

## **The Impact of Feminist Exegesis on the Academia Religious Communities and Institutions in Germany**

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### **Introduction**

#### *A German Protestant perspective*

To write this article would be a major undertaking in any part of the world, as many projects and institutional changes have been inspired by world-wide feminist biblical studies in academic and religious institutions throughout the 20th century. Therefore I will only give some examples pertaining to my specific religious and scholarly background.

As a German Protestant theologian I naturally have a Protestant-Christian perspective, but will also include ecumenical perspectives as well as aspects of the inter-religious dialogue in Germany<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Feminist Exegesis*

Feminist exegesis (as we all know) varies greatly and is dependent on its cultural and religious context.

Because of this I will give my definition: feminist exegesis is part and reflection of a movement which intends to change androcentric and kyriarchal structures in academia, religious communities and society in general to free them from gender-bias. The vision is to establish a new paradigm of bible studies which puts justice at its center. This implies: gender, racial, sexual, social und economic justice, ecological awareness and respect for people with different religious backgrounds. Feminist exegesis is from its very roots ecumenical in nature and the parallels between the different religious backgrounds are always visible. The different theories of feminist biblical studies reflect different regional and historical traditions of feminism and theology. As the position of women in different religious communities is also quite different this has an impact on feminist biblical studies in these communities.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Women in Religious Communities and Academia*

More than 50% of all church members are women.<sup>3</sup> Protestant women have been ordained – albeit with different rights than men - since the 1930s and with full equal rights since the middle of the 1970s. Although the number of women studying theology is growing (in 2009

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<sup>1</sup> In my article I will use material which is presented in the book *“Feministische Theologie: Initiative, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte”* of which I am co-editor and which was published in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Renate JOST, „Feministisch-exegetische Hermeneutiken des Ersten Testaments“, in: *Lesarten der Bibel – Untersuchungen zu einer Theorie der Exegese des Alten Testaments* (ed, H. Utzschneider / E. Blum, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2006), 255–276.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the newest studies (December 31, 2007) by the Evangelical Church in Germany the membership numbers for women vary between 61,1% in Saxony-Anhalt and 52,0% in the Reformed Church.

more than 50%) there are still fewer female ministers than men. In 2007 there was an average of about 31.8% female ministers in the different Protestant churches. Women are still especially underrepresented in leadership positions. The four main departments of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) are headed by seven men and one woman. Although eight men and seven women are representatives on the National Council of the EKD, it is headed by two men. Only two out of twenty-two bishops or church presidents of the Evangelical churches are women.<sup>4</sup>

The situation in the smaller German Old Catholic (*Altkatholisch*) and Episcopal churches is comparable to that of the German Protestants. Women have been ordained since 1996. In the Roman Catholic church women in influential positions are limited to non-clerical assignments and women's organizations.

The first female rabbi in modern history was German: Regina Jonas. She, along with innumerable other Jews, was killed in Auschwitz and as a result of this carnage German-Jewish life disintegrated and moved to Israel and the USA. In the past several decades Germany has experienced a renaissance of Jewish life and there are again female rabbis within egalitarian communities. In 1995 Bea Wyler started her work in Oldenburg, Braunschweig und Delmenhorst as the first female Rabbi in Germany in the post WWII era.

The various Muslim communities are not centrally organized as are the Jewish and Christian communities, but there do exist some women's groups with feminist leanings.

Although more than 50% of all students in Cultural Studies in 2010 are women (compared to 30% in the 1970s) only 15% of their professors are women.

## **The impact of feminist biblical studies**

### *International beginnings<sup>5</sup>*

Despite this still existing situation of inequality between men and women in religious communities and academia much has been achieved beginning in the 1970s – and inspired by feminist biblical studies.

