced.

Bergsma notes that the development of the jubilee year has five “re-uses” in ancient literature, which include “legal, ethical, chronological, eschatological, and messianic concept[s].”⁹ The legal sense relates to the original legislation of the law,

⁶ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 19.

⁷ John Sietze Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 1.

⁸ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 2.

⁹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 1.

written by Israelite priests likely to address issues of “debt-slavery” and “drawing upon older Israelite legal traditions, such as the Covenant Codes and Holiness Codes, as well as the example of royal proclamations of release and forgiveness in surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures.”¹⁰

The ethical sense of jubilee refers to jubilee as a “posture” or a way of relating to other people in the community “in terms of its relationship with God.”¹¹ While laws are necessary for structure and security in the community and are part of jubilee, the ethical sense of jubilee calls for people to act beyond the demands of the law. An ethical posture of jubilee grows out of the “ordering of Israel’s internal relationships in terms of its relationship with God.”¹² Instead of following rules, jubilee deals with orientation toward one another, accountability to what God’s relationship with humanity requires, and a sense of compassion that could never be legislated.

Sharon Ringe touches on the ethical nature of jubilee being fulfilled in Jesus Christ when she writes,

The Jubilee traditions found in Hebrew Scriptures are rich in images of political liberation, economic reversal, and social revolution. Those images in the various historical and social contexts of ancient Israel made and continue to make significant claims about God and about the ethical consequences of being the people of God. Similarly, those images in the Synoptic Gospels made and continue to make significant claims about Jesus as the Christ and about the ethical dimensions of discipleship.¹³

¹⁰ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 2.

¹¹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 198.

¹² Karl Jacobson, “Numbers,” in *The Pentateuch: Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition*, Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page, Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016) 218.

¹³ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 33.

The ethical nature of jubilee culminates in the person of Jesus Christ, the one who comes to fulfill the promise of the year of the Lord's favor and equips his followers to enact jubilee.

Walter J. Houston offers a particularly insightful description of how such an ethical posture of jubilee would make it entirely possible for jubilee to be practiced. He writes that jubilee texts, such as Leviticus 25, assume

. . . an essentially classless society, where among Israelites impoverishment and inequality are temporary accidents arising from the changes and chances of hard physical conditions. If this type of society is presupposed, there is no reason why people should not behave in the ways that the text demands. . . . The conviction of the jubilee's impracticality mainly depends on classical economics' construct of the rational subject who always behaves so as to maximize material benefit. Such a person would certainly not buy a fifty-year lease for the price of even forty-two crops, or lend his feckless neighbor food for a year at zero interest. But the rational subject does not exist: he (he always is a he) is a fantasy of Enlightenment individualism. Real people are motivated by a range of considerations, and especially by what is accepted as the done thing in their society and by the need to maintain the social relationships which are important to them and therefore as much in their interests as material profit. Given a society where the dominant sentiment was a conviction of the equal value of all the members, it would not be inconceivable for people to act in accordance with that, even against their material interests.¹⁴

The ethical sense of jubilee is contrary to the values of a world motivated by money and possessions, but it is not contrary to God's kingdom where all people are understood to be beloved children of God. This ethical posture has the potential to transform the way people interact with and perceive one another.

The eschatological sense of jubilee shifts focus to the entire nation of Israel. This sense specifically "view[s] the anticipated end of the exile and return to the land as a

¹⁴ Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2006), 194-195.

corporate jubilee for the nation . . . the return from exile would involve the restoration of Israel and the inauguration of an eschatological age, for which the jubilee was one among several images.”¹⁵

The chronological sense of jubilee is related to the understanding that the eschaton would occur in 490 years. The book of Daniel presents this time frame as encompassing approximately ten jubilees.

The messianic concept of jubilee centers on the individual who comes to bring jubilee to its fulfillment. Bergsma writes, “[a]lthough the original jubilee legislation required no individual mediator for its actualization, in Isaiah 61:1-4 notions of an anointed *go’el* (redeemer) figure are associated with the realization of the justice, equality, and general *shalom* of which the jubilee has become a symbol or ‘type.’”¹⁶

In Luke 4, Jesus is revealed as the Messiah foretold in Isaiah, who comes to fulfill the promise of jubilee. Jesus proclaims his mission to “bring good news to the poor. . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹⁷ In Jesus Christ, jubilee is an embodied way of relating to God and to one another. It is this understanding of jubilee that this project will focus on in the development of a jubilee hermeneutic for preaching.

Each of the subsequent texts, with the exception of the foundational description of jubilee in Leviticus, reference the messianic sense of jubilee. The messianic understanding of jubilee is central for preaching narratives that can transform women’s

¹⁵ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 2.

¹⁶ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 3.

¹⁷ Lk. 4:18-20.

stories in scripture because for Christians Jesus is the source of human liberation and the model for humanity's ethical posture in the world.

Primary Texts: Attestations of Jubilee

Multiple references to jubilee exist throughout the Old Testament, and it is helpful to understand what is specifically meant by the term “jubilee.” The original Hebrew word, *יובל*, means “ram’s horn” but is translated into English as “jubilee.” In English jubilee carries the sense of a rejoicing, which stems from the Latin form *jubilare*, to shout.¹⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary describes the year of jubilee as

. . . a year of emancipation and restoration, which according to the institution in Lev xxv was to be kept every fifty years, and to be proclaimed by the blast of trumpets throughout the land; during it the fields were to be left uncultivated. Hebrew slaves were to be set free, and lands and houses in the open country or unwalled towns that had been sold were to revert to their former owners or their heirs.¹⁹

The Oxford English Dictionary appears to draw their definition from Leviticus 25. In that text, the Lord describes to Moses on Mt. Sinai the many ways people are to be freed from all that oppresses them, all that is unbalanced in their world. The Lord says: “. . . you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you. . . .”²⁰ A broader definition of jubilee comes from Lidija Gunjevic: “The good Jubilee news refers to the renovation and restoration of life out of slavery, hopelessness and impoverishment.”²¹

¹⁸ Simpson and Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “*jubilare*,” 901.

¹⁹ Simpson and Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “*jubilee*,” 901.

²⁰ Lev. 25:10.

²¹ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 108.

Descriptions of jubilee go beyond this brief summary, of course, and the following discussion will expand upon this definition. Luke 4, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15, Isaiah 61, and Daniel 9 are the texts that describe jubilee that are most relevant to the scope of this project.

Luke 4

While the majority of scriptural references to the Jubilee occur in the Old Testament, there is evidence for the Jubilee tradition in the Gospels. Sharon Ringe notes that the attestations of Jubilee in the Gospels are primarily quotations from Is. 61:1-2, which are found in Lk. 4:18-19 and Mk. 11:1-2/Lk. 7:18-23. This project focuses on the Luke 4 text, since it most clearly describes the core theology of a jubilee hermeneutic, with Mk. 11:1-2/Lk. 7:18-23 containing paraphrases of the Is. 61:1-2 text. Ringe notes that these texts “establish a basis for claiming that at least that particular Jubilee tradition is actually present in the Gospels.”²²

Ringe also describes how Luke expands and elaborates on the Old Testament Jubilee traditions:

Luke . . . has sustained and indeed developed the ethical implications of the Jubilee images themselves. Luke has done this by means of the remaining pericopes of identity and purpose that links Jesus to particular manifestations of physical and social change and summarizes his message as the proclamation of God’s reign. In that way, Luke sets the stage for the interpretation of Jesus’ life and ministry in the remainder of the Gospel in terms of the “good news to the poor” and “release” or “forgiveness” that mark humankind’s encounter with the fact of God’s sovereignty.²³

²² Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 34.

²³ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 45.

Jesus represents the culmination of the ethical understanding of jubilee towards which faithful people are called to strive. The “Gospel of Luke sees Jesus’ proclamation and action of ‘good news to the poor’ as central for Jesus’ identity,” and therefore central for Christian identity.²⁴ Jubilee is a vision realized by Jesus Christ, one which Jesus calls humanity to see and embody with him as the model.

In the Luke 4 text, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus shares his mission with his hometown family and friends when he reads a composite text from the prophet Isaiah:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’²⁵

In what could be considered his first recorded sermon, Jesus goes on to preach the vision of what it looks like for those who are suffering to experience relief, telling the people that he has come to bring this freedom to all who are oppressed. In other words, “just where one would expect to find a sermon *interpreting* the text just presented, Luke records instead Jesus’ words about the *fulfillment* of that scripture.”²⁶ Using God’s own words, Jesus is calling for and proclaiming deliverance through him from all the things that bind people and prevent them from being free to live in God’s love. This study hopes to model this call to move beyond interpretation to the embodiment of the year of the Lord’s favor.

²⁴ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 144.

²⁵ Lk. 4:18-20.

²⁶ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 40.

The people of Jesus' hometown gathered in the synagogue for worship received this message as good news initially. Their ancestors had experienced deliverance from oppression as they were led out of Egypt into the Promised Land. From what they were saying about Jesus, they loved him and his message. Then Jesus told them that he was not going to do any miracles there among them in his hometown and reminds his family and friends that Elijah and Elisha performed astounding miracles for the benefit of Gentiles, a widow from Zarephath and a Syrian with a skin disease. God's choosing of Israel leads to God's choosing of all people.

At this point Jesus' hometown friends and family no longer want to hear his message. Ringe notes that "the assumptions and amazement attributed to Jesus' neighbors are brought up short when those people encounter the work and message of a prophet, with whom the home town and its people cannot assume special privilege."²⁷ Jesus' mission was too threatening to his hometown family and friends' comfortable lives, so much so that they try to kill him, the same people who had just spoken well of him: "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."²⁸ The people were angry because Jesus didn't fit into their expectations for him and because he was threatening their belief system and way of life. They were angry, too, because Jesus was challenging them to see the world through the perspective of others, including through the eyes of the oppressed.

²⁷ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 41.

²⁸ Lk. 4:28-30.

The themes of community and responsibility to one another are woven throughout Jesus' words and actions in Luke's Gospel. Following Jesus Christ means caring for others and meeting needs in ways that bring about freedom. This is the ethical posture Jesus is calling people to when we follow him. Jesus himself is the realization of jubilee, of freedom for all people and, in turn, Jesus calls his people to embody freedom for others in his name.

This posture has the potential to make people in all times and places uncomfortable because it means that those who are comfortable and powerful might need to relinquish some of their privilege voluntarily in order to be in right relation with Jesus and his beloved children. In proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, the year of jubilee, Jesus is declaring that this freedom is more than possible. He has come so all people can be delivered from the things that bind humanity and prevent people from being free to live in God's love.

Deuteronomy 15

Deuteronomy 15 offers specific guidelines for debt forgiveness in a sabbatical year. Deut. 15:1-2 clearly describes the means of forgiveness: "[e]very seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed." This relatively frequent remission of debt is important, because Israelites could be forced to work as slaves to pay off their debt. By forgiving the debt every seven years, individuals would have the promise of being free again in their lifetimes. The security of never again

being enslaved was very important to the Israelites as a people who escaped slavery and were granted the Promised Land by God himself.

On the surface, this text can be challenging to reconcile with Leviticus 25, since both present somewhat different, although not mutually exclusive, directions for practicing jubilee. While some scholars argue that Deuteronomy “abrogates or ignores the Levitical legislation, it seems more likely that the divergences between the two laws are to be explained by the quite different contexts each was formulated to address.”²⁹ The variation on jubilee seen in these texts points to the theological underpinning of jubilee as fundamentally flexible enough to be applicable to different contexts as an ethical posture. In other words, whatever circumstance in society prevents people from living free from oppression is what the practice of jubilee should correct.

Leviticus 25

Leviticus 25 is a foundational text in developing a jubilee hermeneutic. It provides the legislative specifics of jubilee and is arranged in a clear outline that addresses specific ways to treat one another in community. Verses 1-7 discuss the sabbatical year, which describes a crop rotation system that allows land to remain unplanted and rest every seventh year. Verses 8-22 describe how to observe jubilee and encourage its observation, as well as offer direction for the sale of property. Verses 23-55 deal with the different forms of loss people may experience, sometimes through no fault

²⁹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 147.

of their own. These forms of loss include the loss of “land,” “home,” “independence,” and “freedom.”³⁰

The foundational principle of jubilee is expressed throughout Leviticus 25, but summarized in verses 10-12:

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: . . . it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.³¹

Gunjevic observes that the concept of a “year of complete rest in Lev. 25:5 means that the concept of Sabbath . . . has been extended on legal and temporal levels too.”³² The common thread throughout the legislation of jubilee is that jubilee exists to free people from the circumstances that hold them back from living faithfully, to right wrongs, and to bring about an equalization of power among God’s people.

Isaiah 61

The text from Is. 61:1-3 is the text from which Jesus preaches in Luke 4. This text “contains the most widely recognized biblical allusion to the jubilee outside of the Pentateuch.”³³ While Isaiah 61 does not specifically reference the word “jubilee,” it does describe an ethical posture of jubilee so that we can connect the specific, legislated actions of the jubilee described in Leviticus 25 to a way of thinking and being in relation to others in the community that can exist apart from the law. This expansion of a

³⁰ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 84.

³¹ Lev. 25:10-12.

³² Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 24.

³³ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 198.

particular sense of jubilee to an ethical posture reflecting the year of the Lord's favor, is reflected in Jesus' message in Luke 4. Bergsma describes this clearly, writing that the prophet Isaiah

. . . recognizes that the traditional law expressed in its particular regulations certain principles and postures toward God and other members of society, and these principles and postures could be enacted immediately without the implementation of all the particulars of the traditional law. Moreover, such a response on the part of the people—that is, an adoption of a “jubilee” posture toward one another without a full implementation of the jubilee laws—would be pleasing to God and result in essentially similar divine blessings to those promised for literally fulfilling the ancient law.³⁴

In other words, not only does jubilee contain within it a flexibility in order to relate the law to different contexts, as seen in Deuteronomy 15, it also offers an ethical framework for people to relate to one another in community. Jubilee is a way of being that orients the individual to the community.

People who practice a jubilee posture do not only follow laws, they behave toward one another and make decisions based on offering freedom generously. They will be “heralds of joy to the oppressed,” they will “bind up the broken-hearted,” they will “proclaim liberty to the captives,” they will “comfort all the mourners,” and they will proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.³⁵ The result of practicing jubilee is “a radical transformation of communal attitude and condition . . . the transformation is from powerless indebtedness to the restoration of dignity and viability.”³⁶ The ethical practice of jubilee is one that transforms individuals and communities.

³⁴ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 198.

³⁵ Is. 61:1-3.

³⁶ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 108.

Isaiah 61 portrays an individual redeemer, an “anointed one,” as the means by which the promise of this jubilee is fulfilled. Isaiah “foresees the coming . . . of one endowed with the Spirit of the Lord who will personally execute the kind of socio-economic restoration envisioned, to a certain extent, in the ancient jubilee institution.”³⁷ Referencing Is. 61:3 in his Anchor Bible commentary, John L. McKenzie notes that “the fulfillment of righteousness will bring the delayed salvation to pass,” connecting the fulfillment that jubilee brings with Jesus’ salvation.³⁸ In Luke 4 Jesus makes the connection between Isaiah’s prophecy that the Lord will send an anointed one to bring about jubilee and Jesus’ own role.

Daniel 9

Daniel 9 offers an important later understanding of jubilee and how it functions for the community as well as for individuals. The book of Daniel describes jubilee as a period of restoration. The angel Gabriel prophesies that there will be another period of 490 years for the people to repent and be restored, given that 70 years have already passed without repentance from either the people or the city. This time period is based on Leviticus 26:18, which declares, “And if in spite of this you will not obey me, I will continue to punish you sevenfold for your sins.”³⁹ While this will be a time of distress

³⁷ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 202.

³⁸ John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. 1st ed. The Anchor Bible, V. 20 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 181.

³⁹ Lev. 26:18.

because the people had not repented, it will also be a time of hope because it will bring restoration and “usher in the eschatological age.”⁴⁰

Daniel emphasizes the wholeness that jubilee brings as the result of repentance and atonement: “Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.”⁴¹ Jubilee is presented as a physical reality with practical application in the world. Bergsma offers insight into this text when he writes,

. . . ten jubilees constitute a period of quintessential completeness; ten, somewhat like the number seven, symbolizes wholeness, completeness, integrity. . . . At the end of the period of ten jubilees, then, all will be complete: sin will be finished, iniquity atoned for, and ‘eternal righteousness’ ushered in. . . . Just as the Day of Atonement re-establishes wholeness in the cultic and spiritual realm, the jubilee re-establishes it in the social and economic realms.⁴²

Atonement and jubilee are two sides of the same coin: on the one side, the Day of Atonement means that sin will be forgiven and on the other side, physical debts will also be forgiven. In that combination, wholeness is made complete and, indeed, “God’s reign and humankind’s liberation go hand in hand.”⁴³

Daniel connects jubilee with a messiah figure, similar to the messiah figure in Isaiah 61. In both cases, there is a “messiah who suffers and/or dies, atonement for sin, restoration of Jerusalem, the overcoming of ‘desolations,’ and an eschatological jubilee

⁴⁰ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 221.

⁴¹ Dan. 9:24.

⁴² Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 227.

⁴³ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 32.

for God's people."⁴⁴ These descriptions are very much like what Jesus describes he has come to do in Luke 4, as he frees people from oppression and ushers in the year of the Lord's favor.

Secondary Texts: Possible Practices of Jubilee

While these four texts form a solid understanding of the basics of jubilee, a brief consideration of other pertinent texts in Leviticus, Numbers, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is beneficial to form some understanding of what jubilee may have looked like if it were put into practice.

Leviticus 27

Leviticus 27 focuses on the specifics of real estate and jubilee in verses 14-24, along with providing "regulations governing the dedication of persons, animals, . . . or produce to the Lord, i.e. to his sanctuary" throughout the chapter.⁴⁵ These verses describe the rules surrounding the donation of houses and land to the Lord and include processes for the donor of the property to retrieve it if they so desired. Leviticus 27 does not limit that redemption period of dwellings to one year, as Leviticus 25 does, which leads to the speculation that "this would tend to encourage redemption and may indicate that the priests had no particular desire to acquire too many properties to manage on behalf of the sanctuary."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 231.

⁴⁵ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 107.

⁴⁶ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 111.

The laws surrounding land and jubilee are rather complicated in Leviticus 27. For the purposes of this study, it is helpful to note that there was a careful system structured around value of the land, including the appraisal of the land, consecration of the land, who may redeem the land and in what circumstances, and rules that limit people from manipulating the jubilee system.⁴⁷ Furthermore, these specific laws reveal that jubilee was sacred.

. . . [J]ubilee is respected by God himself. Not even the Lord will violate the inalienability of the ancestral holding by accepting permanent donations to his own cult—despite the fact that he is ultimately the true owner of the land (Lev 25:23)! Thus, we have a certain paradox: the land is the Lord’s and truly his, and yet he is determined that nothing should prevent his people from enjoying his land perpetually. The Lord’s will is to use his property to bless his people.⁴⁸

This understanding of the purpose of jubilee emphasizes that God intends jubilee to be a practice that frees his people to live lives of joy and wholeness, connected in community. God chooses jubilee as a means of freedom from all that oppresses his people.

