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Citation for the published article:

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The bible and women: An international networking project for reception history in exegesis and cultural history

Gender agenda matters, 2015, 242-253

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THE BIBLE AND WOMEN: AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING PROJECT FOR RECEPTION HISTORY IN EXEGESIS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

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„*The Bible and Women, an Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*“ is an international gender and women’s studies project, in which 300 female and male scholars worldwide participate and which is published in twenty-one volumes and four languages by internationally known publishing houses (www.bibleandwomen.org).

1. Project Outline

The project steps into unknown scholarly territory, on the basis of its *research into the question of an equitable gender history of exegesis and reception*, as well as because of its nature as an *international co-operative project* and its *multilingualism*.¹ The history of reception is here understood not only as a history of exegesis, but is extended further on a conceptual intermedial basis.² Whereas *exegesis* interprets biblical texts according to methodological criteria (changing in the course of the history of Christianity), the reception of such texts that uses other media is considerably freer in its interpretation. Yet, *interpretations by the arts* frequently have become more prominent than the texts themselves. One might think, for example, of the scene in which the divine breath of life is breathed into the human being, a not very significant scene in exegetical literature, which was represented in Michelangelo’s Sistine frescos by the touch of God’s forefinger. Or, one might think of the “entrance of the Queen of Sheba”, which the biblical text mentions in only a few words, but at the mere mention of the title of which recalls, for everyone with a musical education, the music of Händel’s oratorio. Many biblical narratives – most not as a biblical text, but rather in the various receptions of them – even have become so-called “cultural codes”. One need think here only of Gen 3 as a “seduction story”.

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The Bible is considered as *the* book of so-called western culture. No other text has influenced this culture in the way the Bible, produced for the most part in Judaism and the Mediterranean sphere, has done. This book has developed its formative influence in ethics, legal notions, and philosophy and literature. Especially the arts up through the nineteenth century are unthinkable without the Bible: What would church music, operas, and oratorios be without biblical subjects, or book illumination, frescos and sculptures on ecclesiastical or profane buildings without biblical scenes, or Renaissance or Baroque painting without female biblical figures? The Bible was for the longest period one of the major sources for material from which the arts, with its various techniques and forms of representation, drew and still draws upon to the present day.

Every generation, region, and epoch actualizes other *aspects of the biblical potential for meaning*, through which a very colorful history of reception arises. Many of these receptions may be perceived as episodic curiosities; others have marked the *mainstream* of biblical interpretation and the canon of artistic representation of biblical subjects. But, for almost all epochs and contexts, as well as for the arts, it can be established that *receptions by women* are numerically in the minority and the transmission of such receptions in most cases was *marginalized* or even interrupted. In all the larger encyclopedias on reception history, in series and projects that have been published to date, the category of gender, if it is at all a matter for reflection, is not found among the important questions for research. The reason for this is, in part, also the sources used by researchers: In European, western history, it was primarily men who had access to reading and writing, as well as to those positions that were responsible for an authoritative interpretation of the Bible. In addition, it was in most cases the biblical interpretations made by significant men that were handed down. Through the removal of corrective voices, most of which probably belonged to women, the remaining interpretations were marked by an inevitable androcentrism. This androcentric standpoint influenced not only the researchers' manner of approach to biblical "women's texts" (in which women are the leading figures in the story) and their approach to biblical texts with a special significance for women (ceremonially clean/unclean, for example), but also the question whether and how they took notice of women as exegetes or producers of receptions. A history of reception of the biblical texts especially relevant for women, and a history of biblical interpretations by women, thus still must be written.

2. History

The project originated from out of the experience made by ESWTR (European Society of Women in Theological Research), the largest association of academically employed female theologians in Europe. The Society at the present time has 600 members. Up to the time of my presidency in the years 2001 to 2003, the chairwomen of the Society were exclusively from the so-called “northern belt”. The few members from southern countries were hardly or not at all present, and their research, since it was written in the Romance languages, was hardly received. For this reason, I proposed to hand over the presidency to the South, to the founding member of the ESWTR, Adriana Valerio, professor for the history of Christianity at the University Federico II in Naples. The effect of this for memberships in Italy as well as in Spain was highly favorable. The annoying problem of the lack of receptions other than English-language feminist studies or gender research in individual European countries, however, was thereby not solved. Together with Adriana Valerio, I therefore drafted a research design in which female gender researchers from as many disciplines and from as many countries as possible could take part. Biblical reception is an obvious concern for an Old Testament scholar and a historian. Also, in order to provide editorial responsibility in the Spanish and English-speaking areas, we brought Mercedes Navarro Puerto, at that time professor in Salamanca, and, for the time being, Jorunn Økland, at that time professor in Sheffield. In the meantime, Christiana de Groot, professor in Grand Rapids, has taken over the English-language tasks in the circle of editors.