First impulses came from Mary Daly's "Beyond God the Father" (1973), the consultation on the subject of sexism at the Ecumenical Council of Churches in 1974 in Berlin and the discussion of biblical texts from a feminist perspective on a grassroots level. The first German publication of Elisabeth Moltman's „Ein eigener Mensch werden: Frauen um Jesus“(Becoming an Independent Individual: Women around Jesus), inspired initial enthusiasm among many church-going women and thereafter initiated critical discussions and research. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking book "In Memory of Her" (1983; German 1988) and her works on feminist hermeneutic, as well as Luise Schottroff's feminist social exegesis influenced women in religious groups as well as in academia. Since the middle of the 1980s innumerable books on feminist biblical studies have been published. At the end of the 1980s Jewish feminist biblical interpretations also began to appear. Pnina Nave Levinson (Heidelberg)<sup>6</sup> and Judith Plaskow (New York)<sup>7</sup> were among the most famous. The

<sup>4</sup> Maria Jepsen as the first Lutheran Bishop 1992; Ilse Junkermann as of 2009 in Thuringia.

<sup>5</sup> See also Renate JOST, Einführung, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 13–21.

<sup>6</sup> Pnina Navè LEVINSON, *Eva und ihre Schwestern. Perspektiven einer jüdisch-feministischen Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1992); *IBID.*, *Esther erhebt ihre Stimme. Jüdische Frauen beten* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1993); *IBID.*, *Was wurde aus Saras Töchtern? Frauen im Judentum* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1989).

results of feminist biblical interpretation enable readers, for example, to enjoy a new perspective on the story of creation. They are also helpful in analyzing power structures, institutional oppression as well as injustice in relations between the sexes, as well as in reflecting on one's own religious biography and creating a new understanding of one's own cultural role. Some interpretations were also helpful in integrating feminist biblical studies into existing organizations. Others inspired initiatives on a grassroots level. In the following passage I will describe some of them.

## Initiatives and Publications

### *Schlangenbrut*<sup>8</sup>

In May of 1983 the first issue of *Schlangenbrut* (Snake Brood) a journal for women interested in religious subjects was published. As in the early 1980s there were only very limited possibilities for biblical feminists to publish their writings this journal offered them excellent opportunities. From the journal's very beginning certain special editions concentrated on feminist biblical interpretation. The first special edition in 1999 by Sabine Bäuerle and Elisabeth Müller was about eulogies from a feminist biblical perspective. The second special edition of that year was in honor of Leonie Renk whose work focused on intercultural and inter-religious bibliodrama. The third special edition was published by the Ag "Feminismus und Kirche" (Syndicate "Feminism and the Church") in honor of the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In this context a collection of articles was also published where the feminist liberation theory of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was presented. Women wrote about how it had influenced their personal and professional lives and how feminist exegesis could be institutionalised.

Luckily the "Schlangenbrut" already existed when the debate on anti-Judaism feminist exegesis in Germany began. Most of the articles discussing this issue were published in the journal of 1987 – the year when the public debate started. The many quotations from these volumes in academic work document the important role "Schlangenbrut" played. Since this debate the journal has tried to include articles written by women of different cultural and religious backgrounds, especially Jewish women.

### *Lectio difficilior. Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Exegese (European Journal of Feminist Exegesis)*

This journal was started in 2000 in Bern and is edited by Silvia Schroer, in the beginning working together with Caroline Vander Stichele, today with Tal Ilan. *Lectio difficilior* appears twice a year with two to five feminist biblical articles published in German, English and French. The journal is free, nondenominational and inter-religious and provides a forum for exegetical research.

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Und wieder stehen wir am Sinai. Eine jüdisch-feministische Theologie* (Luzern: Exodus 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Compare Antje RÖCKEMANN, „Schlangenbrut“ und „Lectio Difficilior“, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 27–31.

*First translations of biblical texts using gender-just language*<sup>9</sup>

A women's group in Frankfurt had the idea to use the well-attended annual German Evangelical Church Congress (Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag) in 1987 to initiate a public discussion of feminist critique of language used in religious texts. They decided not to use the idea propagated in the USA of "inclusive language", as they felt that women should not be included implicitly, but explicitly mentioned instead. They therefore spoke about "frauengerechte Sprache" (language that does justice to women). This means a language that also does justice to disabled people, people of different faiths and different skin colors. In the ensuing years this expression has established itself as widely-accepted terminology. The group published their versions of biblical texts which were used for bible studies at the Church Congress, although they were not direct translations from the original Greek or Hebrew texts. These texts were the beginning of a lectionary (and later the translation of the whole Bible) in "gender-just language". When it became known that the Bible Society was planning a revised version of the 1982 "Good News for Today" the Evangelical Women's Organization of Germany (EFD) coordinated in 1988/89 seven groups of women in East and West Germany who discussed the "Good News for Today" from a feminist perspective and offered suggestions for a more just use of language. The Bible Society engaged Monika Fander and Renate Jost to make suggestions on how to integrate these changes into the revised version. Although only a few of the suggestions were eventually integrated into the revised version of 1997 it was advertised as a translation that did justice to women and the work of the women was honored in the afterword.