The legislation recorded in Leviticus 27 likely “originated from the same or similar legislator(s) in the same or similar historical-cultural location(s)” as the legislators of Leviticus 25.⁴⁹ The degree of detail regarding practice of jubilee further supports the likelihood that jubilee was intended to be practiced, even if there is no proof it was enacted in reality. Bergsma even goes one step further in suggesting that Lev. 27:16-24 “is some evidence that the jubilee was actually practiced.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 110.

⁴⁸ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 114.

⁴⁹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 114.

⁵⁰ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 114.

Numbers 27 and 36

Numbers 27 and 36 are in conversation with each other and offer a fascinating glimpse into the practice of jubilee, or at least the putative practice of jubilee. This text contains the story of the daughters of Zelophehad and their inheritance. In Num. 27:1-11, the five daughters of Zelophehad came to Moses and other leaders to argue for their inheritance. Their father had died without a son to inherit his land, which created two problems. The first problem was the reason Mahlah, Noah, Milcah, Oglah, and Tirzah presented to Moses. In ancient Israelite culture there was an “intricate connection between possession of land and preservation of family name”⁵¹ and so it did not seem fair to the daughters that Zelophehad’s name be cut off from his people simply because he had no son. Bergsma summarizes the problem quite clearly, writing,

The importance of perpetuating the “name” implies some concept of an individual afterlife, even if it is no longer possible to reconstruct the exact contours of this concept from the biblical materials. The daughters imply that their father’s present state of existence will be negatively affected if he were to lose his ancestral land-possession and have no further descendants.⁵²

Since ancestral land seems to have had a bearing on a person’s afterlife, the loss of the land from the possession of immediate descendants could mean that Zelophehad himself may not be free even in the afterlife.

The second problem that the daughters do not specifically mention has to do with their own security. Their father’s death with no male heir means that the daughters are left without a dowry. Without a dowry, they cannot be married, will not have children,

⁵¹ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, “Numbers” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., Expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 54.

⁵² Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 120.

and are thus destined for a life of obscurity, poverty, and difficulty with no hope of an afterlife. They will certainly not be able to live in the freedom that comes with jubilee.

Moses does not know how to respond to the daughters, since it is clear that property passes through male heirs, as described in Leviticus 25: 48-49. Moses goes to the Lord and receives the following response:

The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites, "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses."⁵³

God says women can and should be part of the inheritance line, an act of freedom from oppression that, if followed, ensures the security of women in a patriarchal world.⁵⁴

God's direction is followed and land is granted to the daughters. God's action in directing Moses to treat the women justly and with care sets a precedent for how God expects his people to treat one another.

The action does not end there, however. Numbers 36 offers a sequel to the story of the daughters and their struggle to secure their own place and freedom in their society. Another problem with their inheritance has come to the attention of some of the leaders of Zelophehad's clan. The daughters' land will become the possession of whomever they

⁵³ Num. 27:7-11.

⁵⁴ This text transfers a great deal of power to women. It would be fruitful in a different study to explore further the ways this text may realign power dynamics today. God is not interested here in perpetuating the patriarchy, but interested in securing justice and freedom for all his people, women and men alike.

marry. If they were to marry outside of the clan, the clan would lose the resources of the land, which the leaders do not believe is fair.

The leaders bring in the explicit concept of jubilee for the first time here, pointing out that the land won't revert to the clan in the year of jubilee, saying, even "when the jubilee of the Israelites comes, then [the daughters'] inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they have married; and their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestral tribe."⁵⁵ Even jubilee's emphasis on the reordering of things that have become out of balance in the community doesn't specifically address the concern of the clan leaders. It is interesting to note that jubilee is referenced at all, because that implies that jubilee is one standard by which the community judges what is fair and right.

The story ends with Moses agreeing with the clan leaders and Zelophehad's daughters are required to marry within the tribe. Even though it was very unlikely for a woman to marry outside of her clan, a new statute is created to close that loophole requiring a woman to marry within her father's clan if she inherits land: "[e]very daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the Israelites shall marry one from the clan of her father's tribe, so that all Israelites may continue to possess their ancestral inheritance. No inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another; for each of the tribes of the Israelites shall retain its own inheritance."⁵⁶

The story of the daughters of Zelophehad presents a case study of how jubilee may function in culture. The expectation implied in the clan leaders' reference to jubilee

⁵⁵ Num. 36:4.

⁵⁶ Num. 36:8-9.

is that jubilee is meant to provide a fair and just means of freedom to live as God's beloved people. Jubilee is shown here to have bearing on "kinship ties, ancestral property, and the perpetuation of descendants."⁵⁷ The concept of jubilee intersects with culture in meaningful ways that define not merely law but also the spirit of the law.

In a project focused on interpreting scripture from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed, it would be remiss not to observe that although the ethics of jubilee are practiced in this text for the daughters in Numbers 27, by Numbers 36 the jubilee practice has refocused on the needs and concerns of the men, the powerful and privileged, of the community. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld astutely observes that

[t]his story could be heard even in ancient Israel as a story of comfort for women who would not be left destitute, but it was preserved primarily as a story of comfort for men who had the misfortune not to bear any male heirs—their names would not be cut off from their clans. . . .The women do not end up where they began, with no place or space of their own within Israel's inheritance and property structure, and yet the limits of their freedom are made very clear by the end of the story.⁵⁸

Reading, interpreting, and then preaching this text with a jubilee lens leads to precisely these kinds of observations.

Jeremiah 34

Jeremiah 34:8-22 offers a rather chilling glimpse into the possible consequences when people do not follow either posture and practice of jubilee or the covenant God made with them in Exodus. King Zedekiah made a proclamation that all Hebrew slaves

⁵⁷ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 117-118.

⁵⁸ Sakenfeld, "Numbers," 54-55.

should be set free. The people of Jerusalem followed this proclamation, but then they changed their minds and re-enslaved the people. The Lord was not pleased and declared,

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, “Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service.” But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name; but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them again into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the Lord—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.⁵⁹

The Lord’s words to Jeremiah make clear that the Lord expected his people to free slaves every seven years, to enact the practice of freeing people from very literal oppression.

The consequences for the Lord’s people are severe. Because they did not free their slaves, the Lord will free them to suffering and death. While this passage does not clearly prove that the jubilee was practiced, it does point to some expectation that jubilee be a part of both the law and the ethical practice of God’s people. Furthermore, the economic impact of freeing slaves would have been significant, which reveals that the Lord expects his people to think in generous terms of the freedom of others.

These primary and secondary texts offer substantial material to assist in understanding the biblical expectations of jubilee. They point to the year of jubilee as being more than a series of laws God’s people should follow. The year of jubilee is an

⁵⁹ Jer. 34:13-17.

posture that guides God's people in relationship with others so that freedom and the God-given worth of each person is prioritized over money and power.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 engaged scholarly literature related to jubilee. The purpose of Chapter 3 is to engage scholarship that specifically focuses on literature related to hermeneutics and homiletics with the understanding that hermeneutical choices impact homiletics in fundamental ways. Preaching stems from interpretive choices every preacher makes each time they engage the text. As discussed previously, the historical choices made by people engaging in hermeneutics, or the interpretation of scripture, have all too often contributed to the cultural marginalization and oppression of women. It is therefore important to examine the purpose and practice of hermeneutics, as well as to explore some of the hermeneutical approaches that are engaged in the work of expanding the perspectives of the dominant narratives that have marginalized and oppressed groups of people. By applying a hermeneutical lens of jubilee, preaching can engage the practice of jubilee to set people free and be part of transforming women's narratives in scripture.

The Study of Hermeneutics

In any effort to establish a hermeneutic, it is important to understand what is meant by the term "hermeneutics," as well as what the task and purpose of the discipline of hermeneutics is meant to accomplish. A simple definition offered by Henry Rouse is that "hermeneutics is the craft of using well the laws of interpretation, and doing so in the

context of community.”⁹⁸ Duncan Ferguson describes the traditional definition of hermeneutics “as the *study of the locus and principles of interpretation*—particularly as it is applied to the interpretation of ancient texts.”⁹⁹

Ferguson clarifies this traditional definition further. He explains that the Roman Catholic church taught that the church’s tradition was the lens through which Scripture revealed itself and was understood. The Reformers, however, did not agree with this understanding and believed that scripture had power to reveal itself, *sola scriptura*. Ferguson notes further that in the post-Reformation era “[p]rotestant hermeneutics dealt primarily with the rules to be observed in exegesis,” which was solidified with the advent of critical biblical scholarship in the 1800s.¹⁰⁰

Ferguson acknowledges that while exegetical rules drove most scriptural interpretation, there are notable exceptions, particularly in Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Rudolf Bultmann. These theologians helped broaden the understanding of hermeneutics as having a responsibility to “span the gap between past and present.”¹⁰¹ Being able to span the gap between past and present, as well as between shifting cultural realities, is extremely important in any hermeneutic that is interested in moving beyond the oppression of the powerless.

⁹⁸ Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, 23.

⁹⁹ Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 5.

With this brief review of the task of hermeneutics in mind, it is clear that there is a need for the “redeployment of the discipline.”¹⁰² R.S. Sugirtharajah made this observation from a colonial and post-colonial perspective regarding scriptural interpretation, but it applies to any perspective that seeks to interpret more faithfully the texts of the oppressed and powerless. Sugirtharajah astutely notes that hermeneutics had become a “leisurely pursuit of ‘gentlemen’ scholars with little concern for the needs of humanity.”¹⁰³ In the effort to right this wrong, there has been much scholarship in recent years to bring the task of hermeneutics back to the service of all humanity rather than the service of the powerful.

Feminist Hermeneutics

Feminist hermeneutics has been an integral part of the scholarly work that has undertaken a “redeployment of the discipline” of hermeneutics. Mary Ann Tolbert offers a helpful definition of feminist hermeneutics. She writes that feminist hermeneutics “can be defined as a reading of a text . . . in light of the oppressive structures of patriarchal society” and “self-consciously attempts to ground its analyses in the experience of women’s oppression.”¹⁰⁴ Like feminist hermeneutics, a jubilee hermeneutic also undertakes a redeployment of the discipline and has at its ideological center a similar emphasis on grounding interpretation in the experience of oppression.

¹⁰² R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 6.

¹⁰³ Sugirtharajah, *Troublesome Texts*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Defining the Problem,” in *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, Semeia 28 (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1983), 119.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza discusses different hermeneutical approaches that are part of a feminist hermeneutical approach. One approach, among others, is the *hermeneutics of desire* which “reinvents the Bible rather than abandoning it. [The hermeneutics of desire] uses [the Bible] as a language to express its own visions of well-being and happiness.”¹⁰⁵ A second approach is the *hermeneutics of revision* which “understands the patriarchal word of the Bible as a wrapping or covering that contains the word of G*d as a non-patriarchal kernel, core, or essence.”¹⁰⁶ A third approach is the *hermeneutics of liberation* which “seeks to assess the oppressive or liberating functions of biblical texts in the lives and struggles of wo/men.”¹⁰⁷

Sarah Forth writes that women must “claim our place in the collective memory. The task is enormous, since in most instances biblical writers neglected women or included them only when their presence was required for the active participants in history: men.”¹⁰⁸ Preaching a jubilee hermeneutic of freedom from oppression is one important way women can “claim our place” and right that which has been wrong.

When a jubilee hermeneutic is faithfully employed in preaching over a long period of time, it is possible for women, as well as men, to absorb and embody the new messages they will receive about their worth and value in God’s eyes, so that the goal of no one being oppressed through scriptural interpretation can be a reality.

¹⁰⁵ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 15.

¹⁰⁶ Schussler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Schussler Fiorenza, *Changing Horizons*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Forth, *Eve’s Bible*, 34.

In the introduction to *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, the editors assert the possibility of this reality: “[o]ur contributors read biblical texts in creative and constructive ways that can contribute to a world in which gender justice and equality are a reality and not merely an elusive dream . . . as we strive to open our interpretive traditions to emancipatory visions of community.”¹⁰⁹ Freedom from oppression is a real goal that can be attained and the embodiment of a jubilee hermeneutic through preaching is a critical way that can be accomplished.

In the *Journal for Preachers*, Kathleen M. O’Connor makes a strong and specific case for how the witness of preaching reinterpretations of texts can create change. She writes that a reinterpretation of the traditional interpretations of the Genesis 16 and 21 texts dealing with the oppression and power dynamics in Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar’s family could call us to

. . . a spirituality, a way of being and acting in the world, that embraces the personal and the sociopolitical . . . a discipleship that counters our national predisposition to fix everything in automatic response to pain and disorientation . . . a politics of listening, of waiting . . . to try even harder to create pedagogies and curricula that respect and reverence differences within our seminary, churches, and our global families.¹¹⁰

O’Connor’s ideas are an excellent description of the potential effects of interpreting and preaching scripture from a jubilee posture.

¹⁰⁹ L. Juliana M. Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp, eds., *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), 7.

¹¹⁰ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Abraham’s Unholy Family,” *Journal for Preachers* 21.01, ATLA series, 2001, 32-33.

Jubilee Hermeneutics

A hermeneutic that seeks to free the oppressed will include an openness to new revelation that searches beyond the historical interpretations of a text. It will employ a methodology that takes seriously the exegetical imperative along with the continuing unique revelations of scripture in each particular time and place to embody Jesus' mission to free the oppressed. In that way, a jubilee hermeneutic is solidly within a definition of hermeneutics which Duncan Ferguson describes as "essentially a self-consciously chosen starting point containing certain ideological, attitudinal, and methodological components designed to aid the work of interpretation and facilitate maximum understanding."¹¹¹

Sharon Ringe and John Bergsma have contributed significant work to the intersection of jubilee, hermeneutics, and homiletics. Their work has been engaged in detail in previous chapters. Lidija Gunjevic has recently written an excellent book on the subject of jubilee and hermeneutics entitled *Jubilee in the Bible: Using the Theology of Jurgen Moltmann to Find a New Hermeneutic*. While Gunjevic's approach is rooted in Moltmann's work, a study of which is outside the scope of this project, her contributions to the field appear to be covering mostly unbroken ground.

While Gunjevic's work has been referenced throughout this project, it is helpful to explore briefly her understanding of Jubilee as a new hermeneutic. Gunjevic aims to "try to bridge the gap" that exists "between the scholarly work on the subject and the actual practical teaching and implications based on the message of jubilee of various

¹¹¹ Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 5.

Christian organisations and writers” by synthesizing exegetical work on the texts with Moltmann’s “interpretation of the subject.”¹¹²

Gunjevic leads the reader through an extensive study of texts germane to jubilee, employing a “hermeneutical code of intertextual reading and interpreting the message of Jubilee in order to apply the biblical message of Jubilee in today’s world.”¹¹³ Her specific hermeneutical approach is to use Moltmann’s “concept of the social doctrine of the Trinity.”¹¹⁴ Through conversation with Moltmann, her study does, indeed, “disclose the implication of the biblical jubilee in connection with the main problems of today’s world, such as poverty, modern-day slavery, and the financial global crisis.”¹¹⁵ Her synthesis of the scriptural texts related to jubilee reveals that they all point to the work of jubilee as being one that “reverses the condition of . . . oppressed and exploited people” and is work that can and should be continued through all times and places.¹¹⁶

Gunjevic presents a thorough and insightful understanding of the centrality of jubilee in Jesus Christ’s mission for a new hermeneutic. Her work provides support for advancing a jubilee homiletic. Once a jubilee hermeneutic is engaged, preaching from a jubilee homiletic is the next step in creating a culture where women’s narratives in scripture can be transformed.

¹¹² Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 6.

¹¹³ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 257.

¹¹⁴ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 257.

¹¹⁵ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 257.

¹¹⁶ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 263.

The Study of Homiletics

The final body of literature to consider is that relating to homiletics. Homiletics is defined as “the art of preaching; sacred rhetoric.”¹¹⁷ St. Augustine established a useful understanding of the aim of preaching. He writes that the aim of the “eloquent divine,” or the preacher, is to teach, to please, and to “sway the mind.”¹¹⁸ Preaching is a powerful act that does, indeed, sway the mind and therefore contains the possibility of transforming narratives from ones of marginalization and oppression to ones of freedom and jubilee.

In the early centuries of Christianity, Augustine argues that biblical preaching must be rooted in a solid commitment to and understanding of Scripture, making clear that preaching must begin with the text. He offers a beautiful “rule for interpreting figurative expressions,” which is also a rule for describing biblical preaching. He writes,

. . . charity reigns through its supremely just laws of love to God for His own sake, and love to one’s self and one’s neighbor for God’s sake. Accordingly, in regard to figurative expressions, a rule such as the following will be observed, to carefully turn over in our minds and meditate upon what we read till an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love.”¹¹⁹

Preaching, therefore, should fundamentally contain messages that reveal God’s love.

Love is ingrained in the ethical posture of jubilee. It is difficult to work to free others from oppressive structures if one does not love others.

¹¹⁷ Simpson and Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “homiletics,” 779.

¹¹⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Pickerington, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2014), 148.

¹¹⁹ Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, 100.

Many centuries later, Karl Barth's understanding of preaching describes what form establishing a reign of love may take.¹²⁰ Barth writes, "The demand that [the preacher] imitate the divine condescension and recognize and heal real human conditions, linking a true knowledge of humanity with a knowledge of social, economic, and political relations, is binding on the preacher."¹²¹ This idea points to the need for preachers to preach in such a way that they will not only recognize and acknowledge the woundedness and oppression that people face, but then will embody that love in preaching as a means to set the oppressed free.

Barth also offers a two-part "attempt at a new definition" of preaching.¹²² The first part to the "formula" Barth offers is as follows: "Preaching is the Word of God which he himself speaks, claiming for the purpose the exposition of a biblical text in free human words that are relevant to contemporaries by those who are called to do this in the church that is obedient to its commission."¹²³ This definition emphasizes God's work and agency in the process of preaching.

The second part of the formula Barth offers emphasizes the human response to God's work. "Preaching is the attempt enjoined upon the church to serve God's own Word, through one who is called thereto, by expounding a biblical text in human words and making it relevant to contemporaries in intimation of what they have to hear from

¹²⁰ While Barth is not writing in direct conversation with Augustine's comments, it is not a stretch to consider establishing a reign of love to be an act that requires a preacher to work to heal the pain and suffering of humankind.

¹²¹ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 31.

¹²² Barth, *Homiletics*, 44.

¹²³ Barth, *Homiletics*, 44.

God himself.”¹²⁴ These two formulas encompass the two emphases in biblical preaching: “First, God is the one who works, and second, we humans must try to point to what is said in scripture.”¹²⁵ In other words, biblical preaching encompasses “Lordship on God’s side and obedience on ours.”¹²⁶ Barth recognizes the need for scriptural interpretation to be rooted in the present community gathered to hear the Word of God.