The general editors of the series, who have accompanied the project intensively since the *kick-off meeting* in 2006, assign the individual volumes for editing to female or male scholars, who are proven experts for the relevant epochs. These then approach scholars who already have distinguished themselves in the appropriate area through their publications with the request to draft articles for the volume. For the reception in the arts, music and literature, they are advised by researchers in the relevant fields. Since the main editors are all Christians, a continual consultation with regard to Judaism and Jewish research is also necessary. The following table gives an overview of the volumes and their editors and advisors, and indicates the present state of the project: Two volumes are available in four languages (1.1, 1.3), two volumes exist in three languages (2.1, 6.2), the others have been published first of all in one or two

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languages (9.1, 5.1, 8.2, 7.2, 6.1). Thus, from the total of 84 volumes, 19 already have been published, seven have not yet been begun, and the rest are in various stages of completion.

General editors: Irmtraud Fischer, Graz – Mercedes Navarro Puerto, Madrid –Christiana de Groot, Grand Rapids – Adriana Valerio, Neapel

1. Hebrew Bible – Old Testament

1.1 Torah: Irmtraud Fischer (Austria) / Mercedes Navarro Puerto (Spain): Research colloquium Graz, published in all four languages (German, Italian: 2010, E, S: 2010; English 2011)

1.2 Prophets: Irmtraud Fischer / Athalya Brenner (Israel/Netherlands): Research colloquium 2018

1.3 Writings: Nuria Calduch-Benages (Spain /Italy) / Christl Maier (Germany): Research colloquium Marburg, published in all four languages (S: 2012; G: 2013; E, I: 2014)

2. New Testament

2.1 Gospels. Narratives and History: Mercedes Navarro Puerto / Marinella Perroni (Italy): Research colloquium Sevilla, published in Italian (2011), Spanish (2011), German (2012); English version will be published in 2015, edited by Amy Jill Levine

2.2 New Testament Letters: Jorunn Økland (Norway)

3. Apokrypha

3.1 *Jewish Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha*: Marie-Theres Wacker (Germany) / Eileen Schuller (Canada): Research colloquium Münster 2015

3.2 Early Christian Writings: Silke Petersen (Germany) / Outi Lehtipuu (Finland): Research colloquium Catania 2014

4. Jewish Interpretation

4.1 Talmud: Tal Ilan (Israel/Germany) / Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert (USA)

4.2 Jewish Middle Ages and the Modern Era: Carol Bakhos (USA) / Gerhard Langer (Austria): Research colloquium Vienna 2014

5. Patristic Period

5.1 Church Fathers: Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Norway) / Emanuela Prinzivalli (Italy): Research colloquium Trento, published in Italian and Spanish (2013), 2015 in German, 2016 in English.

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5.2 Female Biblical Figures in the Exegesis of the Church Fathers. Agnethe Siquans (Austria): Research colloquium Vienna 2018.

6. *Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era*

6.1 Early Middle Ages: Franca Ela Consolino (Italy) / Judith Herrin (Great Britain): Research colloquium Naples, published in 2015 in Italian and English.

6.2 High Middle Ages: Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Norway) / Adriana Valerio (Italy): Research colloquium Naples, published in Italian (2012), Spanish (2012), German (2013), 2015 in English.

6.3 The Renaissance of Women – „Querelle des femmes“: Ángela Muñoz Fernandez (Spain) / Valeria Ferrari Schiefer (Switzerland)

7. *Era of Reform and Revolution*

7.1 Protestant Reformation and Catholic Reforms in Northern and Central Europe: Charlotte Methuen (Great Britain) / Tarald Rasmussen (Norway)

7.2 Reform and Counter-Reformation in the Catholic Europe: Adriana Valerio (Italy) / Maria Laura Giordano (Spain): Research colloquium Barcelona, published in Italian (2014), 2015 in Spanish, 2016 in German and English.

7.3 Enlightenment and Restoration: Ute Gause (Germany) / Marina Caffiero (Italy)

8. *The So-Called Long Nineteenth Century*

8.1 Finding Themselves. The „Secular“ Women’s Movement: Angela Berlis (Switzerland) / Christiana de Groot (USA): Research colloquium 2012 in Bern

8.2 Devotional Readings and Critical Exegesis in the long nineteenth Century: Ruth Albrecht (Germany) / Michaela Sohn-Kronthaler (Austria): Research colloquium Graz, published in German (2014), 2015 in Spanish, Italian and English.