*Bibel in gerechter Sprache*<sup>10</sup>

20 Years after the first publication of "justly translated biblical texts" the Bible in just language appeared in October 2006 and ignited many public discussions. 52 exegesisists worked five years without any remuneration on this translation. Younger and older exegesisists worked together in an egalitarian and interdisciplinary manner. Feminist theologians, those working in the spirit of Jewish-Christian dialogue and those coming from a socio-historical background all worked closely together and developed lasting networks. For two years more than 300 individuals and groups tested the translation. The title "Bible in just language" shows exactly what is intended: justice for the text. This Bible is a translation from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and forgoes the use of interpretive headlines. A glossary explains the theological background of key words.

*Gender Justice:* women were always part of the events and experiences which are documented in biblical texts and these texts have always had special meaning to women. This translation does not use androcentric language where it is historically evident that women and men are included.

*Social Justice:* the social realities which are reflected in the texts are clearly stated. The translators try to avoid an authoritarian language of dominance.

*Justice Related to the Jewish-Christian Dialogue:* in the last decades it has become evident that many parts of the New Testament which have to be seen in relation to their Jewish

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<sup>9</sup> Compare WEGNER, Hildburg, Erste Bibeltexte in frauengerechter Sprache, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 181–182.

<sup>10</sup> Compare JANSSEN, Claudia, Bibel in gerechter Sprache, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 182–184.

background were interpreted from an anti-Jewish perspective and also incorrectly translated for this reason. The translators of this Bible instead try to learn from the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

This Bible translation is also successful because many issues which have been discussed in feminist theology during the last 30 years are now presented to a larger public. This includes discussions on images of God, christology, redemption and the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Bible in just language is also successful because it is supported by many people from the Christian parishes and on the grassroots level who want the Bible to be understood in easy-to-comprehend and just language. Through the fall of 2007 more than 60,000 volumes were sold. Many books were published to support the intentions of this Bible. A new Edition incorporating the results of discussions over the last few years is in progress.

### *Feminist Bible Studies at the German Evangelical Church Congress (Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag)*

At the German Evangelical Church Congress (with more than 100,000 participants) feminist Bible studies are very popular and engaging. New exegetical insights and new feminist hermeneutical perspectives come together here. This liberating message supports women of all generations and lifestyles to broaden the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal structures of the Church and to reinforce their own charisma. As bible studies are a part of the core of these Church congresses, feminists play a central part as presenters and as audience members. Feminist exegesis is also a major theme at the Feminist Grassroots University and the Women's Center of these congresses. The same is also true for the Ecumenical Church Congress which met for the second time in 2010 in Munich.

### **Protestant Churches**

The individual community churches themselves have played - and continue to play - an important role in feminist exegesis.

Feminist exegesis, which in the 1970s was discredited by some as heretical, has since the 1980s become more and more accepted as a branch of the Protestant theological spectrum. It has been women at the grassroots level who have brought feminist exegesis to church groups, to religious education at public and private schools and to Sunday morning services. Women and men in important positions in the Church - leaders of women's organizations, ministers and bishops - have been influenced by feminist exegetical work and are using insights gained from feminist biblical studies in their pastoral work, as leaders of Bible studies and for preaching in their communities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Eva Renate SCHMIDT / Mieke KORENHOF / Renate JOST (ed.), *Feministisch gelesen*, Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag <sup>2</sup>1988 (Bd. 1), <sup>2</sup>1989 (Bd. 2); Sabine AHRENS / Ulrike EICHLER / Martina GERLACH / Thomas GREBE / Ilona KLAUS / Hanns LESSING (Hg.), *Und schuf sie als Mann und als Frau. Eine Perikopenreihe zu den Lebenswirklichkeiten von Frauen und Männern für die Sonn- und Feiertage des Kirchenjahres*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1995; Mieke KORENHOF (Hg.), *Mit Eva predigen. Ein anderes Perikopenbuch*, Düsseldorf: Presseverb. d. Evang. Kirche im Rheinland 1996; Mieke KORENHOF / Rainer STUHLMANN (Hg.), *Wenn Eva und Adam predigen. Ein anderes Perikopenbuch. Neue Predigten von Frauen und Männer*, Düsseldorf: Presseverb. d. Evang. Kirche im Rheinland 1998 (Band 1) und 1999 (Band 2); Sabine BÄUERLE / Elisabeth MÜLLER (Hg.), *Feministische Predigtreihe*, Frankfurt/Berlin 1991–1992 fortlaufend bis 2002–2003; Martje BRANDT / Martina GUTZLER (Hg.), *Feministisch predigen. Predigen mit Feministischem Hintergrund*, Pinneberg/Höhfröschen 2003–2004 ff. (CD-ROM).