Leander Keck is another twentieth century homiletician who advances the understanding that the role of scripture and interpretation is not to try to apply the rules and mores of another time and place to contemporary society. Keck is adamant that biblical preaching cannot include moralizing.¹²⁷ He also emphasizes biblical content and biblical precedent as two important aspects of biblical preaching. Biblical preaching must be based on the contents of scripture. Keck elaborates, “To preach biblically is to take full account of the concrete issues to which the text was addressed in the first place; it is to reckon with the fact that what the biblical writers found necessary to say was determined not by truth in general but by needs in particular.”¹²⁸ Content and precedent both must be considered in biblical preaching. It is very much in line with homiletical concerns to argue that preachers must undertake serious exegetical study of scripture and be open to multiple hermeneutical lenses, even when it may require setting aside oppressive narratives that we have been taught and with which we are comfortable.

¹²⁴ Barth, *Homiletics*, 44.

¹²⁵ Barth, *Homiletics*, 45.

¹²⁶ Barth, *Homiletics*, 50.

¹²⁷ Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon. 1978), 100.

¹²⁸ Keck, *Bible in the Pulpit*, 115.

CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPING A JUBILEE HOMILETIC

The jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor, is a time where crooked paths will be made straight, insignificant mustard seeds will grow into enormous plants, prodigal children can return home to unconditional love and mercy, and people will choose to do no harm to others, even when it would benefit themselves. Jubilee manifests "emancipatory visions of community."¹²⁹ Jesus' mission for God's people envisions a reordering of the way the world works, so that power will no longer be wielded at the expense of the powerless and that which has become out of balance will be made right once again. Employing a jubilee hermeneutic as a lens for a jubilee homiletic can be understood as an act that embodies this mission.

A jubilee homiletic will seek to proclaim the freedom from oppression embedded in each text and, if an interpretation privileges one group above another, that interpretation can be reconsidered in light of Jesus' mission for God's people. When employed by the preacher, a jubilee homiletic has the potential to contribute to repairing the wounds that have been caused to oppressed people through scriptural interpretation and preaching. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching stands in the unique

¹²⁹ Claassens and Sharp, *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible*, 7.

position of both interpreting scripture and embodying scripture and, as such, has the opportunity to impact culture and experience.

When a woman who has experienced abuse hears a preacher preach that Hagar was a woman who needed to go back to abuse in order to apologize and work harder at her relationship with her abuser, that woman will hold in her body as well as her mind that God blames the abused person for their pain. However, if the same woman hears a preacher interpret Hagar from a jubilee hermeneutic, she will hear that God chooses to reveal Godself, not only to the people in power, but also to the people who are oppressed by those in power. She hears that she is not to blame for the abuse, but that a disordered world subject to the whims of power continues to perpetuate oppression. She learns that God is for her, not against her. This interpretation does not take away the terror of this text, but it does allow for an interpretation that offers hope for freedom from oppression and tells the truth about each person's inherent value as a beloved child of God.

Preaching consistently over many years through a jubilee hermeneutical lens has the potential to change the narratives of oppression and assumptions of power. This practice can contribute to the liberation of women's stories in scripture and thus women's lives today, so that women, and all oppressed people, are able to live freely in the love of God.

Characteristics of a Jubilee Homiletic

There are three important elements in a jubilee homiletic: a messianic emphasis, freedom from oppression, and expression in community. Each of these characteristics are fundamental to the biblical understanding of jubilee and form the planks that bridge the

gap between the culture of the scriptural text and the culture of those who engage scripture today. Sharon Ringe offers similar categories the following way:

At its very root, the Jubilee is about liberty . . . three principle images come together to characterize the Jubilee: the announcement of God’s reign by one anointed by the Holy Spirit to be a messenger, the proclamation of good news to the poor, and the declaration of “release” from captivity to various forms of imprisonment and enslavement. Both the messenger and the message point to the boundary moment when allegiances are to be shifted from the structures, systems, and institutions that characterize the old order, to the new Sovereign whose reign is at hand.¹³⁰

Messianic emphasis correlates to the announcement of God’s reign by a messenger, freedom from oppression correlates to release from captivity, and community expression correlates to the proclamation of the good news. These characteristics provide a foundation for a jubilee homiletic. Freedom is proclaimed by a messenger and manifested by the messiah for the good of the entire community.

Messianic Aspect

In proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor, the year of jubilee, Jesus is declaring that he is the one who has come to make it possible for all people to be delivered from the things that bind humanity and prevent people from being free to live in God’s love. Gunjevic observes that “Jesus is the one in whom the prophecy is fulfilled, especially when he says ‘today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ This reflects not only the nearness of salvation, but also the fact that the liberation and the year of God’s favor have been inaugurated on the historical occasion of Jesus’ ministry.”¹³¹ The

¹³⁰ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 36.

¹³¹ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 263.

resurrection is the ultimate source of freedom and liberation from the power of sin and death, making even more clear that Jesus is himself the fulfillment of the jubilee.

Furthermore, Jesus as the fulfillment of jubilee embodies jubilee. Jesus does not only “do good” for others, his expressions of freedom and goodness stem from who he is as Messiah. “The healings and exorcisms, Jesus’ teaching and preaching, his self-interpretation, and his interaction with hostile neighbors are all presented not just as things Jesus does, but as elaborations of who he is.”¹³² This understanding of Jesus being the embodiment of jubilee certainly fits with the prophets’ emphasis, particularly Isaiah’s and Daniel’s as discussed in Chapter 2, on a messiah figure as the harbinger of the realization of Jubilee. The prophets are interpreted by Christian scholars as serving to foretell of Jesus’ coming in many ways, and Jesus as the messiah figure of the jubilee is one of them. Through this messianic aspect of jubilee, it is clear that Jesus the Messiah embodies freedom for all people.

Freedom from Oppression

A jubilee homiletic focuses on where the freedom is in the text. As we have seen through the biblical theological overview, freedom is the purpose of jubilee. A jubilee homiletic believes that the text itself contains all that is needed to experience freedom from whatever binds a person. Indeed, while freedom from oppression is not the *only* focus of any text, every text does contain freedom from oppression. All texts can be interpreted with a jubilee hermeneutic and, thus, all texts can be preached with a jubilee homiletic.

¹³² Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 37.

In general, arguments that include “all,” “every,” and “never” are suspect. However, the argument that all texts contain freedom from oppression is an exception. Jesus is clear in Luke 4 that his mission is to bring about the year of the Lord’s favor by freeing the oppressed. The fundamental oppressor of humanity is sin, the power of which Jesus frees us from through relationship with God and salvation in Christ.

For people of the Christian faith the central confession remains Christ and him crucified, or some version of the same. The Moravian denomination claims *Vicit Agnus Noster, Eum Sequamur*, “Our Lamb Has Conquered, Let Us Follow Him.” For what purpose does our Lamb conquer? To free humanity from the power of sin and death. For Christians, even the Law exists imperfectly without Christ, who is the fulfillment of the Law. The Law is what grants humanity awareness of sin, and Christ as fulfillment of the Law is the means by which humanity experiences forgiveness of sin. Jesus’ forgiveness and love offers all people freedom from what binds us.

Community Expression

In developing a jubilee homiletic, it is important to bridge the gap between the scriptural texts and the community in which the listeners live, work, learn, and play. The work of hermeneutics is to do just this: to interpret scripture faithfully in light of the contemporary community. The natural progression from this work is from interpretation to proclamation. A jubilee homiletic recognizes that the community must work to express and make manifest Jesus’ work of freedom from oppression.

Phyllis Tribble engages feminist interpretations of scripture in ways that masterfully bridge this gap and thereby profoundly transforms women’s narratives in the

text for contemporary culture. She accomplishes this through careful and exhaustive textual work, specifically using the methodology of rhetorical criticism. Tribble argues that interpreting scripture needs to be done in conversation with not only the culture of the text in mind, but with contemporary culture as well. The interpretive act is a bridge that connects the text and the community. In Tribble's words, the "interpretive clue within the text is also the clue between the text and existence . . . hermeneutics encompasses explication, understanding, and application from past to present. Subject to the experiences of the reader, this process is always compelling and never ending. New occasions teach new duties."¹³³

By proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, Jesus is, in part, calling people to see the world through the perspective of others, including through the eyes of the oppressed. The themes of community and responsibility to one another are woven throughout Jesus' words and actions in Luke's Gospel. Jesus calls his people to make a difference for those who are oppressed and vulnerable.

Preaching offers a powerful opportunity to express jubilee in community. Preaching connects people and can set the social moral conscience or, put another way, preaching contributes to the creation of a jubilee ethical posture. As Ringe writes,

From the depths of the traditions of the community of faith we learn that the Christ is one in whose company the hungry are fed, the sick healed, the outcast embraced, and the fearful comforted, and we learn that crucial to any confession of Christ is action to free the poor from entanglements that impoverish and enslave. Through these images of the one who as the Christ heralds the Jubilee of God's reign, we might find the courage to struggle for justice and peace, and to dare to yearn for the time of liberty acceptable to God.¹³⁴

¹³³ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 7.

¹³⁴ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 15.

Preaching a jubilee homiletic encourages and strengthens God's people to strive for these very things and to do so together.

Questions to Ask When Engaging a Jubilee Hermeneutic for Preaching

With the broader characteristics of a jubilee homiletic in mind, the preacher can ask specific questions of a type that will help her or him draw out these characteristics in textual work. This work is important to undertake intentionally, because scriptural interpretation is unavoidably undertaken from the perspective of particular experiences and perspectives, and those perspectives usually “concur with the dominant perspective” unless intentional effort is made to employ a different lens.¹³⁵ A woman who has been born, raised, and lived her whole life in the Ukraine will interpret scripture in different ways than a man who has been born, raised, and lived his whole life in Guam. Given that all people have varied life experience, can the work of scriptural interpretation be undertaken faithfully in a way that both recognizes the needs of the individuals and communities, and also offers a lens that transcends specific human experiences?

A jubilee hermeneutic for preaching offers the possibility of this kind of transcendent hermeneutic, a particular lens that will aid in recognizing perspectives other than the dominant perspective. By so doing, the preacher will be more able to see the ways interpretations marginalize and oppress the less powerful. In order to expand more faithfully our perspective, it is helpful to approach the practice of scriptural interpretation with a series of questions aimed at this goal.

¹³⁵ Tolbert, “Defining the Problem,” 118.

Henry Rouse suggests six questions to bring to the hermeneutical task. He suggests that a preacher ask the following questions: “What does the text actually say?”, “What do I observe in and about the text?”, “What did this text mean to the original audience?”, “What was the point?”, “What truths in this text are timelessly relevant?”, “How does the part fit the whole?”¹³⁶ These are fundamental questions in any hermeneutical endeavor.

While these questions are an important place to start, additional questions that delve more deeply into the perspectives of the text are helpful. These questions intentionally consider the role of dominant culture in the text and in the historical interpretations of the text. Three of the questions are based on the three characteristics of a jubilee homiletic which include the messianic aspect, freedom from oppression, and community expression. The exegetical work done for preaching with a jubilee homiletic need not be limited to these questions, but the following are an excellent place to begin:

- 1) How has this text been interpreted in the past?
- 2) Who is and who is not part of the dominant culture in this text?
- 3) Who might have experienced marginalization and oppression from interpretations of this text?
- 4) Where in the text is the redemption, grace, and love the Messiah embodies?
- 5) How does the text reveal freedom from oppression through God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit?
- 6) Where is the Good News for *all* people in this text, not only for some people?

¹³⁶ Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, 23-26.

7) How is the Good News shared for both individuals and the community as a whole?

As part of the project findings in Chapter 5, this project will examine three texts, Gen. 3:1-24, Gen. 16:1-16, and Jn. 4:1-42, which have historically been interpreted to marginalize and oppress those without power, specifically women. For each text, we will engage four of Henry Rouse's initial exegetical questions, then offer insight into past interpretation supported by John Calvin's commentaries, concluding by engaging jubilee exegetical questions. I have chosen John Calvin as the example of past interpretation because he is a systematic theologian who had and continues to have significant influence in communities of faith. The questions will be followed by a jubilee interpretation. Sermons developed from both the traditional and jubilee interpretations of the texts will be included in the appendix as a means of recognizing the liberating nature of the jubilee homiletic.

CHAPTER 5
A JUBILEE HOMILETIC: PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF A JUBILEE
HERMENEUTIC

For change to occur it is important that theory and study become embodied practice. This chapter seeks to put into practice a jubilee hermeneutic by exploring the truths and applications that are often missing in exegetical and interpretive work but come to light when a jubilee hermeneutic is applied to the text, with the purpose of crafting a sermon rooted in a jubilee homiletic. The hoped-for result is for women's narratives in scripture to be transformed to reflect God's relationship with humanity more fully and more faithfully.

Genesis 3:1-24

The narrative of Adam, Eve, their choice to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God's expulsion of them from the garden of Eden is foundational to Christian theology and faith. Genesis 3 reveals that while humankind is inevitably going to choose to disobey God, which has consequences, God will not abandon his good creation.

The Text of Genesis 3:1-24

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the

trees in the garden; ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸ They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰ He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” ¹¹ He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹² The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” ¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
 cursed are you among all animals
 and among all wild creatures;
 upon your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
 he will strike your head,
 and you will strike his heel.”

¹⁶ To the woman he said,
 “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children,
 yet your desire shall be for your husband,
 and he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷ And to the man he said,
 “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
 and have eaten of the tree
 about which I commanded you,
 ‘You shall not eat of it,’
 cursed is the ground because of you;
 in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;

and you shall eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread
 until you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
 you are dust,
 and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰ The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. ²¹ And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

²² Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Initial Exegetical Questions

What Does the Text Actually Say?

The text tells of a serpent, a woman, and a man who have a theological conversation regarding God’s directions and purpose for them. The woman and the man eat fruit from a forbidden tree, their “eyes are opened,” they see they are naked, and they are ashamed. The man and woman attempt to hide from God, God questions them, and they admit they ate the fruit. Each blames the other with the man claiming the woman gave it to him, and the woman claiming the serpent tricked her. God then declares the consequences of their choice, clothes the woman and man, and sends them out from the garden of Eden, leaving cherubim to guard the garden.

The narrative in Genesis 3 has been interpreted over the centuries in ways that move beyond what the text actually says. Sin, original sin, Satan, and “the Fall” are not actually mentioned in Genesis 3, but most interpretive work includes some mention of at least one of those as central to the theology and message in Genesis 3. The interpretive

leaps required to move from the text to original sin, Satan and the Fall are difficult to justify, yet they have become central concepts of Christian faith, which reveals the power that interpretation has in our theology.¹³⁷ Despite their absence from the text, these concepts all became integral parts of interpreting this text since the time of early Christianity.¹³⁸

What Do I Observe in and about the Text?

The conversation between the woman and the serpent begins without any obvious trickery. There is “no coercion here, no arm-twisting, no enticement; . . . everything happens through words. The word of the serpent ends up putting the word of God in question.”¹³⁹ Indeed, the serpent’s conversation appears at first to be “smooth and urbane” and rooted in “innocent curiosity.”¹⁴⁰ As the conversation progresses, it becomes more theological in tone, with both the serpent and the woman discussing the parameters of God’s commands regarding the fruit of the tree.

In the original Hebrew, the serpent’s question in Gen. 3:1 contains a plural form of the word translated as “you,” implying that Adam was with Eve while the conversation was happening, but did not participate in the conversation.¹⁴¹ The *New International Bible Commentary* offers an insightful summary to Adam’s role in this narrative:

¹³⁷ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 367.

¹³⁸ As previously discussed, Paul expresses this understanding in I Tim. 2:12-15.

¹³⁹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 361.

¹⁴⁰ Gordon Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Word Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, John D.W. Watts, ed. (Waco: Word Books, 1994), 88.

¹⁴¹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 360.

The woman takes some of the fruit and gives it to her husband. As a silent partner “with her” throughout this exchange, the man puts up no resistance, raises no questions, and considers no theological issues; he simply and silently takes his turn. The woman does not act as a temptress in this scene; they both have succumbed to the same source of temptation.¹⁴²

The text itself does not place blame squarely on Eve. Adam is with her and the serpent, despite scholarly disagreement over that question, and the first pair together eat of the fruit.

In examining more closely the description of the tree of life, the tree not only transfers the knowledge of good and evil, it also seems to provide the ability to “live forever.”¹⁴³ There is something about the combination of living forever and having the knowledge of good and evil that specifically makes the man and woman like God. Would they have lived forever in the garden of Eden if they had not chosen to eat the fruit? The *New International Bible Commentary* suggests that could indeed be the case when it notes that “expulsion from the garden becomes necessary for death to occur.”¹⁴⁴

What Did This Text Mean to the Original Audience?

This text has a complicated source history. Genesis 1-11 are “full of parallels with Near Eastern tradition” while the remaining chapters are focused on the Israelite specific stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants.¹⁴⁵ While Genesis 12-50 were

¹⁴² Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 361.

¹⁴³ Gen. 3:22.

¹⁴⁴ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 360.

¹⁴⁵ Wenham, “Genesis,” xxxvii.

stories told from generation to generation within the Israelite community, Genesis 3 is part of the text that was communicated by and for a broader cultural audience.

The original audience is therefore challenging to define. It is probable, however, that people would have understood this text as a mythical story that explains the reality of the human condition. Genesis 3 provides an explanation for why men find it challenging to grow food, why women have remarkable pain in childbirth, and why people generally hate snakes. Genesis 3 is a text with power and influence in many cultures across time and place.

How Does the Part Fit the Whole?

For Christians, this part of the narrative creates one end of the arc of the Old and New Testaments, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Christian understanding, particularly found in Paul's letters, humanity cannot remain faithfully obedient to God and thus avoid sin and death. Jesus Christ came to repair the relationship with God in our stead so we may live eternally with him. The past interpretation of this text from Genesis 3 offers an explanation for Christians as to why we seem to be inherently sinful, despite being made good in God's image.

Jubilee Exegetical Questions

How Has This Text Been Interpreted in the Past?

The past interpretation of this text is that while Adam and thus all of humanity are responsible for sin, death, and humanity's separation from God, Eve is primarily at fault. Throughout the earliest theological writings of both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, from Augustine to Tertullian to John Calvin, Eve is interpreted and excoriated as the

source of all sin. Eve was tempted by the serpent, Eve was weak and willing to tempt her own husband, Adam was a hapless victim, God was angry and punished all of humanity for Eve's sin with trial, pain, and ultimately death.

Augustine and Tertullian's interpretations of Eve have already been addressed in Chapter 1. John Calvin's commentary on Genesis offers a great deal of insight into his interpretative moves regarding Genesis 3. While Calvin does ascribe fault to Adam, he does so in a theologically detached way. When he discusses Adam's fault, he does not do so in personal terms. When he addresses Eve's fault, however, he expounds at length on her personally and makes unfounded assumptions about her motivation, feelings, and thoughts, writing,

Eve's look, infected with the poison of concupiscence, was both the messenger and the witness of an impure heart. She could previously look at the tree with such sincerity that no desire to eat of it affected her mind, for the faith she had in the word of God was the best guardian of her heart and of all her senses. But now, after her heart had declined from faith and from obedience to the word, she corrupted both herself and all her senses, and depravity was diffused through all parts of her soul as well as her body. It is, therefore, a sign of impious defection that the woman now judged the tree to be good for food, eagerly delighted herself in viewing it, and persuaded herself that it was desirable for the sake of acquiring wisdom, whereas before she had passed by it a hundred times with an unmoved and tranquil look.¹⁴⁶

Calvin uses remarkably moral and ethical language to describe Eve. Eve is evidently a depraved traitor for doing the same thing Adam did.