9. *The Contemporary Period*

9.1 Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century. Scholarship and Movement: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (USA): Research colloquium Oslo, published in English (2014), 2015 in German, Spanish, Italian

9.2 Current Trends: Maria Cristina Bartolomei (Italy)

Advisors: Consultation in art history: Heidi Hornik, USA, Maria Leticia Sánchez Hernández, Spain, Consultation for reception in literature: Magda

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Motté, Germany, Consultation for Jewish history of exegesis: Adele Berlin, R., USA, Consultation for the history of music: Linda Maria Koldau, Germany.

Publishers: Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (German) – Society of Biblical Literature Press, Atlanta (English) – Editorial Verbo Divino, Estella (Spanish) – Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani (Italian).

3. Guidelines

Each volume is developed about two years before its publication during a research colloquium, at which the articles are discussed critically. Thereby, a quality assurance is maintained on the one hand and, on the other, new *networks* among the theological gender researchers and the gender researchers of the *scientific communities* in the individual language spheres, as well as among the individual disciplines, especially those researching the arts, are promoted.

All the volumes appear in the *four languages* English, Italian, German, and Spanish. This decision was made, on the one hand, because while English-language literature is taken notice of internationally, genuine scholarship in the other three languages is not (or no longer). In addition, publications in the present “lingua franca” are read more in the academic context than in the practical fields within theology, for which the results of women’s and gender research are intended to be accessible.

On the basis of the history of its origin, the project began with a focus on women’s theological research in Europe, but this research is, of course, a part of an international network. An interest oriented on the “western cultural sphere” cannot ignore the last half-millennium in North or South America in its research questions, nor can it exclude worldwide renowned women researchers and gender researchers. However, in view of the abundance of Bible receptions in all cultural areas and all the regions of the earth, the work which is done can be always only *exemplary and not encyclopedic*. The German and English subtitle of the series, in this regard, was chosen at the behest of the publishers in order to emphasize the coherence of the thematic treatment and thus to differentiate it from a loose series of anthologies.

The project from the very beginning is structured within the horizon of a co-called “*grand ecumenism*” in the sense of the potential co-operation

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of all Christian confessions as well as of Judaism. As a result of the history of its origins, “The Bible and Women” is sustained by four female Christian theologians who come from those different linguistic and scholarly traditions in whose languages the work appears. For Judaism, however, American biblical scholar Adele Berlin serves as advisor for the entire series. The decision for an arrangement according to the canon and the sequence of books of the Hebrew Bible is also well-founded because there will be two volumes of the history of reception of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism. Several of the volume editors also come from the Jewish tradition, and the assignment of individual articles in the other volumes follows the principle of as broad a dispersion as possible not only among the individual linguistic spheres, but also among the Christian confessions and Judaism.

For every epoch treated in the project, in part in multiple volumes, an iconographic section is planned. For the volumes that treat the Bible itself, this is primarily an archeological section that concerns itself with ancient Oriental iconography. From the volumes dealing with the Middle Ages on, all contain articles on reception either in the graphic or plastic arts, literature, or music, the more so since pictorial and acoustic representations appeal not only to the intellect, but rather also to the emotions of the public, and for this reason often have developed a more intensive effect in cultural history than the theological interpretations of the same epoch. The pursuit of the theological ideas that stand behind the receptions in the arts, whether they are affirmative or stand in opposition, is a task that does not monopolize the arts, but rather takes them seriously in their particular idiosyncrasies of (re)presentation.

4. Risks

A multilingual project of this size also has its risks. These lie, on the one hand, on the level of management and are of an organizational, but also of a financial, nature. On the other hand, they are grounded in the different scholarly cultures of the individual linguistic areas and contexts.

Since authors always like to make corrections and additions as long as an article has not yet been published, the danger is great that an article already is being (or already is) translated into another language while at another location work is still being done on it. Even if (at least in the German) all contributions undergo a final control reading before being

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printed, it is not to be assumed that all the authors have a good command of all the languages. Many contributions, in addition, must be revised so extensively that a translation from the original language – what otherwise is the standard in the project – is no longer a possibility. It is also clear that, in regard to the manner of presentation of the researched subject, the meticulousness of the bibliographical data, but also the consciousness for gender issues, there are obvious very different scholarly traditions. Since a translation of a scholarly work makes sense only when the corresponding current source editions are adapted to the individual languages, the work on the bibliographical section means backbreaking labor for the volume and chief editors. It undoubtedly makes little sense when a Spanish translation of Jerome's texts is cited in an English edition. Here, it becomes clear, too, that Italian research on texts of (Late) Antiquity, for example, can rely on considerably more editions and translations than German research, for example. Also, translations – or original versions – of secondary literature must be searched out, since a work translated into Spanish from a German original cannot be cited in Spanish in the German text.