In the beginning the biblical stories about powerful and strong women such as Miriam, Sara, Hagar, Maria, Martha and Maria Magdalena were at the center of this work. These stories offered women the possibility to talk about their own experiences in a male-centered Church. Later on a “gender-just” interpretation of all biblical texts was developed and discussed at workshops and conferences organized by women’s organizations and various educational venues. Furthermore two official statements by the National Council of Protestant Churches in Germany used insights provided by feminist exegetical studies to underscore the role of women in Church and society<sup>12</sup> and to support arguments rejecting violence against women.<sup>13</sup>

In many community churches work towards gender justice has become firmly established. This has been helpful in bringing feminist biblical studies into different areas of Church hierarchy. The goals of gender justice are legitimized in the first narrative of creation in Gen 1:27 and 5:2f in correlation with the new being in Christ in Gal 3:28. Since biblical anthropology such as in 1 Tim 2:8–15 or 1 Kor 11:7–9 has in the past been used to support the domination of women by men, these have been deconstructed and reinterpreted. The theological metaphors of Gen 1:27 and 5:2f are critical of the elements of historical anthropology where women are subordinated to men as well as the male dominated liturgical language as transgressing the biblical command against images. The central idea of the reformation that all people who believe in Christ are priestesses and priests also gives impulses which are critical of existing institutions.

In addition, the Evangelical Church of the Rheinland tests knowledge of feminist biblical studies – among other feminist issues – in their exams.

### **Roman Catholic politics<sup>14</sup>**

After initial skepticism in relation to the expression “Feminist Biblical Studies” and the fear that the women in Roman Catholic women’s organizations would reject the entire Roman Catholic tradition, a hermeneutic grounded in feminist liberation has been accepted in these women’s organizations since the 1980s.

Feminist biblical research has supported and strengthened the work of Roman Catholic women’s organizations. Women are now much more secure about their religious competencies. Today they discuss their theological positions with full self-confidence and defend their spiritual insights even when talking to Church leaders. Women have learned to use all tools at their disposal but have also experienced the limits of their involvement in the Church. Feminist biblical studies are firmly anchored in the areas of education and in the prayer services within these women’s organizations. Through the officially sanctioned functions of *Spiritual Leader/Companion* or *Spiritual Advisor* theological positions have been established which are practiced almost wholly by women and in which feminist theology plays an important part in their training. This can be a living example for the future of the whole Roman Catholic Church. The metaphor of the female image of God is an important part of the Roman Catholic Church as well as of other churches.

<sup>12</sup> Die Frau in Familie, Kirche und Gesellschaft eine Studie zum gemeinsamen Leben von Frau und Mann, vorgelegt von einem Ausschuss der evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (hrsg. von der Kirchenkanzlei im Auftr. des Rates der EKD (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus <sup>2</sup>1980).

<sup>13</sup> Gewalt gegen Frauen als Thema der Kirche. Ein Bericht in zwei Teilen (im Auftrag des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, hrsg. vom Kirchenamt der EKD (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Compare Angelika FROMM, Feministische Antworten auf römisch-katholische Frauenpolitik, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 79–86.

Within these women's organizations there are already schools of thought working towards the goal of a Church without any hierarchies. Here the Church is seen as a living egalitarian community as, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes in her lectures and books. The initiatives described in the following passage try to put these ideas into practice in different ways.