In contrast, when discussing Adam's fault, Calvin writes that "Adam was not created to experience those multiplied miseries under which all his posterity suffer, but . . . he fell into them by his own fault," that "God permitted Adam to be tempted," and that

¹⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Genesis*, Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, eds, The Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 43.

“it is not believable” that Adam was present initially when the serpent spoke to Eve.¹⁴⁷

The language Calvin chooses to describe Adam is remote, analytical, and passive in contrast to the accusatory, emotional, and active language describing Eve.

Calvin explicitly declares that Eve was the source of sin and death for humanity. He writes, “First woman was led away from the word of God by the wiles of Satan, through unbelief. So the beginning of the ruin by which the human race was overthrown was a defection from the command of God.”¹⁴⁸ Calvin describes Satan and humanity as both having a role in sin, but Eve remains the primary source of fault.

Calvin’s past interpretation of Eve’s role in Genesis 3 reflects how deeply he was himself influenced by the teaching and preaching of the church in his own understanding of the role of women. He presumes a marginalization of women that he considers completely acceptable. He writes,

The second punishment that God exacted is subjection. The words “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” have the same force as if God had said that she would no longer be free and do as she wanted but would be subject to the authority of her husband and dependent upon his will, or as if he had said, “You will desire nothing but what your husband wishes” (cf. Genesis 4:7). Thus the woman, who had perversely exceeded her proper bounds, was forced back to her own position. She had, indeed, previously been subject to her husband, but that was a liberal and gentle subjection; now, however, she was made a servant.¹⁴⁹

When one of the most influential theologians and preachers of the Protestant Reformation considers a woman’s “proper bounds” to be even a “liberal and gentle subjection,” let alone that of a “servant,” it is no surprise that women have been routinely marginalized

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Genesis*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, 43.

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, *Genesis*, 48-49.

and oppressed in churches as well as secular culture. When that foundational understanding of women's roles is then justified by scripture, the harm done is even more insidious.

Who Is and Who Is Not Part of the Dominant Culture in This Text?

Culture was rather limited in the time and place within the narrative itself since Eve and Adam were the first and only created pair. One could argue that God himself represents the dominant culture, with humankind being below God in the hierarchy, and animals and plants below humankind.

If we were to consider the culture of the original audiences reading this text, then Adam was considered part of the dominant culture in the early readers' time and place. Eve would not be part of the dominant culture, since original listeners and readers to this text were, for the most part, members of "androcentric, patriarchal" cultures.¹⁵⁰

Who Might Have Experienced Marginalization and Oppression from Interpretations of This Text?

It would not be an overstatement to assert that women as a group have been marginalized and oppressed by interpretations of this text in systemic and profoundly disturbing ways. This topic has been engaged throughout this chapter, so it is sufficient for the scope of this study to note that significant damage that has been done through verse 16 alone where it appears that God indicates a woman's husband "will rule over"

¹⁵⁰ Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 25.

her. If a husband has a divine mandate to rule over his wife, any and all kinds of abuse will be permitted, from physical abuse to sexual, emotional, financial, and mental abuse.

Men, too, could experience marginalization through this text since Adam is a relatively passive and silent part of the story. Adam does not come across as any more noble or wise than Eve does in the actual text. For a group that is used to dominance and power, reading a text that depicts them as powerless and unwise may feel oppressive. Indeed, the extreme interpretive castigation of Eve throughout history may itself be a reaction on the part of the dominant male interpreters to the marginalization they feel in the text. Adam's powerlessness in the text is at direct odds with the experience of powerful men in a patriarchal society, potentially contributing to interpreters overemphasizing Eve's role.

Where in the Text Is the Redemption, Grace, and Love the Messiah Embodies?

Although Eve and Adam were banished from the garden, they weren't banished from a relationship with God. God could have imposed any consequence, including immediate death for all humanity, but chose to continue to engage with humanity. God kept the possibility for redemption open and, by his grace and mercy, bore the burden of bridging the gap made by sin.

It is interesting to note that the serpent is the only one who is cursed by God. Gordon J. Wenham notes that "neither the man nor the woman are cursed: only the snake (v 14) and the soil (v 17) are cursed. . . ."¹⁵¹ Adam and Eve experience the consequences of their choice, but scripture doesn't say that God's declaration was a curse. There is a

¹⁵¹ Wenham, "Genesis," 81.

distinction between being cursed and enduring the consequences of a choice. By holding back on punishing Adam and Eve, God reveals a depth of grace, love, and compassion that humanity sees in its depth and breadth in Christ.

How Does the Text Reveal Freedom from Oppression through God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit?

Elaine Neuenfeldt offers an interpretation of the Adam and Eve narrative that places the emphasis in the narrative on God's relationship with humanity, not humanity's relationship with one another. She writes, ". . . the creation stories in Genesis may also be understood as expressing the idea that the most important difference exists between God and creation, not between male and female. Creation depends on God; this is the primary theological relationship concerning creation."¹⁵² This interpretive shift frees people from the burden of past interpretations which taught that women are subordinate to men.

Neuenfeldt describes the relationship between God and humanity as one characterized by love. She writes,

This fundamental distinction between God and creation is defined by love, not by an exclusive gender binary among or between humanity. . . . The ethics of care and love embodied in this reading of Genesis emphasize an ethics of gender justice because hospitality, love, and an embrace of difference prevail from the perspective that humans are always before the eyes or in the presence of God. Together human beings are called to be stewards to one another and all of creation.¹⁵³

When people interpret the creation stories in Genesis as primarily about the relationship between humanity and God rather than the relationship between men and women, we can

¹⁵² Neuenfeldt, *Gender Justice Policy*, 4.

¹⁵³ Neuenfeldt, *Gender Justice Policy*, 4.

be secure in the knowledge that we are all God's beloved children, created with a purpose and calling in the world, equipped by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We then are free to celebrate differences in one another rather than be threatened by them.

Where Is the Good News for All People in This Text?

The Good News for all people in this text is anticipatory, in that for Christians this text is the beginning of the narrative of Jesus Christ's birth, death, and resurrection and thus the redeemed relationship between God and all of humanity. The Good News in this text takes a slightly different form than in the other two texts we will examine. Because of the three thousand years of interpretations not consistently centered on the text of Genesis 3 itself, the text has taken on an overlapping meaning that is not part of the original itself.

Therefore, the emancipatory work of jubilee in interpreting this text may first be undertaken not in the original meaning of the text, but in deconstructing the layers of additional meaning that were added since the earliest Christian writers put ink to paper. In other words, in order to find the freedom in the text, we must first free ourselves from the web of interpretation that has overtaken the text.

How Is the Good News Shared for Both Individuals and the Community as a Whole?

God does not give up on his creation, either on Adam and Eve as individuals or humankind as a whole. While there are consequences for Adam and Eve's choice in the garden of Eden, God still provides for them and sends them out to build a community.

God does not withdraw his presence entirely from them. “God, who is good and full of grace, did not abandon them in their helplessness—even though he was the one whom they had disobeyed.”¹⁵⁴ Instead, when God sent Adam and Eve out from the garden he also sent them out to birth the rest of humanity.

Jubilee Hermeneutical Lens

It is important in interpreting Genesis 3 from a jubilee hermeneutical lens to recognize the immense power that past interpretation has had on assumptions made today regarding this text. Indeed, these assumptions have become part of secular culture as well as religious culture. An example of this in secular culture is the all too common trope in movies of the temptress who spends the entire length of the movie trying to tempt the innocent man into doing what he knows he should not do. Eve as a danger to men shows up often.

Despite the prevalence of this interpretation, the text does not attest to Eve’s character as one of manipulative temptress. To understand how the inaccurate characterization of Eve as temptress and source of sin came about, Carol Meyers argues that we must look at the social history of women in early Israel. She writes,

Some three thousand years of male dominance in Western civilization, and in particular in religious institutions, have clouded our vision of the prebiblical past and have led to the belief that the exclusion of females from regular leadership, at least in public and/or religious life, has been the norm in human history. . . . It is being discovered that the position and role of women in society were very different in some crucial areas than what they became subsequent to the beginnings of Israel.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), 16.

¹⁵⁵ Carol L. Meyers, “The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel,” in *The Bible and*

Thus, we need to wade through the centuries of interpretation that have layered assumption upon assumption in order to discover what are “God-given sanctions” as opposed to “misogynistic interpretations of early biblical tradition” and “statements taken out of context and used dogmatically and authoritatively.”¹⁵⁶

Genesis 3 offers an excellent example what this process looks like in practice. As we have seen, interpreters from the beginnings of Christianity “took considerable pains to demonstrate that Eve was significant not as the source of life but rather as the source of death and evil; and, therefore, women needed to be controlled and dominated by their male relatives.”¹⁵⁷ Yet Genesis 3 does not actually portray “any theory of subordination or inferiority of women. Read on its *own terms*, the story shows a primordial male who appears passive and submissive. This ancient tale must have been understood this way for centuries as part of Hebraic literature.”¹⁵⁸ Eve is someone who has knowledge of God’s character and commands. She engages the serpent with confidence and with a strong voice. She is not passive and subordinate in the slightest.

If we then set aside the assumption that Eve is inferior and at fault for humanity’s separation from God, the interpreter has the opportunity to consider Genesis 3 with a fresh perspective. One such perspective of this text is a maturation interpretation. This theory is from an unpublished interpretation proposed by the Rev. Dr. Amy Gohdes-

Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics, edited by Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 291.

¹⁵⁶ Meyers, “Roots of Restriction,” in *The Bible and Liberation*, 291.

¹⁵⁷ Meyers, “Roots of Restriction,” in *The Bible and Liberation*, 291.

¹⁵⁸ Meyers, “Roots of Restriction,” in *The Bible and Liberation*, 291.

Luhman, which in turn is based on work by Dr. Lynn Bechtel.¹⁵⁹ Maturation interpretation understands the Eve and Adam story to be an etiological narrative that presents the growth or maturation of humanity from childhood to adulthood. Gohdes-Luhman builds on Bechtel's work by observing that rather than being a narrative about sin, this text shows that "Adam and Eve's disobedience results in growth, leaving the childhood garden to move out into the world."¹⁶⁰

Mieke Bal's work contributes to Gohdes-Luhman's interpretation since Bal handles the text from a linear literary perspective. She understands Eve and Adam to be characters who develop progressively throughout the text, thus offering the interpreter an "'inner-view' representation of feelings and hence a step further in the construction of character."¹⁶¹

This perspective encourages an interpreter to look for the broader purpose of the narrative. Eve and Adam are created, or birthed, as fully formed adults. They live in the garden in a naked state, evidently. Nakedness in the time period of the Genesis myth implies immaturity. Gohdes-Luhman notes that Egyptian art from the same era depicts children as "naked adults."¹⁶² Eve and Adam's nakedness thus implies immaturity.

¹⁵⁹ This interpretation is certainly not the only possible jubilee interpretation and it may indeed be a somewhat controversial one, but it offers an intriguing and thought-provoking understanding of the role and purpose of the Genesis 3 narrative that is profoundly applicable to the work of freeing people from oppression.

¹⁶⁰ Amy Gohdes-Luhman, *Women Written: Eve, Jezebel, and the Shunammite*, paper presented at the 10th Moravian Women's Conference, Northfield, MN, June 27-30, 2007, 10.

¹⁶¹ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 120.

¹⁶² Gohdes-Luhman, *Women Written*, 9.

Eve and Adam are only ashamed of their nakedness when their eyes are opened after they cross this boundary from child to adult. This is a sign of safe and smart maturity. There are practical reasons not to spend our lives naked as adults. Their nakedness is not described in the text as sin.

As most parents do for their children, Eve and Adam's parent, God, has given them boundaries to keep them safe as they grow up. One of those boundaries is that they cannot eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This rule makes sense for children. There are many rules parents make to keep their children safe. Children are told not to do things like touch a hot stove or run in the street. Their immature minds are not able to do those things safely. Likewise, an immature mind could not handle grappling with the knowledge of good and evil. It is for Eve and Adam's own growth that God tells them not to eat of the fruit, not because God somehow would feel threatened by their knowledge.

Like all children, as Eve and Adam mature their minds are able to handle the more challenging things in life, so they can move past those early boundaries. Adults touch stoves and cross streets safely. Part of how we grow and learn to do these things safely is through testing boundaries. When the serpent speaks to Eve, she is not alone. Adam is with her and they walk through this boundary together, "moving from childhood to young adulthood."¹⁶³ They stand on the edge of the garden, ready to do as God directs them in Gen. 2:28: God said to [humankind], "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and

¹⁶³ Gohdes-Luhman, *Women Written*, 8.

over every living thing that lives upon the earth.” They have matured and go forth into the world to fulfill the purpose for which God created them.

Regarding this moment, Gohdes-Luhman observes that . . .

. . . in the act of defiance the child matures and enters adolescence. Is it disobedience? Certainly. Are there consequences to knowledge? Are there consequences in growing up? Of course. Children get big and have to work, are often afraid of snakes, and women go through painful labor. But is it sin? Well, the Hebrew writer never calls what Adam and Eve do sin, and none of the many male writers in all of the 38 books of the Old Testament ever call Adam and Eve’s act a sin. Not once. Do you know when the word for sin is first used in the Holy Bible? When Cain kills Abel. That is sin. Growing up into the image of God is not sin. Becoming like God in the discernment of good and evil is not sin. . . . As the story is actually told in the Hebrew, Adam and Eve’s disobedience results in growth, leaving the childhood garden to move out into the world.¹⁶⁴

This interpretation of the meaning of Eve and Adam in Genesis 3 frees people from needing to read this text only through the lens of sin. This approach is neither an orthodox interpretation of this text nor is it the interpretation taught by religious communities over the centuries. This interpretation is, however, faithful to the text and is consistent with God’s character as a loving God who created his people in his image with a purpose.

Genesis 16:1-16

Phyllis Tribble classifies Gen. 16:1-16 as a “text of terror,” because God appears to act in a way that perpetuates oppression.¹⁶⁵ The text itself states that God sends Hagar back to Sarai to be abused: “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her

¹⁶⁴ Gohdes-Luhman, *Women Written*, 9-10.

¹⁶⁵ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 14.

hand.”¹⁶⁶ How is it possible to reconcile the God of love with a God that condones abuse? It is particularly difficult to accomplish this with a text such as Genesis 16 which is filled with moments of powerful freedom alongside this fundamental terror. God does send Hagar back to be abused, and she *is* abused again by Abraham and Sarah. This is a reality in the text that cannot be justified or explained. The faithful interpreter would do well to acknowledge the terror and brokenness of this world.

Yet Genesis 16 also invites the reader into the longest conversation anyone, male or female, has with God in the Old Testament. This text reveals that an Egyptian woman is one of the only recorded people to speak to God face to face and live. Indeed, Hagar is the “*only* person in the Old Testament to name God. She engages in theological formulation, using her own experience with God and the knowledge of God gained thereby to shape new language for God.”¹⁶⁷ Hagar’s story cannot and should not be interpreted as a minor diversion from the main narrative. Her story *is* the main narrative.

When Genesis 16 is interpreted through the lens of dominant culture, it is necessary to jump through interpretive hoops to attempt to justify God’s seemingly unjustifiable action. When interpreted through the lens of the powerless, however, the interpreter begins to find a more faithful understanding of God’s character and relationship with his beloved children.

The Text of Genesis 16:1-16

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ² and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall

¹⁶⁶ Gen. 16:9b (NKJV).

¹⁶⁷ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 454.

obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. ⁴ He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!” ⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

⁷ The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And he said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” ⁹ The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.” ¹⁰ The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” ¹¹ And the angel of the LORD said to her,

“Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
 you shall call him Ishmael,
 for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.

¹² He shall be a wild ass of a man,
 with his hand against everyone,
 and everyone’s hand against him;
 and he shall live at odds with all his kin.”

¹³ So she named the LORD who spoke to her, “You are El-roi”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Initial Exegetical Questions

What Does the Text Actually Say?

The text tells the story of a woman named Hagar, who is sent by her mistress, Sarai, to become pregnant by her master, Abram, since Sarai has not conceived. The New Revised Standard Version relates that once she had conceived, Hagar looked on Sarai with contempt. Sarai, in turn, took the problem to Abram, who refused to address the

issue. Sarai then abused Hagar and Hagar fled to her home. Just before she arrived home, the angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her to return and submit to Sarai. The angel of the Lord also made a promise to Hagar, much like his covenant with Abram, that she would have countless offspring. The angel of the Lord says that the Lord has seen Hagar's affliction and Hagar responds by naming the Lord "*El Roi*," one who sees. Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai and has a son, Ishmael.

What Do I Observe in and about the Text?

Three aspects of this text stand out upon an initial observation. First, the abuse Hagar suffers is evident. She is given no choice over her own body when Sarai sends her to Abram to become pregnant. The *Women's Bible Commentary* notes that ". . . a person's sexual services could be donated by their masters or mistresses."¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, at Sarai's hands Hagar endures the kind of abuse that the Israelite people endured at Pharaoh's hands.¹⁶⁹ Phyllis Tribble describes the abuse that Hagar suffered clearly: "The verb *afflict* ('*nh*) is a strong one, connoting harsh treatment. It characterizes, for example, the sufferings of the entire Hebrew population in Egypt, the land of their bondage."¹⁷⁰ When Hagar flees and her home is almost in sight, this is the severity of the abuse God sends her back to suffer.

The second aspect that stands out in this text is that Hagar is unique among all people named in the scriptures, male and female, because of God's direct engagement

¹⁶⁸ Susan Niditch, "Genesis" in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 20.

¹⁶⁹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 452.

¹⁷⁰ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 13.

with her. Hagar is the first person in the Old Testament to be “encountered by an angel of God, and the first woman to be given promises. In response, Hagar becomes the only person in the OT to name God.”¹⁷¹ Hagar is both in direct contact with the greatest power possible but is herself almost powerless in the dominant culture.

A third observation is that Sarai and Abram choose to act outside of God’s direction so they can have a son. “It is the unusual and often initially infertile women who have special births These women often engineer the births, thereby showing considerable power in matters related to fertility and sexuality.”¹⁷² Sarai and Abram’s desire to move God’s plan along echoes the challenges Adam and Eve faced in trusting God’s word as true.

What Did This Text Mean to the Original Audience?

The original audience of this text were the Israelite people. This text was an important one as part of the narrative of the patriarchs from whom God founded the ancient Israelite people. The original audience would have made the connection between the enslavement and affliction an Egyptian girl suffered from an Israelite couple and the later enslavement and affliction the Israelite people endured at the hands of the Egyptians. Indeed, the chiasmic nature of these two narratives connects them in a fundamental way that points to the complicated nature of humanity. We are capable of both great good and great ill.

¹⁷¹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 454.

¹⁷² Niditch, “Genesis,” 35.

How Does the Part Fit the Whole?

