Esther Fuchs has spent decades challenging traditional scholarship on the Hebrew Bible and also trying to get biblical studies scholars to reconsider their frame of reference when it comes to gender interpretations.

A newly published article by Fuchs, a UA Near Eastern Studies professor, suggests that biblical feminism is emerging as an "autonomous field," and at this juncture, it is critically important that biblical feminist scholars question how knowledge is attributed.

Fuchs (pronounced "fyooks") noted that in the United States and other parts of the world, biblical studies have been dominated by a Christian perspective and scholars are increasingly skeptical and are taking a more secular approach to evaluating the Bible.

"Rather than a reflection of a totalizing â€˜truth,' the Bible is increasingly understood as a cultural and ideological text, embedded in historical struggles for political power," Fuchs said.

While a Christian perspective is not negative, there must be room for the feminist approach, Fuchs said. The feminist approach to Bible interpretation, she explained, lies between the Christian and secular approaches but cannot be clearly defined. Unlike women's studies, which has defined theories and models, the feminist approach in biblical studies is still fairly new. Generally speaking, the feminist approach does not accept the idea that women are substandard and it also discredits the objectification of women. For too long, she said, the male-biased interpretation has been considered an objective viewpoint with little room for the feminist perspective or a feminist interpretation. Her work, she said, represents at attempt to "depatriarchalize" the Hebrew Bible.

It's important to look critically at the Bible because there are relationships of power inherently related to the text, she said. Gender is only one issue of concern â€˜culture and ethnicity are among the others. Traditional interpretations have portrayed women in negative ways without a critical interpretation of their purpose in the Bible, she explained.


The term "biblical feminisms" is somewhat fluid and, depending on the scholar, could mean studying the women of the Bible, studying what the Bible teaches about women, examining how interpretations differ from each other depending on the scholar's position and location, and also how cultural and religious background determine one's understanding of what the Bible is trying to convey.

In her article, Fuchs calls for "a radical democratization of the field and the questioning of any and all orthodoxies and hierarchies that may have already emerged in the field," she said.
Fuchs was one of the first people to question the ways women have been presented in biblical literature and to challenge mainstream traditional biblical studies – what has become known as “malestream scholarship.” In this case, “malestream” refers to the “tendency to objectify and commodify the woman's body and the female subject, and to define femininity in terms of male interests and priorities,” Fuchs said.

"I have both a personal and a professional interest in this area," said Fuchs, who speaks several languages, including Hebrew and Yiddish, and is an affiliate faculty member in the UA women's studies department.

She first came to the UA as an associate professor in 1985 and has an extensive repertoire of published articles on topics that include the role of women and sexual politics in the Bible, contemporary Israeli fiction, the cultural and religious lives of Jewish women and the ways women are represented in contemporary Hebrew texts. Her book, "Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative," was published in 2000. Fuchs also has written about gender and the Holocaust, Jewish feminists and women's studies.

She organized the first Society of Biblical Literature panel focused on biblical feminism and, in 2005, organized a panel on diversity in biblical women's studies. She has organized numerous other panels to raise the level of awareness and conversation about the representation of women.

In her most recent article, Fuchs draws on the scholarship of numerous critical thinkers, including Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich and Michel Foucault.

The late Foucault, a sociologist and philosopher who died in 1984, promoted the idea that knowledge and the production of knowledge are powerful tools that rest in the hands of those in authoritative and commanding positions.

"It was a revolutionary idea at the time, but it quickly became a trend in the scholarship, and now critical readings of the Bible from ideological and discursive perspectives are taken for granted not only in gender-related areas, but in postcolonial biblical studies and cultural biblical studies," Fuchs said.

She would like to see more women's studies scholars studying the Bible and also more biblical scholars studying feminist texts. Fuchs said it will be important for scholars to make distinctions between theological efforts to make the Bible relevant to contemporary women and the academic pursuit of biblical studies.

"Feminist research has revolutionized the field of biblical studies," Fuchs said.

"Most leading scholars in the field admit it and recognize that their own writing and thinking has been greatly influenced by the feminist transformation of the field," she said. "We still have a way to go though because there is a considerable backlash from conservative and traditional quarters, and a neo-religious revival using feminism for missionary purposes."

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/ua-professor-explores-feminist-interpretation-bible#comment-0