### *Mary of Magdala*

This initiative was founded 1987 in Münster with the intention of radically improving the situation of women. The members are working towards a church where men and women have equal rights in all areas. Mary Magdalene as "the apostle of all apostles", having been installed by Jesus himself to spread the gospel, is their main biblical symbol. The goals of this association are:

- complete access for women to all Church councils and decision-making bodies, also in positions of leadership
- abolition of the exclusive connection between decision-making and ordination
- complete access for women to all positions in theological faculties
- changing of the male-dominated metaphors for God
- practice of a women-just (woman-inclusive) language and liturgy.

These goals are trying to be achieved through many different activities and networks. With their activities the women of Mary-of-Magdala want to give a voice to the silent majority within the Roman Catholic Church.

### *„The second path“*

As opposed to the ordination of women as priestesses the ordination of deaconesses is a historically provable fact. "The second way" wants to continue this tradition. Normally becoming a deacon is the first step to becoming a priest. From the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been attempts to revitalize the position of deacon in the sense of the three-fold ordo (deacon, priest, bishop). At the 2nd Vatican Council this position was attained for married men. Since then many attempts have been started to open up the position of deacon for women as well.

### *Priestesses "contra legem"*

On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2002 seven women from Germany, Austria and the USA were ordained as the first priestesses by the Argentinean archbishop R. Braschi. The Vatican excommunicated all of them in August of 2002. Others followed their example in France, USA and Canada. The Vatican did not excommunicate those ordained after 2002 – possibly because they are not accepted as being Roman Catholic.

### *Results and Vision for the Future*

Although women cannot be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church there are women in leading positions

- as professors in teaching and research positions at universities

- as pastoral and community advisors in parishes where they are fully accepted by the church members
- in exceptional cases they are allowed to lead parishes
- as teachers and preachers in catechetical work
- by accompanying dying people and relatives who have lost a loved one they closely approach practicing sacramental services
- in exceptional cases they are allowed to lead funeral services
- as leaders in academia and women’s organizations.

Feminist biblical studies help both women as well as men in expanding their spiritual and theological competencies. Laywomen and laymen are leading religious services and by practicing their faith in egalitarian communities they are changing the church.

There are different pathways to achieve the same goal. Women in particular are invited to accept each other’s differences and work together in a Christian sisterhood for a future Church without hierarchies. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza developed such a vision for a future Church at the 2. WOW-Conference in Ottawa in 2005 when she spoke about the “ecclesia as a continuing communal succession of equal wo/men”. This ecclesia is a radical democratic assembly of women and men in opposition to all traditional kyriarchal structures. In this ecclesia feminist Catholicism can be practiced as social-religious plurality in global alliance with connections to the many different community churches and different cultures in an ecumenical fashion. The initiatives presented here have each integrated feminist biblical studies in their own way. All are necessary for moving forward towards the goal of women’s ordination and a more ecumenical community.

### **Old Catholic Church<sup>15</sup>**

In the Old Catholic Church feminist biblical insights have been very helpful since the middle of the 1970s to support the claim of the three-fold office. For example: in the Old Catholic seminar at the University of Bonn Bernadette Brooten’s article on “Junia”, one of the first apostles, was presented and discussed.<sup>16</sup> With this background Angela Berlis asks how this knowledge of the apostola can be integrated:

”What are the consequences ... for a changed culture of images?”<sup>17</sup>

She concludes that a deeper reflection on the meaning of women’s ordination under these aspects of differentiated thought could give new impulses and answers.

### **Jewish Feminists in the Land of the Shoah<sup>18</sup>**

After 1945 Jewish life and self-confidence were so destroyed that the survivors in the German Republic (BRD) as well as in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) stuck to the

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<sup>15</sup> Compare Angela BERLIS, Entwicklungen in der altkatholischen Kirche, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 309–314.

<sup>16</sup> BROOTEN, Bernadette, „Junia ... hervorragend unter den Aposteln“ (Röm 16,7), in: *Frauenbefreiung: Biblische und theologische Argumente* (ed. Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel; München: Kaiser, <sup>3</sup>1982), 148–151.