This text is part of the larger narrative of the first patriarch, Abraham, and the origins of the Israelite people. It is also part of the narrative of God's covenant relationship with his people. Prior to Genesis 16, God makes a covenant with Abram that he will have countless descendants. In Gen. 16:10, God makes a similar covenant with Hagar.

This text occurs after the time that God has promised Abram many descendants and before Sarai becomes pregnant with a son. When Sarai, later Sarah, does eventually bear Isaac, he and Hagar's son, Ishmael, are raised together. Eventually Abram, later Abraham, turns Hagar and Ishmael out on their own into the wilderness because of continued conflict and abuse.

The *Global Bible Commentary* offers the fascinating possibility that Hagar's story is the center of the overarching narrative of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

Recent studies of Genesis have suggested that the story of Abraham (and Jacob) is structured chiasmatically, with a series of parallels that progressively work in toward the center of this section. Viewed in this way, the unexpected center of the narrative is the account of the pregnancy of Hagar the Egyptian (ch. 16), the substitute wife of Abraham, leading into the birth of her son, Ishmael, which is enveloped by two accounts of the covenant between God and Abraham (chs. 15 and 17). At first sight, the story of Hagar appears to be a diversion, a false trail, which irritatingly delays the arrival of Isaac, the favored heir. Yet look more closely and it becomes clear that this is no narrative dead end but a pathway to a vision of God whose justice refuses to be confined by national or tribal boundaries.¹⁷³

Genesis 16 makes clear that God's love and freedom is not only for the Israelite people.

¹⁷³ Clare Amos, *Global Bible Commentary*, Daniel Patte, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 10.

This placement of the Hagar story within the broader narrative of the foundation of the Israelite people and faith emphasizes that God does not favor only the powerful, but indeed predicates the future of the powerful upon how they treat the marginalized and oppressed in their cultures. “A demand for justice and compassion for all resident aliens, with Hagar as an archetype, is being written into the very fabric of the covenant. The seeming implication is that this covenant relationship’s healthy continuance depends at least in part on the willingness of Abraham and his family to offer justice to others.”¹⁷⁴ Hagar’s story is not a footnote about a girl who tried to rise above her station in life. Rather, her story is the central depiction of what relationships should look like in God’s kingdom. Even if Hagar cannot escape the abuse of this world, God’s kingdom is not and will not be one that perpetuates oppression. This narrative points to the year of the Lord’s favor as a future vision, even if not a present reality.

Jubilee Exegetical Questions

How Has This Text Been Interpreted in the Past?

Past interpretation of the text was largely rooted in an assumption that the story should be read from the perspective of Abram and Sarai. In other words, this story has been interpreted from the viewpoint of the people in culture with power. The privileged, well-educated men interpreting Genesis 16 over the years did not seem to imagine what it would be like to understand the story from the marginalized, oppressed, and abused woman around whom the story centers. Power, and who has it, has dictated the traditional interpretation of this text.

¹⁷⁴ Amos, *Global Bible Commentary*, 11.

Past interpretation considers Hagar to be the one acting inappropriately. The *Africa Bible Commentary* declares that “the roots of [Hagar’s] problem were in her failure to submit to Sarai after she found out she was pregnant.”¹⁷⁵ Hagar’s agency and activity are overshadowed by the assumption that she was wrong not to obey Sarai and therefore somehow brought Sarai’s abuse on herself.¹⁷⁶ She became too grasping of power herself when, as a woman bearing the master’s child, her status was increasing.

This is clear as early as John Calvin’s 1554 commentary on Genesis. Calvin declared quite forcefully that

Sarai made use of her proper authority in restraining the insolence of her maid. And, doubtless, from the event we may conclude that Hagar was impelled to flee not so much by the cruelty of her mistress as by her own contempt for Sarai. Her own conscience accused her. Further, it is improbable that Sarai should have been so greatly incensed except by many and indeed atrocious offenses.¹⁷⁷

Hagar has long been presented as the one who did wrong by not respecting those with power, regardless of what abuses they perpetrated against her.

Even Calvin’s use of the phrase “Hagar was *impelled* to flee” indicates an inability to recognize Hagar’s use of power.¹⁷⁸ It is as if Calvin could not perceive that Hagar’s action was actually the use of the power she did possess. For Calvin, Hagar wasn’t a woman who was acting to save her life and the life of her unborn child. Instead, she was a woman caught in the pull of her emotions, and it was her contempt and her conscience that forced her to flee. He did not interpret her flight to be an act of strength

¹⁷⁵ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 35.

¹⁷⁶ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 452.

¹⁷⁷ Calvin, *Genesis*, 155.

¹⁷⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, 155.

and power. It is even more interesting that, while he thought carefully about Sarai's motivation, and offered Sarai the benefit of the doubt that she must have been deeply provoked by Hagar, he did not seem to think about Hagar's motivation. He didn't ignore her role in the narrative. But as a person with significant power himself, it appears that he was limited in his ability to imagine Hagar's perspective in this narrative. Yet he imagined Sarai's perspective, perhaps because he perceived her to be a person of power in the text.

Another element in the text that interpreters have focused on is that God sends Hagar back to Sarai because Hagar needed to repair the relationship that has been broken by her contempt for her mistress. Hagar had sinned by not being respectful and thus had to bear the consequences of her choice.¹⁷⁹ This interpretation is deeply problematic, in part because the break in the relationship was not caused by Hagar's contempt, but by Sarai and Abram's manipulation and abuse of Hagar. The relationship was broken from the beginning because it was never an equitable one. Hagar did not have the power to heal the relationship or to harm it. These traditional interpretations neglect to take into account the power differential in the text, creating even more potential terror around this text.

Who Is and Who Is Not Part of the Dominant Culture in This Text?

Abram and Sarai are both part of the dominant culture in the text, although because of gender Sarai is limited in her dominance. Hagar is clearly not part of the

¹⁷⁹ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 35.

dominant culture, although she appears to begin to see the potential to be more a part of the dominant culture upon bearing the son of Abram.

Abram is the primary member of the dominant culture in Genesis 16. He is the master with wealth and possessions. While most Western commentaries do not note Abram as being an integral part of this narrative, the *Africa Bible Commentary* offers an interesting perspective on Abram's role in this text. The commentary casts responsibility onto Abram for all of the interpersonal problems that arise in his household because Abram failed to consult with God before he obeyed Sarai and made Hagar pregnant.¹⁸⁰

Who Might Have Experienced Marginalization and Oppression from Interpretations of This Text?

Past interpretations of this text have the potential to marginalize and oppress any woman or man who has been abused and blamed for her or his abuse. All too often people who experience abuse are told their terror is their fault for not conforming to the abuser's expectations. Because the Lord sends Hagar back to be afflicted, this text can be twisted and used to justify the need to remain in the power of an abuser.

Where in the Text Is the Redemption, Grace, and Love the Messiah Embodies?

God comes to Hagar in the wilderness and engages with her in a way that creates an intimate relationship. God's conversation with Hagar is reminiscent of the compassion with which Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. God approaches Hagar in a posture of relationship and with respect. God "addresses [Hagar] by name, and

¹⁸⁰ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 34.

. . . draws her into conversation rather than reducing her to silence.”¹⁸¹ While God appears to her as an “angel of the Lord,” this “messenger should not be confused with later angelic beings. The narrator’s report in v. 13 shows that Yahweh speaks to Hagar, and Hagar recognizes that she has seen God.”¹⁸² God sees Hagar and Hagar sees God.

In seeing Hagar and allowing her to see Godself, God has offered her grace and embraced her with love in a tangible way. Hagar responds to God’s love by naming God and recognizing God’s presence with her: “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me.’”¹⁸³ De La Torre observes that this moment is remarkable. He writes,

. . . Hagar, the lowly marginalized woman, does the unexpected: she dares to give God a name, a privilege extended to no other person throughout the Bible. Ancient custom dictated that only a superior could name those who are lower in status, yet here a slave woman is the first biblically recorded person to give God a name. She calls God, *El Roi*, the God who sees, uniting the divine with her human experience of suffering.¹⁸⁴

In this act, God makes clear that Hagar is God’s beloved child and she receives God’s grace.

God continues to offer his redemption, grace, and love when he makes a promise to Hagar similar to the promise he makes to Abram: “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”¹⁸⁵ In the midst of Hagar’s powerlessness and vulnerability, God comes to her and shows her that she is his beloved child, despite

¹⁸¹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 452-453.

¹⁸² Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 452.

¹⁸³ Gen. 16:13 (NRSV).

¹⁸⁴ De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Gen. 16:10b.

the reality of the oppression she faces in the world. Hagar learns that no matter how powerless she is, God cares about her.

How Does the Text Reveal Freedom from Oppression through God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit?

We cannot dismiss or attempt to justify the inherent terror in this text of God sending Hagar back to be afflicted. This is an element in the text that remains disturbing and none of the exegetical work here intends minimize that.

Even as this reality must be acknowledged and undiminished, it is possible to find freedom in this text. It is possible to interpret this text as one in which God frees Hagar spiritually and internally, even though he did not free her physically because Hagar has seen and named God. Her social construct would have said she was worthless but in this one act God made it clear that she was valuable. She goes back with the assurance that her life is valuable in God's eyes. From a New Testament perspective, one could say that the Holy Spirit remains with Hagar to guide her through the oppression she experiences. After this encounter with God, Hagar did not need to depend upon the powerful people she lived with to tell her she was worthy. In that sense, God freed Hagar from emotional and spiritual oppression. Hagar knew who she was in relation to God, a relationship that far surpasses any of the toxic human relationships she endures.

God also reveals in this text that true freedom is found in God. There will be countless forms of oppression in this world, but no oppression in God's kingdom. Hagar is Egyptian and, logically, flees back to Egypt, exchanging the oppression she faces with Abram and Sarai for a place not known for the great freedoms its people enjoyed. Hagar

“prefers the dangers of the wilderness to continuing life in Abram’s household. . . . she thinks she can find more freedom in Egypt than among God’s chosen people.”¹⁸⁶ The tragic reality of this world is that oppression abounds. God’s appearance to Hagar reminds her that it is in relationship with God that true freedom is found. Through his engagement with Hagar on the wilderness road and his promise of descendants, God draws Hagar and her family into the promise of his love, which includes the “possibilities for a future of nonoppression.”¹⁸⁷

Where Is the Good News for All People in This Text, Not Only for Some People?

This text makes clear that the Good News is for the marginalized and oppressed just as much as it is for the powerful. Through Hagar, God showed his love for all people by revealing Godself to her and expanding his promise of descendants to Hagar and Ishmael’s line as well as Abram and Sarai’s line. The *New International Bible Commentary* refers to the writer of Genesis as portraying “God as a *Creator* who makes *promises* to those who do not belong to the ‘people of God’ (which should include their descendants, both physical and spiritual, in Islam).”¹⁸⁸ God reveals Godself in this text as a God who is not limited to love and care for only the Israelite people. “God acts in *both word and deed* outside the boundaries of what we normally call the community of *faith*.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 452.

¹⁸⁷ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 453.

¹⁸⁸ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 455.

¹⁸⁹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 455.

How Is the Good News Shared with the Community as a Whole?

One way the Good News for Hagar in this text is shared is through the promise God made to her of descendants through her son, Ishmael. That promise continues for her descendants today. One commentator asks what it means for “Hagar and Ishmael to receive the *continuing* promise of God.”¹⁹⁰ God’s promise to Hagar, a promise offered to her people, means that God continues to work and move among not only the descendants of the Israelites, but also descendants of the people of Islam. Christians, too, trace our faith history to these promises of God that we will be his people. The Good News that God loves all people of every community is conveyed through this text in profound ways.

Jubilee Hermeneutical Lens

Hagar is a woman living in a world with strict power structures, and, as an enslaved woman, is herself at the bottom of the power hierarchy. Power is woven into every interaction in this text, from Sarai wielding her power to harm, to Abram wielding sexual power, to Hagar exercising the little power she does have very effectively by escaping Sarai and Abram and fleeing to her home.

Phyllis Tribble brilliantly interprets Genesis 16 from Hagar’s perspective in *Texts of Terror*. Through her translation work, she presents an understanding of Hagar as a woman with a powerful vision. Tribble writes,

The Hebrew expression “her mistress was slight (or trifling) in her eyes” inspires various interpretations. Many translators alter the syntax to make Hagar the subject of the verb. They also attribute to the verb (*qll*) the legitimate, though not necessary, meaning of contempt or disdain. Accordingly, one reads, “When she knew she was with child, she despised her mistress” (NEB); or “when she saw

¹⁹⁰ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 455.

that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress” (RSV). Yet the verb with its correct subject also offers the less harsh reading that is present in the translation, “Her mistress was lowered in her esteem.”

Trible’s translation work highlights precisely this study’s point about interpretive choice. Interpreters in the past made the choice to alter the subject of the sentence, thereby ascribing blame to the powerless person in the narrative rather than the one with power. Not only was that not a necessary translation choice, it was not even the most faithfully accurate choice.

This example highlights the need for a jubilee hermeneutical lens to be applied to texts. If interpreters had used a hermeneutical lens that looks for the freedom in this text, there could be an entirely different history of interpretation around this text. Rather than reinforcing the power structure, this text could have led to hermeneutical and homiletical choices that advanced a vision of the equal worth of all people in God’s eyes, thereby impacting cultural understandings of abuse and power.

Trible’s interpretation is one that reflects a jubilee hermeneutic. Hagar is revealed as a woman who has seen the possibilities of a new power structure that recognizes value in all people. Trible describes what has happened to Hagar in this moment of freedom when she writes, “Hagar acquires a new vision of Sarai. Hierarchical blinders disappear. The exalted mistress decreases while the lowly maid increases. Not hatred but a reordering of the relationship is the point.”¹⁹¹ De La Torre describes Hagar’s experience here as “consciousness-raising” and a moment where she “recognizes her own dignity.”¹⁹² When Sarai will not join Hagar in her vision, Hagar takes control of her life

¹⁹¹ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 12.

¹⁹² De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality*, 15.

and exerts what little power she does have to “seek her own liberation by fleeing Sarah’s cruelty”¹⁹³

For a brief moment in Hagar’s story there is transformative hope in the holy encounter Hagar has with the Lord. God sees her and she sees God. It is still a text of terror. But for a moment, “Hagar has seen a new reality that challenges the power structure.”¹⁹⁴ The possibility of a world free from oppression has been witnessed to between God and humanity.

John 4:1-42

In the Gospel of John, chapter 4, an unnamed Samaritan woman walks to Jacob’s well.¹⁹⁵ In doing so, she has offered countless people the opportunity to bear witness to her life changing experience of liberation found in Jesus, as well as the opportunity to bear false witness against her morality and value as a child of God. This text also offers Jesus’ actions toward the woman as a model of what it looks like to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

The Text of John 4:1-42

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman

¹⁹³ De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality*, 15.

¹⁹⁴ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 13.

¹⁹⁵ Karoline Lewis, *John*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 54.

said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."¹⁹⁶

Initial Exegetical Questions

What Does the Text Actually Say?

The text relates the story of a personal as well as a theological conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The outcome of this conversation is that Jesus reveals to the woman that he is the Messiah, she comes to a degree of belief in him, shares the story of her encounter with Jesus with her community, and many people come to believe in him.

What Do I Observe in and about the Text?

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is remarkable in many ways. Their conversation is of a length and depth that is unusual for any time and place, but particularly between two people who have so little in common. Indeed, Gail O'Day refers to the conversation between Jesus and the woman as "scandalous."¹⁹⁷ She writes, "The woman knows that a Jewish man should not talk with a Samaritan woman. Moreover, a Jew should not consider drinking water from a Samaritan vessel (4:9)."¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Jn. 4:1-42.

¹⁹⁷ Gail R. O'Day, "John," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 383.

¹⁹⁸ O'Day, "John," 383.

Samaritans were considered enemies of the Jews and most Jews would have taken a route between Judea and Galilee that was much longer in order to avoid going through Samaria.¹⁹⁹ Gail O’Day describes the “source of the enmity between them” as

. . . a dispute about the correct location of the cultic place of worship, a problem the Samaritan woman herself puts before Jesus (4:20). Although the break between Jews and Samaritans is first narrated in 2 Kings 17, the most intense rivalry began about 300 B.C.E. The Samaritans built and worshiped at a shrine on Mount Gerizim, a shrine that competed with the Temple in Jerusalem.²⁰⁰

Despite this history of enmity, Jesus chose to engage in a lengthy conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. The woman shows her own theological depth as she and Jesus deepen their relationship with one another through this conversation. The result is that Jesus reveals himself to her as the Messiah, a holy moment that Jesus has not shared in John’s Gospel with anyone else, not even his own disciples. The disciples interrupt this moment and remain silent. Nothing is as one would expect in this text.

What Did This Text Mean to the Original Audience?

An important message for the original audience is that Jesus’ message is for the whole world, Gentiles as well as Jews. The text declares that it was “necessary” for Jesus to go through Samaria in order to show what it means that God loves the world. The Greek word, “*edei*,” implies that this was a divine plan or direction straight from God.²⁰¹ The Samaritans were not people that Jews would consider objects of God’s love. Yet Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman immediately shows that God’s abundant love

¹⁹⁹ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1259.

²⁰⁰ O’Day, “John,” 383.

²⁰¹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 565.

extends even to “those on the margins, the peripheries, the outer boundaries of the centralized community” and of our personal world.²⁰² Many of the early Christians that comprised the original audience of John’s Gospel were Gentiles and this message that Jesus wants to connect intimately with all people would likely have been resonant.

How Does the Part Fit the Whole?

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He has performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana and just begun teaching and preaching. Jesus’ early trip sets the expectation that Jesus’ ministry is for all people. Karoline Lewis writes,

Samaria would be the last place, not the first place, expected for Jesus to go to show God’s love for the world. . . . That Jesus must travel through Samaria is stipulated by John 3:16, “For God so loved the world.” . . . That God loves the world will be demonstrated by Jesus’ ministry in Samaria. . . . [T]he world represents the entirety of God’s creation, including those who cannot imagine themselves as objects of God’s love.²⁰³

This text also conveys the power of Jesus’ message, with many people believing because the woman shared this one encounter.

The placement of this text immediately following Jesus’ engagement with Nicodemus illuminates some of the differences between the belief of a Samaritan woman and the unbelief of a Jewish man. The Samaritan woman is open to Jesus in ways Nicodemus is not. One commentator notes that “the woman’s openness to Jesus and her willingness to engage him in conversation stand in marked contrast to Nicodemus, who

²⁰² Lewis, *John*, 54.

²⁰³ Lewis, *John*, 53.

only greeted Jesus with amazement and resistance (3:4, 9).”²⁰⁴ This placement of the text within the broader text further emphasizes that Jesus’ message and love is for all people.

Jubilee Exegetical Questions

How Has This Text Been Interpreted in the Past?

Past interpretation of John 4 emphasizes that since Jesus loved and forgave a woman as reprehensibly sinful as the Samaritan woman, Jesus will therefore certainly forgive any persons who repent of their sin and turns to him. Jesus himself shared that Good News in Jn. 3:16: “For God so loved the world that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.” No matter the depravity of the sin, Jesus offers every person eternal life when he or she believes in him.