The financial risks also are not to be underestimated: The Italian and Spanish editions in the beginning were supported by the "Fondazione Pasquale Valerio per la Storia delle Donne" (the foundation has been re-oriented in the meantime and no longer supports scholarly projects). The project now is financed exclusively through the patronage of individual universities and through donated funds, in part from regional Protestant churches, abbeys, Catholic bishops, but also private persons. The publishers all publish without added charge, which is remarkable in a time in which the reading and buying of non-fiction books and academic literature has changed enormously as a result of the demand for open-access material. The research design underlying the project is not supported by present-day academic financial sources, which focus on positions for young scholars. This is all the more so because in many countries the pressure to publish only in the English language is increasing and no funds are made available for translation into other languages. The research that devotes itself to cultural phenomena is, of course, thereby forced to decouple itself from the practical fields belonging to it, since these normally make use of literature in the original languages. But since the readability of a publication is to be equated with an applied science, research in the humanities and in cultural studies is thus removed still further from that with which it is charged as not having: social relevance.

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The translation into four languages is intended to help the project reach a broader public. Of course, this guideline brings with it further risks: It is clear that few researchers are willing or able to write in such a manner that complex circumstances are portrayed in layperson's terms. Scholarly prose is accustomed to covering itself on all sides and to including all eventualities and reservations in its formulation. As is often the case, monster sentences then result which can be deciphered only by insiders. Translations of the same then run the far greater risk of transporting misunderstandings into the text that are not present in the original. Even if the guideline is that all citations in a foreign language, whether old or new, must be translated directly into the language of publication, not all authors by any means follow it. In many contexts, it is considered chic not to provide translations. Such publications then are sometimes too lofty to be able to reach a general public. But, as general editor, one can boss around neither editors nor the researchers. The management of a project this size thus requires a certain flexibility, as well as also a great deal of patience, but yet may not lose sight of the broad general outlines of the project. Otherwise, such a series would become arbitrary.

A further problem is the quite frequent fluctuation among the volume editors. It is often the case that assent is quickly given to international projects that enable extensive and interdisciplinary networking. But, the editing of such a complex publication simply demands considerably more time than one in one's own native language and one's own scholarly context. Almost all major projects must contend with this phenomenon and the only one who really can take exception to this is the one who has never coordinated such a project. Important is to ensure continuity and to find a replacement as quickly as possible where suitable researchers can be found, or also to be satisfied to let the unfilled position remain open when no one suggests herself. Scholarship changes in the course of generations of students; in five years, solid research can exist where there is only a desideratum today.

This project, to be sure, has set the goal of raising the status of marginalized receptions by women, or those passed over by a history of exegesis dominated by men, or those with only a regional significance. But, it does *not* aim to write a *compensatory history*. For, then, there would be the risk that a – if also quite a long – special chapter now would be added to the reception history presented thus far. Coming to terms with the biblical reception done by women and with the reception of biblical texts important for women does not represent compensation for a complete view of reception understood thus far to a great extent only as “his-story”,

because this has incorporated merely the half of the relevant material (if it is all the half – if one considers the criterion of ethnicity, then the percentage sinks even more). Reception history must be written anew: It is to be characterized, like general history, as such only when it does not exclude half of humanity as insignificant on the basis of a *gender bias*.

5. A Long Overdue Project for Gender Democracies

The project, thus, does not pursue any kind of niche research, but rather involves itself in current research discourse with archival material that has been neglected inexcusably, with necessary and gender-relevant questions, as well as with hermeneutical discourse, and also shows where religious denominations impede or even refuse an *inculturation of the Bible in a gender democracy*. “The Bible and Women” understands itself in regard to this aspect as an up-to-date part of a reception history that attempts to actualize the Bible and its *intermedial exegetical history* for societies with a gender democracy, and to investigate critically the biblical views of the relationship between the sexes and its development. Seen in this way, the project is an attempt at an inculturation that inquires about the possibilities of a biblically-grounded, gender-fair theological anthropology, and thereby takes a critical view of Scripture and its reception through the centuries.

With this project, there will exist *for the first time a thematically coherent overview of gender-relevant questions regarding the Bible and its intermedial history of reception*. Many fields have not yet been dealt with in scholarly terms at all, and only in working in these fields do new research questions arise that, in turn, *initiate new research*. Thus, this major project with its international and interdisciplinary network also will serve as a stimulus for *research by young scholars* who approach the areas of theology, the humanities, and cultural studies with a consciousness of gender. The general editors hope that this project will prove in retrospect to be less a summary of research, but much more a force initiating new research.

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Notes

¹ A detailed description is found as the introduction to Volume 1: Fischer, Navarro Puerto, Økland & Valerio 2011, available also http://www.bibleandwomen.org/download/Introduction_Torah.pdf.

² See on this in more detail: Fischer 2014.