<sup>17</sup> Berlis, 2008, 314

<sup>18</sup> Compare Lara DÄMMIG / Elisa KLAPHECK, Jüdische Feministinnen im Land der Schoa, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 329–334

“unbroken” world of Jewish “Shtetl Orthodoxy”<sup>19</sup>. After the fall of the wall in 1989 and the process of unification began, a dramatic change in Jewish life took place. In many big cities in Germany Jewish liberal groups and egalitarian *Minyanim* were founded, some as a revival of liberal Judaism, which had been strong in Germany before the Shoah.

In 1998 the Jewish women’s organisation “BetDebora” was founded in Berlin. Bet Debora is named after the biblical Debora – a prophetess, judge and politician. When in the Talmud a new tradition of interpretation was founded it was called a “house” (Bet) – as for example “Bet Hillel” or “Bet Schammai”. By calling themselves “Bet Debora” Jewish women want to demonstrate that they are creating their own new path of biblical interpretation.

Bet Debora organizes conferences which deal exclusively with a new European-Jewish feminist consciousness independent of American and Israeli culture and tradition.

## Academia

Beginning in the 1970s laypersons could become professors in all Roman Catholic disciplines and, because of this, many Roman Catholic women decided on an academic career without really knowing if they would be able to get a permanent position in Germany or not. Some of them decided to leave Germany and to work in the USA where it was easier for women to gain permanent academic employment. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (\*1938) is a famous example of this academic biography. She has taught since 1970 in the USA. Since 1988 she is the Krister-Stendahl Professor at Harvard University. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s work - especially in feminist hermeneutic - influenced and inspired generations of feminist work in religious communities and in academia around the world.<sup>20</sup> With her hermeneutical reflections she also inspired many younger colleagues – including myself - working at that time to qualify for an academic career.

Beginning in the late 1980s in particular women specializing in exegesis became (if they were not too radical) professors of Old Testament studies, supported by their male predecessors. Helen Schüngel Straumann(\*1940), who starting in 1987 occupied a chair for Old Testament in Kassel and was later president of the ESWTR, was one of the first.<sup>21</sup> She also initiated in 1996 a foundation for feminist literature the “Helen-Straumann-Stiftung für Feministische Theologie” in Basel.<sup>22</sup> Ten years later a growing number of feminist exegetes received permanent positions in the academic world. The Roman Catholic feminist biblical scholar Silvia Schroer (\*1958) was appointed in 1997 to the chair for “Old Testament and Biblical Environment” at the Protestant faculty of the University of Bern. From 1997-2004 a chair for Old Testament and Theological Women’s Studies was established in Bonn (Irmtraud

<sup>19</sup> See DÄMMIG/KLAPHECK, *Jüdische Feministinnen*, 331

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Democratizing Biblical studies : toward an emancipatory educational space* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press 2009). Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Gerecht ist das Wort der Weisheit. Historisch-politische Kontexte feministischer Bibelinterpretation* (übers. aus dem Engl.: Ulrike Saringer; Luzern: Ed. Exodus 2008). Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *The power of the word: scripture and the rhetoric of empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007). Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Wisdom ways: introducing feminist biblical interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2001). *Searching the scriptures*, ed. by Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA (New York: Crossroad 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Helen SCHÜNGEL-STRAUMANN, *RUAH bewegt die Welt. Gottes schöpferische Lebenskraft in der Krisenzeit des Exils*, SBS 151 (Stuttgart: Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 1992); Helen SCHÜNGEL-STRAUMANN, *Die Frau am Anfang – Eva und die Folgen* (Münster: Lit-Verlag<sup>3</sup>1999).

<sup>22</sup> For further information compare, RÖCKEMANN, Antje, Helen-Straumann-Stiftung für Feministische Theologie, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 56f.

Fischer, \*1957). 1998 another chair for Old Testament and Theological Women's Studies in Münster (Marie-Theres Wacker, \*1952) was established.

Protestant women in the 1970s generally made the decision to pursue a church career as the churches offered them good positions and supported their feminist work (if it was not too radical). Their decision was also influenced by the situation in academia, which was more critical of feminist biblical studies than the churches. One famous exception is Luise Schottroff (\*1934)<sup>23</sup>, who taught from 1971-1986 New Testament in Mainz and from 1986-1999 in Kassel. There she founded the Feminist Liberation-Theology Archive.