A common past interpretation is that the Samaritan woman seems to be an excellent example of the depths of sin that Jesus will forgive. Here is a woman who admits she has been married five times and is now living with a man who is not her husband. Therefore, she is, at best, a woman of loose morals and, at worst, a prostitute. Indeed, D. Mayfield describes the Samaritan woman as someone who is “seen as an example of sexual immorality—someone who has had many partners and multiple divorces, and lives with a man outside marriage.”²⁰⁵ This past interpretation is another example of how interpretive choices have been made that are not faithful to the text and have created oppressive narratives in religious and secular culture.

John Calvin’s commentary offers a clear example of this oppressive narrative. Calvin sees the transformative power of repentance and Jesus’ great compassion as the

²⁰⁴ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 567.

²⁰⁵ Mayfield, “Claims of ‘Sexual Immorality,’” 6.

main interpretive moves in John 4. Those interpretive foci, however, are dependent upon an interpretation of the Samaritan woman as a degenerate sinner who treats Jesus with impudence. Calvin is remarkably forceful in the language he uses to describe the Samaritan woman's thoughts, feelings, and motivations in her encounter with Jesus. He uses words and phrases like "contempt," "mocks," "jibe," "accuse," "completely degenerated," "abandoned true godliness," "she despises [Christ]," "jeering and scoffing" to describe the woman.²⁰⁶

Having pointed out the woman's many failures and errors and established her as being the greatest of sinners, Calvin then moves on to interpret the woman's interaction with Jesus in verses 16-21 in terms that reveal not only his prejudicial assumptions about the woman's circumstances in life, but does so in ways that are not based in actual textual evidence. Calvin writes,

[Christ] presses the ulcer more forcibly by openly accusing her about her wickedness. . . . for when Christ says, "You have had five husbands" (verse 18), this was probably because she had been such a stubborn and disobedient wife that she forced her husbands to divorce her. This is how I interpret these words: "Although God joined you to lawful husbands, you did not stop sinning, and as you were made infamous by your numerous divorces, you turned to prostitution."

As a scholar and Christ-follower who has grown from and appreciated Calvin's systematic theology greatly, I am nonetheless nonplussed and dismayed by this complete and unapologetic interpretive departure from the text. It is not hard to see that such an erroneous interpretation both stems from and contributes to centuries of marginalization and oppression of women. We will consider these verses through a more faithful lens later in this chapter.

²⁰⁶ Calvin, *John*, 94-96.

Who Is and Who Is Not Part of the Dominant Culture in This Text?

The Samaritan woman is not part of the dominant culture of the text's original Christian and Jewish audience. She was very much an outsider and enemy. Within her own culture, the Samaritan woman would still not have been part of the dominant culture due to her gender. Interestingly, however, she was someone that people would listen to when she shared Jesus' message, so she must have wielded some power within her community. As a stranger in Samaria, Jesus was himself not part of the dominant culture in this text. In that sense, the Samaritan woman was more a part of dominant culture than Jesus was. This text in particular challenges the concept of dominance in culture.

Who Might Have Experienced Marginalization and Oppression from Interpretations of This Text?

By emphasizing the woman's presumed sin, this text is one that has been used to keep women firmly under the subjection of the men in their lives. This verse has placed sexual sin as a sin of the greatest severity, leaving many women with a burden of guilt and shame regarding their sexuality.

John Calvin goes so far in his interpretive work to interpret Jesus' response to the woman as one that itself perpetuates oppression. He writes,

. . . one might suppose that Christ, annoyed and put to shame by the impudence of the woman, changes the subject. But this is not the case. When Christ saw that the only reply the woman made to what he said was jeering and scoffing, he applied the appropriate remedy to this conviction of her sin. This is further remarkable evidence of Christ's compassion, that when the woman was unwilling to come to him of her own accord, he drew her to him, as it were, against her will. However,

we should note most of all what I have said, that people who are completely careless and almost stupid must be deeply wounded through conviction of sin.²⁰⁷

Calvin's interpretation here is almost violent in imagery. For a woman who has been forced to do something against her will, hearing that Jesus drew a woman to him against her will could not only perpetuate oppression and marginalization, but even create a sense of terror and fear of Jesus. A man who experienced something similar would also be vulnerable to such a reaction upon hearing this interpretation.

Where in the Text Is the Redemption, Grace, and Love the Messiah Embodies?

The Messiah's redemption, grace, and love run throughout this entire text. Simply by revealing to the Samaritan woman that he is the Messiah Jesus is offering her abundant grace. The woman also experiences Jesus' love and redemption through his ability to know her intimately and love her fully. Jesus offers the woman living water, an invitation to redemption in him and eternal life. Jesus embodies redemption, grace, and love in this image and in this text.

How Does the Text Reveal Freedom from Oppression through God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit?

Jesus describes himself as the source of "living water," water that becomes in people "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life," water that causes people never to be thirsty again.²⁰⁸ The *New International Bible Commentary* offers a succinct summary:

²⁰⁷ Calvin, *John*, 96.

²⁰⁸ Jn. 4:14.

“Jesus offers water that gives life.”²⁰⁹ Jesus is proclaiming jubilee in these words, revealing that his living water is one that frees people from the oppression of sin and death and leads to eternal life.

By choosing to travel through enemy territory, Jesus makes himself less powerful. He opens himself up to be marginalized and oppressed, even physically harmed, in order to free the Samaritan woman and the people of Samaria. Jesus literally embodies freedom from oppression in John 4, just as he claimed he would do in Luke 4.

The text offers the simple but powerful symbol of the woman’s freedom after her encounter with Jesus. By leaving the water jar at the well, she makes clear Jesus is now her source of living water, one that is eternal and uncontained. Jesus engages with her in deep, vulnerable, mutual conversation and the woman experiences the power of divine grace. She gets up, leaves her jar, and shares the Good News of the Messiah’s love with her community.²¹⁰

The Samaritan woman is freed by Jesus from the burden of grief she experienced through the loss of five husbands. She could very likely be part of a levirate marriage system that passes her on from one male relative to the next upon the death of her first husband.²¹¹ Jesus “knows everything she has ever done” and offers her abundant love. His ability to know her and love her frees her from the constraints of her culture so she is herself free to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

²⁰⁹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 566.

²¹⁰ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 569.

²¹¹ Fretheim, *New International Bible Commentary*, 567; Lewis, *John*, 60.

Where Is the Good News for All People in This Text, Not Only for Some People?

As we examined in previous questions, Jesus makes clear in John 4 that the Good News is for all people. He chooses to take a path through Samaria that was more dangerous than the usual route so that he could engage with the whole world. This lengthy conversation occurs between Jesus and this Samaritan woman whose people are enemies of the Jews. Nobody would have expected that the Jewish Messiah would share any Good News with a Samaritan.

How Is the Good News Shared for the Community?

The Samaritan woman's first action upon hearing Jesus tell her that he is the Messiah is to leave her water jug and share this Good News with her community. The text tells us that many Samaritans in her city came to believe in Jesus because of her testimony.

This text also creates a sense of community between the Jews and the Samaritans, despite their long-standing enmity. Jesus, a Jew, reveals himself as the Messiah to a Samaritan woman. This woman becomes one of the earliest disciples, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with her people, just as Jesus' twelve male, Jewish disciples are sharing the Good News with the people with whom they come in contact.

Jubilee Hermeneutical Lens

John 4:5-42 is faithfully read in the context of the preceding chapter where Jesus engages with Nicodemus. Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus and the woman at the well offer significant contrasts between those who "see" or believe in Jesus and those who do

not see or believe.²¹² Nicodemus is a Jewish leader, a male, a Pharisee, and a member of the powerful class. He visits Jesus by night and leaves their encounter unable to understand or believe in Jesus and engage in relationship with him. The Samaritan woman at the well, by contrast, is a woman, a Samaritan, has no power, has no name, and encounters Jesus at a well in the middle of the day. Unlike Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman does see and believe in Jesus through her willingness to be in relationship with Jesus. In her engagement with Jesus she is freed from what binds her in life to share the Good News with others.²¹³

The story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus occurs not only beside the story of Nicodemus, but also beside Jn. 3:16, making Jn. 4:1-3 an important bridge. In these verses we learn that God loves the *world*, not just some of the world, but the entire world. Jesus' immediate engagement with a woman from Samaria, a definite enemy of the Jewish people, is an embodiment of God's love for the world.

The Gospel of John's understanding of relationship with Jesus leads into the Gospel's understanding of sin. Karoline Lewis writes, "Sin in John has nothing to do with past actions or present indiscretions. Sin is a synonym for lacking a relationship with

²¹² Lewis, *John*, 45.

²¹³ It is important to note how Jesus engages differently with the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus. He connects with both of them in the way they each individually need. The Samaritan woman is open to Jesus' teaching and develops a genuine relationship with him quickly. Nicodemus, a person steeped in tradition, rules, and power, needs more time to develop that relationship. Nicodemus appears later in scripture in Jn. 7:45-52 and Jn. 19:38-42, suggesting a continued development of his relationship with Jesus.

God.”²¹⁴ Jesus is not interested in condemning or judging people. He is interested in relationships so people are freed from all that oppress them.

This encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman reflects this understanding of sin very well. When read with a Jubilee hermeneutical lens it is evident that Jesus is quite unconcerned with the woman’s morals. There is no indication that this woman has made immoral choices. Indeed, she could have been in a levirate marriage, one which would have left her dependent on a man who was not her husband if her previous husbands had either died or abandoned her.²¹⁵

A levirate marriage situation is indeed likely as Jesus offers no judgement when he asks her to get her husband and she responds that the man she lives with now is not her husband. Instead of a moment of judgment for perceived sin, this is a moment of deepened relationship where Jesus shows that he also “sees” the woman. This makes possible her ability to “see” that Jesus may be the Messiah and Jesus’ response confirming her belief. The Samaritan woman has been dependent on many husbands, but now she is invited into relationship to be mutually dependent on Jesus, free from the marginalization and oppression that come with being a widow in her culture.

That moment of freedom comes when Jesus reveals his divinity to her and states, “I am.”²¹⁶ This is a powerful revelation, one that Jesus has not yet offered to his own closest male disciples. Yet here is Jesus, speaking at length to a stranger and a woman who is an enemy of his people, sharing with her the deepest reality of his very identity.

²¹⁴ Lewis, *John*, 55.

²¹⁵ Lewis, *John*, 60.

²¹⁶ Jn. 4:26.

Yet the power structures in western culture cannot allow that a woman who is powerless may have been freed from that same powerlessness through Jesus' intentional action and engagement. That interpretation would undermine the structure of the dominant culture that was, indeed, the very structure that was marginalizing and oppressing the woman by keeping her without agency in a non-married state.

Through a jubilee hermeneutical lens, however, the Samaritan woman is understood to be a disciple. She is the "I AM" in the world for her people" because she and Jesus are in relationship.²¹⁷ This woman offers a powerful example of what it looks like when a person is freed from oppression by Jesus: a witness to God's love for the world.

²¹⁷ Lewis, *John*, 65.

CHAPTER 6

SIGNIFICANCE OF A JUBILEE HOMILETIC

In *Vindicating the Vixens*, Sandra Glahn discusses what is “at stake” in reexamining scriptural texts that have historically been interpreted in ways that marginalized and oppressed women. Glahn writes,

Our own view of women reveals what we think God says about half the people on the planet. . . . Our perspective affects how we view power and how we see sex. If our views are based on faulty interpretations of Scripture, we will embrace a faulty view of God. Indeed, God’s very reputation is at stake if we misunderstand how to view those who image him.²¹⁸

Faithfully interpreting scripture through a lens that recognizes the freedom that Christ brings is significant because that work is part of how humanity understands, experiences, and shares God. Lidija Gunjevic puts it another way: “The way we see God influences the way we think and relate to ourselves and the world.”²¹⁹ If scriptural interpretation willingly and intentionally continues to overlook or dismiss aspects of God’s character and message, that interpretive work arguably becomes blasphemous and does great harm both to individual relationships and cultural norms and expectations.

²¹⁸ Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, 116.

²¹⁹ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 265.

Glahn describes the liberation she witnesses when texts are faithfully interpreted. She “has seen new life breathed into women who see with fresh eyes how the text values them—rather than criticizes, minimizes, or stereotypes them,” which leads her to the question “what *are* the truths and applications we’ve missed? . . . [T]ime and again, God’s heart for the silenced, the marginalized, the powerless, the Gentile, the outsider, was what had been missing.”²²⁰ There are limitless applications of God’s love for all of humanity contained in scripture. The practical application of a jubilee hermeneutic to lead to a jubilee homiletic matters for the world because it embodies God’s love in people who have been taught they do not deserve his love. In this process, a jubilee homiletic transforms people and communities and brings about the kingdom of God.

How Might Communities Be Transformed and Liberated by a Jubilee Homiletic?

Lidija Gunjevic describes jubilee hermeneutical work as an “ongoing transformation.”²²¹ While this thesis has focused on texts that have been interpreted in ways oppressive to women, the hope is this lens will be applied broadly so that every community experiences transformation and that all marginalized groups experience freedom from oppression. Texts that oppress one group of people, women for example, often oppress other groups as well. The Hagar text in Genesis 16 is an example. Miguel De La Torre points out that “Hagar suffered from classism (a slave), racism (an Egyptian

²²⁰ Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, 15-16.

²²¹ Gunjevic, *Jubilee in the Bible*, 265.

foreigner), and sexism (a woman raped by Abraham).²²² Many groups experience marginalization and oppression through interpretations of the same text.

The scope of this study is not broad enough to address all the ways a jubilee homiletic might transform narratives of race, age, socio-economic power, sexuality, or other constructs. It must suffice to assert that the liberation that comes with a jubilee homiletic is indeed ongoing and available to all. In an effort to envision the possibilities of liberation through a jubilee homiletic, however, the following are just two examples of how communities might experience freedom through a consistent practice of jubilee homiletics. One example remains firmly within the scope of transforming women's narratives in scripture, while the other briefly examines the potential for freedom for people in my congregational setting who are marginalized because of their age.

People Gifted with a Prophetic Voice

One of the challenges the church faces today is that it has not made room for and embraced people gifted with a prophetic voice. A jubilee homiletic offers a means for the church to engage in prophetic speech. By definition a prophetic voice is not one that makes people comfortable, but as preaching that frees people from oppression is embodied over generations, I believe the church will one day better tolerate prophetic voices.

This belief is a difficult concept to track and evaluate in the limited time of a doctoral research program. On a personal level, however, I have witnessed this transformation in the generations of my own family. I am the fifth-generation

²²² De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality*, 16.

clergyperson and four of those generations have been ordained Moravian clergy. While we are but one small part of the church, we have embodied generations of consistent preaching, theology, and study within one denomination, all grounded in careful, faithful scriptural interpretation. As each generation has passed, we have become increasingly vocal in working to bring about the year of the Lord's favor by preaching in ways that free people from oppression. We certainly do not do this perfectly, but our voices have grown and developed, from the first three generations of men serving the church to the most recent two generations of women.

Our oldest child, Evan, is an example of the changes I've seen in our family generations. When he was a freshman in high school, he was talking with a group of his friends. One of them told a misogynistic joke. Evan pointed out that it was not a respectful or appropriate way to talk about girls. His friend replied Evan needed to relax and declared this joke could be told about boys, too. Evan replied that nobody does tell a joke like that about boys, which is part of why it is misogynistic. A heated debate evidently ensued, with Evan leaving after declaring in anger that "you have all been desensitized to misogyny!"

Evan is able to identify oppression of women in seemingly harmless forms partly because he has grown up in a family that talks about it and has worked through the implications for generations. He had the courage and the confidence to address it immediately with his friends because he already knew how damaging and insidious such attitudes are to the well-being of women and men. Evan has heard the message of jubilee at home and from the pulpit his entire life. While he still has blind spots, as we all do, his ability to use his prophetic voice to add brick by brick to the foundation of a jubilee

world makes a difference. The challenge for the church is find the courage to welcome his prophetic voice. Imagine a world where Evan's response to a sexist joke was the norm, rather than the exception. Frequent, powerful prophetic voices that are part of daily culture is one of the new things that can be accomplished through a jubilee homiletic.

People Experiencing Ageism

In my own ministry context, I work with elderly individuals who are considered quite powerless by our culture. Indeed, the elders in our communities are often entirely overlooked, even as a group that experiences marginalization and oppression. A jubilee homiletic is as much needed in this context as in any other. All people have passions in life, most of which require physical freedom. One of the greatest challenges people face as their physical bodies begin to experience significant limitations is finding a renewed purpose. Past purpose often can no longer be fulfilled, but there is little support to explore new ones. Yet God certainly calls and sends his beloved children at all stages of life to love and serve God and others. A jubilee homiletic is one means of support to remind people who are in the later years of life that God has a purpose for them.

One of the residents with whom I work has passed the century mark. She was a pastor's wife her entire life and she dedicated herself and her family to serving others in Jesus' name. She said to me that she feels badly she can no longer be a help to others. "All I can do," she said, "is pray." I responded that prayer is really the most important way we can serve others. She did not initially see it that way, however, in part because secular and Christian culture today both tend to devalue the role prayer plays in serving others. Prayer is good and necessary, but it is not considered sufficient unto itself for service. Preaching that values non-physical contributions to the kingdom of God can aid

in freeing this demographic to live fully into the call God has for them. If a 100-year-old woman hears week after week that she is God's beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in this world, she can be free from the marginalization and oppression that comes with age.²²³ This liberation is one more potential outcome of a jubilee homiletic.

Challenges for this Homiletic

As we have just seen, one of the great challenges of preaching a jubilee homiletic to aid in transforming women's narratives in scripture is that it embodies a liberation that takes place over time. Other challenges exist as well, and the preacher employing a jubilee homiletic would do well to be aware of them. The following are just three potential challenges.

Individual Perspective

Inherent in this study is the reality that it is being undertaken by a white, educated, female American who benefits from privilege. I bring a specific perspective to my understanding of the need for a jubilee homiletic. Scripture and Jesus' own words are the starting place for my assertions, but those assertions are still made from my particular perspective. This truth applies to anyone who engages in the task of hermeneutics and practice homiletics. Sharon Ringe summarizes this idea clearly: “. . . the problem is that our own social location among the privileged muffles the images of liberation, so that we fail to be grasped by them, or else we recognize only those dimensions of the images that

²²³ David Lose, “Lectionary Texts for January 6, 2013,” *Dear Working Preacher*, [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org) from Luther Seminary, January 6, 2013, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1624>.

do not threaten us.”²²⁴ Individual perspectives, by definition, cannot encompass all aspects of a text and are limited in scope.

People are blinded to some degree by the power structure in which they exist, especially if they are themselves privileged to be near the top of the power hierarchy.