She has been very influential as the author of numerous articles on feminist exegesis and social history and as co-editor of numerous "classical works" on feminist exegesis. In the 1990s a growing number of female theologians decided to aim for permanent academic positions. Some of them left for the USA where feminist exegesis was more accepted. One example is Angela Bauer-Levesque (\*1960) who has served on the faculty of Episcopal Divinity School in Boston since 1994. Another example is Susanne Scholz, who also has been teaching in the USA since the middle of the 1990s. Since 2009 she is a professor for Old Testament at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Only at a few German institutions with a long feminist tradition (Marburg, for example) were some feminist exegetes (Angela Stanhartinger and Christl Maier) able to gain permanent academic employment.<sup>24</sup>

The only tenured professorship for Feminist Theology and Women's Studies was established at the Augustana in Neuendettelsau (near Nürnberg). Renate Jost (\*1955), an Old Testament scholar, has occupied the position since 1997. The International Institute for Feminist Research in Theology and Religion which was founded in 2008 by Renate Jost Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Susannah Heschel works to support the international network in feminist theology.<sup>25</sup> To honor one of the most influential feminist theologians one room of the library with an almost complete collection of German feminist exegetical work and many international volumes was in 2008 named "Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Raum".

Furthermore, at some universities feminist methodologies and subjects are used for teaching and research. The numerous dissertations and habilitations which have been finished during the last decades also show the growing acceptance and relevance of feminist biblical scholarship.<sup>26</sup> In context of the German-speaking scholastic community research work up until 1995 is published in "Feministische Exegese". The "Compendium" presents the work of feminist biblical scholars encompassing all biblical and many apocryphic books.

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<sup>23</sup> Luise SCHOTTROFF / Andrea BIELER, *Das Abendmahl. Essen, um zu leben* (Gütersloh : Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2007). Luise SCHOTTROFF / Wolfgang STEGEMANN, *Jesus von Nazareth – Hoffnung der Armen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1981). Luise SCHOTTROFF, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern. Feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums* (Gütersloh: Kaiser 2001). *Kompendium feministische Bibelauslegung*, hrsg. von Luise SCHOTTROFF (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1998). *Feministische Exegese: Forschungserträge zur Bibel aus der Perspektive von Frauen*, hrsg. Luise SCHOTTROFF / Silvia SCHROER / Marie-Theres WACKER (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges. 1995).

<sup>24</sup> For more information compare Claudia JANSSEN / Renate JOST, *Feministische Theologie an Universitäten und Hochschulen*, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 236–294

<sup>25</sup> Both received a honourable doctorate at the Augustana for their feminist work in 2008. Compare Renate JOST / Klaus RASCHZOK (Hg.), „Gender – Religion – Kultur. Biblische, interreligiöse und ethische Aspekte“, *Theologische Akzente 6* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Compare the selected bibliography of dissertations and habilitations at the end of this article.

The German-speaking section of the European Society of Women in Theological Research, which was founded in 1986 in Magliaso, Switzerland, gives women opportunities for discussion and exchange on feminist biblical research.<sup>27</sup>

### Inter-religious dialogue<sup>28</sup>

The budding feminist impact on inter-religious dialogue, which began in the late 1990s, is exemplified by the two Hagar-Sarah initiatives.

The monotheistic religions are often called “Abrahamitic religions”. Feminist theologians have incorporated this idea by naming themselves after the two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, who are for them the founding mothers of their respective faiths. These women are an excellent example of theological differentiation.

The significance of these women is as different in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as is the hermeneutical ways in which these religions deal with these biblical stories. While the Jewish perspective is complementary, Christians see Sarah and Hagar in a conflictive fashion while Moslems have more narrative and ritual styles of interpretation.<sup>29</sup>

The Christian interpretation of this story has for a long time been anti-Judaic and hegemonic.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand in Christian ecumenical dialogue the story was helpful in

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<sup>27</sup> Meetings for OT since 1995, for NT since 1991. Compare also the journals of the ESWTR with many articles on feminist biblical studies:

The society's first Journal was published in 1993. The following volumes are in print:

- 17/2009 Feminist Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue
- 16/2008 Becoming Living Communities
- 15/2007 Scandinavian Critique of Anglo-American Feminist Theology
- 14/2006 Building Bridges in a Multifaceted Europe. Religious Origins, Traditions, Contexts and Identities
- 13/2005 Theological Women's Studies in Southern Europe
- 12/2004 Holy Texts: Authority and Language
- 11/2003 Theological Women's Studies in Central/Eastern Europe
- 10/2002 The End of Liberation? Liberation in the End! Feminist Theory, Feminist Theology and Their Political Implications
- 9/2001 Women, Ritual and Liturgy
- 8/2000 Feminist Perspectives on History and Religion
- 7/1999 Time – Utopia – Eschatology
- 6/1998 Feminist Perspectives in Pastoral Theology
- 5/1997 Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies
- 4/1996 What Does it Mean Today to be a (Feminist) Theologian?
- 3/1995 Women Churches: Networking and Reflection in the European Context
- 2/1994 Ecofeminism and Theology
- 1/1993 Feminist Theology in a European Context

The Journal is a Peeters, Leuven (B) publication. Most abstracts of the contributions can be viewed at the publisher's homepage. A subscription to the Journal is included in the ESWTR membership fee. The latest edition is sent to members after its publication.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Annette MEHLHORN, *Feministische Praxis und Theologie im Dialog zwischen den Töchtern Sarahs und Hagers*, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 355–361.

<sup>29</sup> To compare the different perspectives of Sarah and Hagar see: Petra KUNIK / Sawsan CHAHROUR / Angelika FROMM, „Sara und Hagar“, in „*Weißt du wer ich bin?*“, Materialsammlung I Basisheft (ed. Ökumenische Centrale der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland [ACK]), 60–70.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Annette MEHLHORN, *Sarah und Hagar – zwei sehr unterschiedliche Frauenbiografien. Theologische Reflexionen jüdischer, christlicher und muslimischer Quellen. Erweiterte Fassung einer Predigt in der Stuttgarter Leonhardskirche. 14.11.2005*, in: *epd-Dokumentation 6/2006*, 33–37; auch in: *Evangelischer Arbeitskreis Kirche und Israel in Hessen und Nassau: Materialdienst 2/2006*, 13–17.

discussing the discrimination of women in different cultures.<sup>31</sup> From Jewish interpretations much can be learned about how to read texts from different perspectives and about the complementarity of the sexes: Sarah, Hagar and Abraham are personifications of the human experience which can only be unified through cooperation and conflict.<sup>32</sup> The Islamic version of the stories of the conflict between Abraham's women concentrates on Hagar and her son Ishmael. It is the story of perseverance and trust in God versus fear and desperation which lead to the source of *Zam Zam*, the source of life.

With this background offering possibilities for feminist inter-religious dialogue it is understandable that "Sarah-Hagar" was seen as an appropriate name for two women's organizations which were founded independently of each other in 2001 in Hessa and Berlin. Both are supported by their regional governments with the goal of combining inter-religious dialogue with political concerns. Women with differing political and religious backgrounds come together in regional and national workshops and conferences for an open dialogue, overcoming the interests and restrictions of the individual institutions they belong to.

## Conclusion

Feminist biblical studies have integrated interdenominational, inter-religious, international and interdisciplinary perspectives and have learned to deal with these differences in a creative manner.

The impact of the biblical studies on religious communities and academia can be seen in the image of the "velvet triangle" (Alison Woodward).<sup>33</sup> Wo/men coming out of the feminist movement from different religious communities, institutions and academia are working together for a more just world. The velvet of the triangle signifies the flowing nature of the interdisciplinary exchange between the various communities participating in feminist bible studies.

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<sup>31</sup> Compare, for example, Jessica Grimes: Reinterpreting Hagar's Story. In *lectio difficilior I/2004*, [www.lectio.unibe.ch](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch).

<sup>32</sup> See: Elisa KLAPHECK, Sarah und Hagar – zwei jüdische Schicksale, in: *Interreligiöses Bibliodrama* (Schenefeld 2005), 46–54.

<sup>33</sup> Compare also Gisela MATTHIAE, Das samtene Dreieck – Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten, in: *Feministische Theologie. Initiativen, Kirchen, Universitäten – eine Erfolgsgeschichte* (ed. Gisela Matthiae / Renate Jost / Claudia Janssen / Annette Mehlhorn / Antje Röckemann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008), 378–383.

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