People are also limited by experience in understanding another’s perspective. In

Liberating Sexuality, Miguel De La Torre discusses this very point, highlighting the need to be open to different perspectives when preaching the Gospel message:

Insisting to read the text solely through the eyes of men violates the gospel message of liberation as women are forced to conform to patriarchal traditions that rob them of their dignity. Women who read the text with their own eyes are simply no longer willing to accept biblical interpretations constructed by men as normative for their lives. In short, as demonstrated in Matthew 19:3-9, Jesus becomes the model by which Christians read, interpret, and accept (or dismiss) verses that appear to justify oppressive social structures.²²⁵

In any hermeneutic or homiletic task it is important to recognize that there are aspects of our own privilege that may blind us to opportunities for freedom. The interpreter who preaches does well to remain open to learning from others’ perspectives and to approach the text with humility in order to preach faithfully the Gospel message of freedom from injustice and to avoid unintentionally limiting freedom, keeping Jesus always as the model for this work.

Subjective Nature of Interpretation

The subjective nature of interpretation is related to the challenge of individual perspective. Although a jubilee hermeneutic and jubilee homiletic are broadly applicable,

²²⁴ Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 14.

²²⁵ De La Torre. *Liberating Sexuality*, 13.

“interpretation is always subjective” and hermeneutical perspectives are indeed all “advocacy positions.”²²⁶ A circumstance could arise where freedom from oppression for one person may feel like oppression to another. It is beyond the scope of this study to delve deeply into that idea, but I suspect that with a jubilee homiletic, this issue would most likely happen when the group perpetuating the oppression is prevented from continuing to oppress others. Freedom from oppression for one person can mean that the person acting out the oppression may then feel oppressed when no longer benefitting from the power and resources that come with being the oppressor. A jubilee homiletic is challenging this way because “to identify oppression we need to have the courage to identify privilege.”²²⁷ When that courage is lacking, a jubilee homiletic will fall on deaf ears.

Furthermore, freedom is not a limited resource. Experiencing freedom does not mean that someone else must be oppressed. Indeed, one of the strengths of a jubilee homiletic is that it is broadly applicable across all perspectives so that people who are in power need not be threatened by the homiletic.

Taking into account the subjective nature of interpretation, it is also important to note that the jubilee perspective is not the only lens to use in scriptural interpretation and homiletics. This could be a challenge this study faces on a surface level, so it is important to highlight that the jubilee hermeneutical lens and a jubilee homiletic are well suited to employ alongside many perspectives and varied hermeneutical lenses. A jubilee lens is a

²²⁶ Tolbert, *Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, 117.

²²⁷ Elaine Neuenfeldt, “Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy and Other Systems of Oppression of Women,” in *International Review of Mission*, 104, no. 1 (April 2015): 20, at https://library.pcw.gov.ph/sites/default/files/Neuenfeldt-2015-International_Review_of_Mission.pdf, accessed January 25, 2020.

critical one to use in interpretive work in combination with other lenses, because any interpretation of scripture that leads to the oppression of others, people of any gender, race, socio-economic background, and ethnicity, is not the most faithful interpretation. If the message a preacher is sharing could create a feeling of marginalization or oppression, the preacher would do well to go back to the text and delve further into the hermeneutical task.

Prophetic Nature of a Jubilee Homiletic

Another challenge is that while a jubilee homiletic is a liberating homiletic, it is also a convicting one for those who are in power, because it embodies the need for change. A jubilee homiletic is often a prophetic homiletic. Leander Keck points to this very reality when he describes the preacher as a “prophet who bears witness to what he or she has heard in his or her priestly role.”²²⁸ However, if a listener currently benefits passively from the power structure he or she is part of, then it can be very difficult to hear the call to freedom.

In this sense, a jubilee homiletic may not resonate with every listener in the pew, which presents a challenge for a preacher who employs this homiletic. Mark Allan Powell discusses the challenges of this in terms of building empathy with the listeners:

. . . [empathy] is, in fact, one aspect of *point of view*, so assumptions about an audience’s empathy choices are as significant as those about other matters of perspective (values, beliefs, or commitments). Bottom line: a sermon that assumes a particular point of empathy for its intended effect will only achieve that effect for those who make the connection; others may construct a meaning outside the parameters of the preacher’s intent.²²⁹

²²⁸ Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 53-54.

²²⁹ Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit & Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 7.

Not all listeners will empathize with the urgency or the need for such a homiletic. Powell goes on to write that “ultimately we have no control over how people will respond to our words. Recognizing that lack of control can be liberating as well as frightening, but it does not relieve us of responsibility for doing what we can.”²³⁰ In other words, while it is necessary for a preacher to understand her or his context and speak to the listeners in such a way that the message will be conveyed as effectively as possible, this is a homiletic that functions out of a fundamental aspect of Jesus’ mission in this world and it is therefore a homiletic that can be used courageously and prophetically, even if it will not build empathy in all listeners.

²³⁰ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 8.

CHAPTER 7

TRANSFORMING WOMEN’S NARRATIVES: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

My initial interest in this topic grew out of my own anger and frustration at the prevalence of deeply rooted misogynistic structures across culture despite generations of women and men having already brought about significant change in matters of marginalization and oppression of women. While progress has undoubtedly been made and was hard-won, there is still much that needs to transform. The glass ceiling became very visible to me when I entered ministry, and I have bumped up against it continually since. My experience of God and his immeasurable love makes it impossible for me to imagine God’s kingdom is meant to be a place where people are marginalized or oppressed because of who God created them to be, so I began to look for ways to channel my rage into something theologically useful. This study advocating for preachers and congregations to embody a jubilee homiletic is the result of that effort.

The pulpit is one of the most public and frequent spaces in which religion and theology has the opportunity to interact in culture today and, therefore, preachers are significant agents in this process of liberation. A jubilee homiletic needs to be employed faithfully and consistently over a period of time and this will require enormous courage and intentionality from preachers. Jesus’ own words and mission in John 4 make it impossible to ignore the call that preaching must speak directly to narratives that perpetuate marginalization and oppression. Elaine Neuenfeldt argues that “. . . religion

and theology should interact in public spaces to help promote transformation of unjust and exclusive structures.”²³¹ Jesus spent his ministry striving to transform unjust and exclusive structures. As bearers of God’s Word, preachers are called to do the same.

My overarching hope is that this present work will offer one more “path of transformation” on the road map of “gender justice,” so that freedom continues to occur in the church as well as in culture.²³² This liberation does not “reside in powerful individuals—women or men—but in a collaborative joining of hands and collective efforts toward change.”²³³ As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said in reference to doing the work of justice for sanitation workers, “We need all of you.”²³⁴ King was speaking directly to preachers when he proclaimed this call to join together to lead the way to liberation. He is exactly right. One cannot bring about this kind of liberation alone and all preachers would do well to have the courage to preach jubilee.

We do not need only preachers, of course. We need entire congregations, all people. In the context of racial justice work, Will Willimon wrote, “Maybe one reason we go to church is to be given the grace to name our masters, to confess our servitude. When a preacher dares to tell the truth we’ve been avoiding, the preacher pays tribute to the power of Jesus Christ to enable naturally deceitful people to be truthful.”²³⁵ We are all

²³¹ Neuenfeldt, “Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy,” 24.

²³² Neuenfeldt, “Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy,” 23.

²³³ Neuenfeldt, “Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy,” 20.

²³⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968), YouTube audio, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixfwGLxRJU8>.

²³⁵ Will Willimon, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 39.

“naturally deceitful.” Many of us in churches today benefit from power structures that marginalize and oppress others, preachers and congregants alike. When we are “accountable to the Gospel,” however, we can come together in honesty and repentance and, with God’s grace, have the courage to identify ways to embody the posture of jubilee.²³⁶

Jubilee and Sight

As I engaged the exegetical process for the three texts in Chapter 5 (Gen. 3:1-24, Gen. 16:1-16, and Jn. 4:1-42) an insight became personally and theologically clear to me. All three of these texts examined in this study involve a lengthy conversation between God and a woman, conversations that are theologically profound and reveal much about what it means to be God’s child. In Gen. 3:1-24 Eve and Adam’s “eyes were opened” and their sight led to separation from God. In both Gen. 16:1-16 and Jn. 4:1-42, however, sight leads to connection, belonging, and relationship with God. While Eve and Adam’s sight led to a disordering of God’s creation, God can and does use sight to bring about a reordering of his creation. It appears that ever since Eve and Adam’s eyes were opened, God has been working to restore humanity’s original sight. In scripture, “seeing” is about coming to a restored relationship with God and others, rather than dwelling in the brokenness so evident in the marginalization and oppression in the world.

Through a messenger of the Lord, God comes to Hagar, sees her, and calls her by name. In turn, Hagar names God “*El Roi*,” or “God who sees.”²³⁷ God promises Hagar

²³⁶ Willimon, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?*, 39.

²³⁷ Gen. 16:13.

countless descendants as a means of freedom from the oppression she lives with daily. While we cannot dismiss the terror of God sending her back to be oppressed further, we do see the beginning of what it might mean to live in a rightly ordered world, a world that embodies the year of the Lord's favor so that all people are precious in others' sight, as well as God's sight. From a Christian perspective, this engagement between God and Hagar offers a glimpse of what will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

We see more fully what God's kingdom will be like with the ministry of Jesus in Jn. 4:1-42. Even the setting of this text points to the importance of sight. The woman draws water from a well that is unnecessarily far away and at the brightest time of day. She is out at the well when people would be most able to see. This is a particular contrast with the previous chapter's story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night and being unable to see Jesus.²³⁸ This emphasis on vision and sight is no accident in a text as well-crafted as John's Gospel.

As Jesus and the Samaritan woman engage in deeper conversation and become more intimately connected, Jesus asks a very vulnerable question of the woman, and she responds honestly. When Jesus reveals to the woman how well he already knows her, the woman responds to Jesus, "I see that you are a prophet."²³⁹ Jesus, in response to her "seeing" of him, eventually welcomes her to see him as he is, the Messiah. Through their mutual "seeing" Jesus models what it means to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. In doing so, Jesus transforms the "seeing" that is the result of mistrusting God that occurs in Gen. 3:1-24. The Samaritan woman in Jn. 4:1-42 sees the Good News of Jesus Christ, not

²³⁸ Lewis, *John*, 45.

²³⁹ Jn. 4:19.

the fruits of disobedience and mistrust and responds by leaving her water jar at the well and going to her community to herself proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, inviting them to "come and see."²⁴⁰ Her actions express freedom because she has been transformed by her encounter with the divine.

At the heart of transformation is the wisdom and the ability to see other perspectives. At the heart of jubilee is the ability to see all people as beloved children of God. This ability reflects the ethical posture of jubilee that defines our relationships with one another. These texts teach us that by living with a posture of jubilee, we can see the needs of others and proclaim the year of the Lord. Jesus Christ embodies this liberation and, through his saving work, restores humanity to God.

Hoped-for Outcomes

This study has been advocating for a jubilee homiletic which embodies "emancipatory visions of community" so that such a vision of freedom is not "merely an elusive dream."²⁴¹

In their chapter "Making Trouble and Making Good News," Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Rebecca Chop summarize the overarching hope I have for this study:

We deliberately or unconsciously shift the way we interpret [the text]. We redirect the flow of meaning until it is no longer oppressive or corrupt, either to us or others. And in so doing, we find new paths—new ways of reading and interpreting—that lead to value and wholeness. Theologically, we might say that we have confronted sin by deciding not to take the path that leads to brokenness.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Jn. 4:29.

²⁴¹ Claassens and Sharp, *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible*, 7.

²⁴² Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Rebecca Chop, "Making Trouble and Making Good News," in *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence, ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 85.

My hope is that preachers will continue to make consistent interpretive choices that lead us on the path to freedom and wholeness rather than oppression and brokenness, thereby transforming the experience of women in scripture.

Healing

One hoped-for outcome of this study is that all people will experience healing of the wounds caused by marginalization and abuse that they have experienced throughout their lives. Part of that work of healing will happen when preachers are courageous in speaking honestly about where we have been with this issue. When preachers do not address the oppression that has been perpetuated in certain texts through hermeneutical choices, preachers are giving tacit consent to oppression. Women need to hear that the fundamental things they have been taught about women and their relation to God and men and the world are not always scripturally based. Healing comes through a renewed and re-visioned understanding of women's basic worth as beloved children of God.

Reclaiming

As healing occurs through jubilee preaching, my hope is that women will reclaim the text as ones that are meant for them, that God is meant for them. As we saw in Genesis 16 and John 4, God deeply desires to be in relationship with women, not just with men. God "saw" Hagar and the Samaritan woman, and they saw God. In this "seeing," God transformed their lives from ones rooted in separation from God and subject to human oppression, to lives that are rooted in intimate connection to God and free from oppression. My hope is that women will reclaim this narrative and "unlearn the

lies we learned from [our ancestors].”²⁴³ This aspect of transformation, like healing, will take place over a period of time, but it is an important part of proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor.

Conclusion

To conclude this study, I would share with women and girls everywhere the following: please know you can question the stories you are told about yourself, even if you hear them in church. If a narrative diminishes or marginalizes you in any way, set it aside firmly. It is important to recognize its power, but it is not necessary to believe it is true. To men and boys, please know that you can and should challenge narratives and structures that marginalize and oppress women. To all marginalized and oppressed people, God loves you and desires you to live with freedom and joy. Do not believe a narrative that declares God causes you to suffer because of who God made you to be. Historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez says “Where we come from matters deeply, and it shapes the present, . . . and how we understand the past, can shape our future.”²⁴⁴ We must know our past in order to transform our reality and build a future that is free from oppression.

²⁴³ Fred Clark, “Bad Reputation: The Right Subject, the Wrong Question,” *Patheos* (blog), February 4, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2019/02/04/bad-reputation-the-right-subject-the-wrong-question/>, accessed January 25, 2020, 3.

²⁴⁴ Audie Cornish and Kelly Lytle Hernandez, “Rebel Historian Who Reframes History Receives Macarthur ‘Genius’ Grant,” interview on National Public Radio’s audio program “All Things Considered,” September 25, 2019, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.kunc.org/post/rebel-historian-who-reframes-history-receives-macarthur-genius-grant>.

APPENDIX A

Jubilee Sermon: Genesis 3:1-24

When I was a freshman in high school, my boyfriend took me to see “The Phantom of the Opera” for my 15th birthday. He was a year older than I was, so he had a driver’s license. My parents took a deep breath and allowed me the space to grow. My boyfriend and I got in the car, went to the show in our best 1990s church clothes, enjoyed the performance immensely and felt very grown up through the whole experience. We can handle this adult life! It’s not really so hard!

But then we started to drive home. We discovered pretty quickly that we had not accounted for one major part of the day. We had no idea how to get home. The one-way streets of Minneapolis meant we couldn’t retrace our route even if we had remembered it. We didn’t have GPS or cell phones or any other help except for a paper map. Yes. A paper map, which is actually a pretty effective tool. We grew up a little more than expected or desired that day, finding a shaded neighborhood street, pulling out the map, and teaching ourselves quickly how to read it. We got home just fine.

I wonder if Eve and Adam felt something similar as they stood at the edge of the Garden of Eden, looking out over the new world they would inhabit. Where in the world were they going? How would they get there? Was God really a guide they could trust to get them where they needed to be? I imagine they did not really enjoy this part of growing up.

How did Eve and Adam reach this point of new beginnings? We first learn of Eve and Adam's existence in Genesis 1 and 2. These two texts were written by different people, referred to as the Priestly writer and the Jahwistic writer. In Genesis 1 we read the Priestly writer's account of creation where man and woman were made by God simultaneously: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. . . ." ²⁴⁵ Eve and Adam were birthed by God with a purpose and calling in this world.

In Genesis 2 the Jahwistic writer offers a second narrative of the creation of humankind. Gen. 2:7, 18, 21-23 states

“. . . then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. . . The Lord God said 'it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman," for she was taken out of man.'"

These texts tell us the story of Eve and Adam's birth, albeit a unique birth.

Genesis 1 and 2 have been interpreted by many years as prescriptive of the relationship between women and men. These birth stories, however, are primarily about humanity's relationship with God and what it means to be God's children. One pastor observes that these creation stories express "the idea that the most important difference exists between God and creation, not between male and female. Creation depends on

²⁴⁵ Gen. 1:27-28a.

God; this is the primary theological relationship concerning creation.”²⁴⁶ Genesis 1-3 teach us that we are God’s beloved children, created for a purpose in this world.

Genesis 3 invites us into the story of Eve and Adam maturing as God’s children in the garden of Eden and finding God’s purpose for them. This garden is a safe and protected place where they can grow up. Like most parents, God gives Eve and Adam some boundaries to their growing up years. God tells them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We tell our children similar things. “Don’t touch a stove!” or “Don’t cross the street alone!” We put up gates at the top of steep flights of stairs when our children are little. These are all actions that will hurt children if they do them too soon. But they do eventually do them. As adults we touch stoves all the time. We cross the street alone. We can navigate stairs without needing a gate to protect us. As we grow and mature we no longer need the safety of those boundaries.

But when we are children we need these boundaries. Like good parents do, God gave Eve and Adam the boundary of not eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A child would find the knowledge of good and evil too overwhelming to comprehend, so a child should not eat the fruit of that tree. Yet children universally push against these kinds of boundaries, and Eve and Adam are no exception. The serpent challenges Eve and Adam to question God’s intention behind his rule for his children and his children have matured enough to question and cross that boundary God has put in place. Crossing this boundary does have consequences, which God tells Eve and Adam about, but God does not curse them as God curses the serpent.

²⁴⁶ Neuenfeldt, *Gender Justice Policy*, 4.

The boundary was in place for a reason, but in order for Eve and Adam to go out into the world and be “fruitful and multiply” they needed to leave the garden. In other words, in order for this first couple to do what God had called them to do, they needed to leave the safety of the garden and engage in an adult life with all the joy and goodness alongside the hardship and evil.

As we grow, we find it hard to process that loss of innocence, that growing understanding that evil in the world is real and present. Boundaries are set by our parents so that we do not experience this kind of loss of innocence until we are ready to cope with it.

My boyfriend and I experienced that dose of reality when we were sitting in that car lost on the side of a city street, realizing that in the adult world, a person is responsible for her or his own navigation. This was not a terribly profound loss of innocence, but it was nonetheless a loss in the sense that it marked a before and after in my mind about my own responsibility in the world. The burden of responsibility also came with the freedom to experience new and wonderful things in the world like the opportunity to attend a fantastic musical. Eve and Adam ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it was the next stage in their growth.

We are all children of God, created in his image, capable of profound and deep goodness. We are true and lasting friends to others. We sacrifice personally for the benefit of someone else. We cling to Jesus with a stubborn faith that believes love overcomes all injustice. We fight with passion for the vulnerable in our communities. We show relentless beauty and courage in the ways we face our personal vulnerabilities. This process of growing up is one where we take into ourselves all of these truths and begin to

see the rough shape of the clay that God is molding each of us into. We continue to grow and mature throughout our lives. We experience the fullness of all these things because God called us to go out into the world, to leave the safety of our garden, and “fill the earth.”²⁴⁷ We cannot fulfill this mission by remaining children in a safe little garden.

If you have heard this Genesis 3 text as one that subordinates women to men’s authority, or if you have been taught that women are the source of sin in this world, or if you have been told that your belovedness is not as great as a man’s because you are a woman then please hear this: you are God’s beloved child. Like all children you have grown and matured in ways that God has called you to do. There will be pain and challenges that come with this reality. There will also be much goodness and love. God gave Eve and Adam a purpose in this world and he has given you a purpose, too. Amen.

Jubilee Sermon: Genesis 16:1-16

In 1997, Natalie Imbruglia wrote a song titled “Torn,” that addresses the difference between illusions and reality. She sings, “So I guess the fortune teller’s right/Should have seen just what was there/and not some holy light/There’s just so many things/that I can’t touch, I’m torn/I’m all out of faith/This is how I feel/I’m cold and I’m ashamed/Bound and broken on the floor/Illusion never changed into something real/I’m wide awake and I can see/The perfect sky is torn.”²⁴⁸

This song could have been sung by Hagar. Hagar is a woman whose reality bumps up against a barely birthed illusion. In this illusion, Hagar sees the possibility for a

²⁴⁷ Gen. 1:28.

²⁴⁸ Scott Cutler and Anne Preven, “Torn,” song lyrics sung by Natalie Imbruglia, Polygram Music Publishing, Ltd., 1997, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics.natalieimbruglia/torn/html>.

new kind of relationship with Sarai, a relationship not based on an imbalance of power, or abuse, or hierarchy, or the “way things are,” or one that leaves Hagar bound and broken, but a relationship based on mutuality. Hagar’s illusion isn’t shared by the people around her, but it is shared by God.

We first learn of Hagar’s illusion, or vision, when she learns of her pregnancy, a pregnancy itself conceived in abuse and violence, loss of agency and powerlessness. It’s important to have some historical context here to understand how this situation could even happen. It was common in Abram, Sarai, and Hagar’s time for slaves to be used to provide children for wives of wealthy men who didn’t otherwise have children. Sarai sending Hagar to Abram so she would conceive and bear Sarai a child to call her own was part of the cultural norm at the time.

Pause a moment and consider how this cultural reality might feel to Hagar, even if it really was the way things were done in her time and place. Just because something is culturally accepted doesn’t mean that it doesn’t hurt someone or that it is okay. Regardless of cultural acceptability, Sarai’s actions are ones of abuse and contempt for the very humanity of Hagar.

We first learn that Hagar does indeed become pregnant with the child who we will soon meet as Ishmael, a son of Abram who is part of God’s promise for many descendants. It’s at the moment Hagar discovers her pregnancy that we learn that Hagar’s mistress, “Sarai, was lowered in her esteem.”²⁴⁹ Often this text is translated as “Hagar began to despise her mistress” (Gen. 16:4 NIV) or “looked with contempt on her

²⁴⁹ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 12.

mistress” (Gen. 16:4 NRSV). But it just as accurate, arguable more so, to say that her mistress was “lowered in her esteem.”²⁵⁰

That’s very different, critically different. Saying that Hagar is the one acting with contempt leads to an interpretation that Hagar is at fault for Sarai’s abuse of her. But the text says Sarai is the subject and that she is simply lowered in Hagar’s esteem, which is an interpretation that actually fits well with what we know historically. For one thing, when a concubine or servant became pregnant with a master’s child, she literally would be raised in the culture’s hierarchical system while the wife without a child would literally be lowered. This can be simply a descriptive reality of the way things were, rather than a commentary on Hagar’s character.

But there is yet another way we can interpret this more accurate translation, and it is one where we begin to get a glimpse of the way things are in God’s world. In these few words, we begin to see Hagar’s illusion take shape. In this moment, as Phyllis Trible writes, “Hagar acquires a new vision of Sarai. Hierarchical blinders disappear. The exalted mistress decreases while the lowly maid increases. Not hatred but a reordering of the relationship is the point.”²⁵¹

Hagar has actually seen a new possibility, a new story for how she and Sarai can be in relationship, how power between them can be redistributed, how they can both live life abundantly as beloved children of God. Hagar is rewriting the story. She sees a new possibility, not that Sarai is diminished but that she and Sarai are both valuable, able to live in mutual relationship with one another.

²⁵⁰ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 12.

²⁵¹ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 12.

As beautifully compelling as it is, however, Hagar's illusion doesn't change into something real at this point because Sarai, from her position of power, does not accept this new vision. We are told she not only rejects the illusion, but reinforces the existing power structure by abusing Hagar terribly.

Over the years of scriptural translation and interpretation, we've tried to clean this up a bit and say simply that Sarai has afflicted Hagar. But Sarai does more than that. The harsh treatment she afflicts Hagar with is described by the same word used for how the Hebrew people will suffer in Egypt when they are slaves. The irony is not lost that two Hebrew people first treated their Egyptian slave with the same kind of abuse their descendants will suffer so terribly generations later at the hands of Egyptians. This violence against a pregnant woman is the kind of abuse that threatens Hagar's very life.

In the face of Sarai's abuse, Hagar uses the power available to her to save her life and life of her baby. She flees into the wilderness to escape the nightmare of her reality and the death of her nascent illusion. She pauses at a spring near Shur, which is just at the Egyptian border. Hagar has almost made it home. And it is at this spring in the wilderness, a place of life and power and sustenance that a couple of things happen: God catches up to Hagar, God sees her, and Hagar's original illusion is resurrected to start to become something real.

When the messenger of God catches up to Hagar, he asks her where she came from. Her answer is, "I am fleeing my mistress Sarai" (Gen. 16:8 NRSV). She is no longer given by one woman with power to a man with power, subject to their whims and the way things are. She is choosing to run away from the violence and abuse against her

body and her baby's body. She is no longer acted upon, but the one acting. She has fled, and I am thankful that she is free.

But then God asks her through his messenger where she is going. Hagar doesn't seem to answer that question at all, let alone with the kind of power and certainty she answered his first question. Instead, God answers that question for her. God takes over her voice.

I'll be honest. At this point, God and I are circling each other somewhat skeptically. This puts up all my red flags. I really want to hear that God is going to send Hagar on the rest of her journey safely. I want to hear that Hagar arrives back to her own hometown, lives with her family, gives birth to Ishmael and lives a long life with many children and grandchildren surrounding her, never again suffering abuse. That's what I want to hear.

But that doesn't happen. Instead of sending her on to her family and safety, God tells her to go back. That is why this text is sometimes referred to as a text of terror. God tells Hagar to go back to abuse, to violence, to her body being subject to the whims of others. God doesn't even give Hagar a reason to return. He tells her to go back and *be afflicted*. This is wrong. This makes me furious. And it should, because being forced to go back to a situation of abuse and suffering is NOT what God wants for any of us. No person should suffer that way.

It is in the midst of this inexplicable, contradictory direction that God does something else. He promises to change Hagar's illusion of mutual relationship into something real. Yes, God does this in a future sense by bringing Hagar into the covenant relationship that he already had with Abram and through the promise he makes to Hagar

of her own son providing her with many descendants, but he does it more immediately, too, because while Sarai may not see Hagar's illusion of a life of mutual relationships rooted in the beloved-ness of each person, by the end of these verses God makes clear that God does see that vision. This vision or illusion isn't going to become reality right away, but God gives Hagar a powerful taste of what it will be like by himself entering into mutual relationship with her. God sees Hagar and calls her by name. Hagar responds by seeing God and calling God by name, too. El-Roi, God sees.

Do you see that? God embodies Hagar's illusion of mutual relationship so that it becomes real, even though the people around Hagar can't see that possibility. Hagar is the only person in the text who lives her envisioned reality of mutual relationship, a reality that up until now in this hierarchical and power-hungry world has been only an illusion for everyone, and Hagar is the one who lives this reality of God's world by seeing God himself and exchanging names with him. Hagar's life does not go on to look the way we want it to look, but it does go on with the promise of this new reality.

We are all invited to participate with God and Hagar in making a new world, of embodying illusions until they become reality. We have the power to choose to see new visions that privilege all people as God's beloved children with whom we can be in mutual relationship. What would it look like in your life if you entertained an illusion and embodied it?

Hagar's song needs to be rewritten: "So I guess our God who sees is right. I can look for what could be there in the holy light. There are so many things I can see. I am full of faith, this is how I feel, I'm strong and I'm free, filled with new visions, because

illusion does change into something real. I'm wide awake and I can see that God has a name and is called 'I see.'" Amen.

Jubilee Sermon: John 4:1-42

Picture this scene with me. Its mid-day and you realize you need to replenish your household's water. You don't live in 2017 where you can use the fridge dispenser for water AND ice or can run to Target and get a case of 24 bottles for \$2.99. Instead, you live almost 2000 years ago in a town in Samaria.

It's hot, it's dry, it's dusty, it's noon, and getting water is not a quick or easy task. You head out to the well about a mile from your home. Even though the sun is beating down on your head, it's worth the walk because the well is fed by an underground stream, so it's cleaner and fresher water. It's also Jacob's well, the common ancestor you and your people share with the Jewish people. It's too bad that your ancestors split into two kingdoms, making you enemies ever since. The well has a lot of history that you think is pretty interesting. It's called Jacob's well because it's the place Jacob met his wife, Rachel. A well is also where Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebecca met, and even where Zipporah met her husband, Moses. A lot of relationships start at a well!

As you approach the well, you realize there is a man sitting there all alone. He's clearly a Jew and there's no way you can be alone with a man or talk to him. Drawing your water from the well and engaging this weary looking man would put you in a pretty vulnerable position. It's just the two of you out here, and not only was it unacceptable for men and women to talk to each other alone, Jews and Samaritans certainly didn't engage in any good way!

But then you hear him say to you, “Give me a drink.” You might feel sorry for him, or you might just decide there’s no way you’re walking that mile home without water, but for whatever reason, you decide to ask him what in the world he’s thinking by asking you for a drink. And before you know it, you are engaged in an encounter that leads to a deep relationship that will change your life.

Pretty quickly it strikes you that this relationship is a mutual one. You both need each other. This man has asked you for water and is completely dependent on you to help him with his thirst. He doesn’t even have a water jar! But he makes it very clear that he has water you need, too, and he can provide it. It’s a living water, springing up to eternal life. That sounds pretty good. You keep talking with this man.

Your conversation becomes more personal, as he asks you to go get your husband. For a second you consider backing off from the conversation, filling your water jar, and taking off for home, because that question could leave you vulnerable, too. You don’t have a husband, and if you tell this man that, then it could be really dangerous to be alone at this remote well with him. But he’s been kind so far and you are intrigued and want to get to know him better. So you are honest. You decide to reveal a deep part of who you are, and tell him you have no husband.

This man’s response shares a lot about who he is, too, and it’s pretty astonishing! Turns out he’s a prophet! He knows all about you, your situation, and tells you that you’ve been married five times and the man you are living with now isn’t your husband. He sees and knows this deep pain in your life. You are not, as many people have assumed, a woman of loose morals. In your time and place you would have been in all these relationships because each of those husbands would have either died or divorced

you. You were likely living with a husband's brother in a levirate marriage so that you were protected and had a home. You are genuinely astonished that you and this man have shared so much of yourselves that you would reveal these things to each other.

You were definitely not expecting this when you left your home with an empty water jar, but you are so glad you decided to step into this encounter with him. You decide to go even deeper with some of your burning theological questions. This prophet answers, although you still aren't too sure you understand everything he is talking about.

But then the moment comes that changes your life. You and this man at the well have reached a deep and genuine mutuality in your relationship, and this man lets you see the fully divine in him. Just as you have shown him the deepest parts of who you are, he shows you the deepest part of who he is. He reveals to you in a heart stopping moment that he is the Messiah. He is God. This moment stops you in your tracks. Utter silence permeates the heavy air around the man, this Jesus, as he declares for the first time--"I AM." Sit in that silence for a minute. Can you hear the sound that revelation makes in your heart and in your spirit? Can you hear the invitation that Jesus is offering you? This man, this Jesus, that you have been sharing yourself with, deepening your relationship with, is the Messiah—or at least you think he could be.

The disciples feel this silence, too, since they arrive at this very moment and, despite their own astonishment at seeing Jesus talking alone with you, say nothing. They cannot speak into this holy moment of knowing and being known in genuine relationship with the Messiah. This relationship has brought you to a point of belief, not of full understanding, but of belief.

In the thick silence, you leave your water jar at the well, along with Jesus and the dumbfounded disciples, and go invite the people in your town to come and encounter Jesus, too. You invite them to be in relationship with the Messiah, and you will never be the same again.

Jesus has revealed himself to you. And you. And you. And you. Jesus invites each and every one of us, he invites the whole world, into this kind of a mutual relationship with him. “Give me a drink,” Jesus invites us. “Give me a drink.” Amen.

Bibliography

- Adeyemo, Tokunboh. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006.
- Amos, Clare. "Genesis." *Global Bible Commentary*. Daniel Patte, ed. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- Arbesmann, Rudolph, Sister Emily Joseph, and Edwin A. Quain, trans. *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*. The Fathers of the Church 40. New York, NY: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959.
- Association of Religion Data Archives. *Congregational QuickStats: Gender of Religious Leader*. Accessed September 17, 2019.
http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_236.asp.
- Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Pickerington, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2014.
- Bal, Mieke. *Lethal Love*. Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Barth, Karl. *Homiletics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.
- Bellis, Alice Ogden. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Bergsma, John S. *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*. Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2006.
- Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Shame-less: A Sexual Reformation*. New York: Convergent, 2019.
- Calvin, John. *Genesis*. Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, eds. The Crossway Classic Commentaries. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001.
- Calvin, John. *John*. Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, eds. The Crossway Classic Commentaries. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.
- Claassens, L. Juliana M., and Carolyn J. Sharp. *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*. T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017.
- Clark, Fred. "Bad Reputation: The Right Subject, the Wrong Question." *Patheos* (blog). February 4, 2019. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2019/02/04/bad-reputation-the-right-subject-the-wrong-question/>.
- Clines, David J.A. *What Does Eve Do to Help?: And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990.

- Cornish, Audie and Kelly Lytle Hernandez. "Rebel Historian Who Reframes History Receives Macarthur 'Genius' Grant." Interview on National Public Radio's program "All Things Considered." September 25, 2019, accessed February 10, 2020. <https://www.kunc.org/post/rebel-historian-who-reframes-history-receives-macarthur-genius-grant>.
- Cutler, Scott and Anne Preven. "Torn." Song Lyrics sung by Natalie Imbruglia. Polygram Music Publishing, Ltd., 1997. <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics.natalieimbruglia/torn/html>.
- De la Torre, Miguel. *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016.
- Ellis, Katrina. "UC Davis Study of California Women Business Leaders" (PDF) UC Regents, 2006. Accessed January 31, 2020. <https://gsm.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ucdaviswomenstudyfull.pdf>.
- Engel, Beverly. "Why Don't Victims of Sexual Harassment Come Forward Sooner?" *Psychology Today*. Accessed February 7, 2019. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-compassion-chronicles/201711/why-dont-victims-sexual-harassment-come-forward-sooner>.
- Ferguson, Duncan S. *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1986.
- Forth, Sarah S. *Eve's Bible: A Woman's Guide to the Old Testament*. 1st ed. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008.
- Fretheim, Terence E. *New International Bible Commentary*, volume 1. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- . *New International Bible Commentary*, volume 2. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Gench, Frances Taylor. *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- Glahn, Sandra, ed. *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017.
- Gohdes-Luhman, Amy. *Women Written: Eve, Jezebel, and the Shunammite*. Paper presented at the 10th Moravian Women's Conference. Northfield, MN, June 27-30, 2007.

- Gunjevic, Lidija. *Jubilee in the Bible: Using the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann to Find a New Hermeneutic*. Biblical Interpretation Series Volume 156. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- Hollingworth, Miles. *Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Houston, Walter J. *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*. T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2006.
- Jacobson, Karl. "Numbers." In *The Pentateuch: Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition*. 211-231. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page, Jr., Matthew J.M. Coomber, eds. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016.
- Keck, Leander E. *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1978.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. *I've Been to the Mountaintop*. At Bishop Charles Mason Temple. Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixfwGLxRJU8>.
- Levy, Karyne. "Yahoo's Diversity Numbers are Just as Terrible as the Rest of the Tech Industry's." *Business Insider*. June 17, 2014. Accessed January 31, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/yahoo-workplace-diversity-numbers-2014-6>.
- Lewis, Karoline M. *John*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014.
- Lose, David. "Lectionary Texts for January 6, 2013," *Dear Working Preacher*. Workingpreacher.org from Luther Seminary. January 6, 2013. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1624> (accessed January 25, 2020).
- Masci, David. "The Divide Over Ordaining Women." In *Pew Research*, September 9, 2014, accessed January 25, 2020, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/09/the-divide-over-ordaining-women/>.
- Mayfield, D.L. "Claims of Sexual Immorality Have Been Used to Diminish or Discredit Female Religious Figures for Ages. Here's How—and Why." In *The Lily*, April 20, no year listed, accessed January 24, 2020, at <https://www.thelily.com/claims-of-sexual-immorality-have-been-used-to-diminish-or-discredit-female-religious-figures-for-ages-heres-how-and-why/>.
- McClintock Fulkerson, Mary and Rebecca Chop. "Making Trouble and Making Good News." In *Preaching as Testimony*, 81-108, Anna Carter Florence, ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

- McKenzie, John L. *Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. 1st ed. The Anchor Bible, V. 20. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968.
- Meyers, Carol L. "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel." In *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, 289-306, Norman K. Gottwald, ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983.
- Nelson, Alissa Jones. *Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Book of Job with Edward Said*. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2012.
- Neuenfeldt, Elaine. *Gender Justice Policy*. In *Lutheran World Federation*, 2013, at https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf.
- Neuenfeldt, Elaine. "Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy and Other Systems of Oppression of Women." In *International Review of Mission*, 104, no. 1, April 2015, at https://library.pcw.gov.ph/sites/default/files/Neuenfeldt-2015-International_Review_of_Mission.pdf.
- Newsom, Carol A., Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Expanded ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- O'Connor, Kathleen M. "Abraham's Unholy Family: Mirror, Witness, Summons." In *Journal for Preachers*, ATLA 21.1 (2001): 26-34.
- Pagels, Elaine. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1988.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit & Pew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- Ringe, Sharon H. *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- . *Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- . *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*[o]logy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.
- Simpson, J.A. and E.S.C. Weiner. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

- Smith, Sarah. "Baptist Leader Told Victim It Was 'Good' She Was Raped: Lawyer Says," in *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 2, 2018, accessed January 25, 2020, at <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/fort-worth/article212356699.html>.
- Sugirtharajah, R. S. *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. "Defining the Problem." In *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*. Semeia 28. Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1983.
- Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978.
- . *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Tubbs Tisdale, Leonora. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.
- Wambach, Abby. *Wolfpack: How to Come Together, Unleash Our Power, and Change the Game*. New York: Celadon Books, 2019.
- Weems, Renita J. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.
- Wenham, Gordon. "Genesis." In *Word Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-15*. John D.W. Watts, ed. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1994.
- Williams, Maxine. "Building a More Diverse Facebook." Facebook, June 25, 2014. Accessed January 31, 2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2014/06/building-a-more-diverse-facebook/>.
- Willimon, Will. *Who Lynched Willie Earle?* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017.
- Woods, Susanne, ed. *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, Inc., 1993.