

## “Historical-Critical Ministry? The Biblical Studies Classroom as Restorative Secular Space”

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### Abstract

This article revisits the past decades of scholarly use (or rather non-use) of Bernadette Brooten’s *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* to reveal that citation practices in biblical studies—or any field—can be inherently political (e.g. misogynistic) whilst maintaining a pretence of scientific objectivity. As a corrective, the author calls for the abandonment of the myth of neutrality in the biblical studies classroom. She argues that rape is only one end of a long spectrum of behaviours that silence; at the other, more subtle end of that spectrum, and all along it, are thousands of lesser instances of silencing and diminishing that occur in the classroom, that are gentler extensions of the notion that women’s bodies do not belong to them, that men are the default human beings, and that women are valuable only insofar as they are pleasing or useful from a male standpoint. Parks advocates a biblical studies pedagogy that intentionally upholds inclusion and diversity in its curriculum, its group dynamics, and its citation practices, even (or especially) within institutions that do not. This is especially important given the prevalence of survivors of sexual assault and gender-based violence in every classroom; maintaining a neutral stance implicitly re-inscribes and encourages the status quo of rape culture.

### Keywords

Biblical Studies, Pedagogy, Gender, Historical Criticism, #MeToo, Citation Politics, Bernadette Brooten

### Introduction

As neither a Catholic nor a theologian I participated in the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain’s 2018 conference from an

outsider's perspective—that of a Protestant historical-critical biblical scholar who maintains a secular classroom. Typically my scholarship and my teaching are done within the confines of the disciplines of history and literature. If I ever find myself discussing theology it is only to place the theological perspective of a given ancient text into its historical context in antiquity. I do not typically find myself talking about the conference's theme of ministry in *any* context.

That said, upon reflection, I decided that my way in to the topic of the conference would be to play around with the concept of the biblical studies classroom as a secular ministry. In doing so, I also wished to honour the conference committee's brave and proper decision to organise a panel around the issues of clerical sexual abuse that have come more sharply into global focus over these last weeks, and I have done so by incorporating that subject into my presentation as well.

As a non-Catholic, I will not and perhaps should not comment directly on the causes of or solutions for clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church specifically. What I can comment on instead is something that may have some parallels to that situation, but that falls within my *own* realm of experience: that is, the experience of a woman in biblical studies. While teaching in the university setting, I have become increasingly aware of the extent to which the gender, class, and ethnicity of my students will have important effects on whether their experience in my classroom is a comfortable or an unpleasant one. My own gender, class, and ethnicity play a role in that as well.

In terms of gender affecting one's experience, for example, statistics tell us that it is virtually impossible that no-one at our conference gathering has been sexually assaulted. We know this because that statistic holds true for every room with four women in it, and that means it holds true in every university module I teach. Thinking only about assaults on women, the latest UK crime statistics tell us that about one in five UK women can expect to be a victim of gender-based violence at least once in their lives.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, where I'm from, that number holds steady at one in three.<sup>2</sup> This means that when I have 25 female students in my Introduction to the New Testament class, at *least* five of them have been assaulted or will be assaulted, and one of them is likely to have it happen while taking my module. If I want to run an equitable classroom, can I ignore numbers like this? Doing so under the auspices of being 'neutral' and 'apolitical' does nothing but reinforce the situations that led to that statistic, making me an indirect accomplice. When accepting

<sup>1</sup> Crime Survey for England and Wales as of 2017, Office for National Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, 'Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends' 2006: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/85-570-X>.

his Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, Elie Wiesel asserted that ‘silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented’.<sup>3</sup>

Chillingly, I have an awful suspicion that the above statistics reflect only the tip of a massive iceberg. One year during my PhD I worked in the Halls of Residence at McGill University in Montreal. That year, in our building alone (and there were seven other buildings, with between 200 and 600 students per building), an average of about one sexual assault per week occurred during the school year among students in my care. In other words, between 30 and 40 cases of sexual assault were disclosed either directly to me or to a student staff member who reported to me. These ranged from partner abuse, to public groping, from incidents with sedatives at the pub, to deplorable uncles from childhood only reported when safely away at university in another province, from blind dates gone wrong, to strangers leaping out of bushes with knives—the whole gamut. In the province of Quebec, a university student aged 18 or over is an adult, protected by the full extent of Quebec privacy laws. This meant that I could provide as much information as possible about support resources and legal recourse, but if the student chose not to report the crime, then I was obliged to keep it confidential.

Not one of those young women chose to report. They had all seen what happened earlier that year when their fellow student Sarelle Sheldon went public with her experience of attempting to report a clear-cut rape case: a story of humiliation and futility.<sup>4</sup> They also knew that the three football players who had been charged with sexual assault were not only still enrolled at our university, but were in fact still playing on our football team.<sup>5</sup> So, after these students were assaulted, I could follow up by listening compassionately through the chaos that ensued with their grades and their friendships and their mental health, but there was no mechanism to record the incidents. Statistically speaking, they never happened. I don’t blame the victims for their choice to muddle through without going on the record. Given the systems in place and the likely outcomes of reporting rape, they made the right decision for their own wellbeing – a decision that unfortunately reassures perpetrators that rape has no consequences, and that means our statistics may not give the full, horrific picture.

<sup>3</sup> Elie Wiesel, ‘Acceptance Speech’, NobelPrize.org: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/facts/>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘McGill Student Speaks out about Rape: Video Interview Spreads Across Social Media’, *Maclean’s*, 7 May 2013: <https://www.macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/mcgill-student-speaks-out-about-rape/>.

<sup>5</sup> Billy Shields, ‘McGill Campus Football Team at Centre of Sex Assault Controversy’, *Global News*, 22 November 2013: <https://globalnews.ca/news/985364/mcgill-campus-football-team-the-centre-of-sex-assault-controversy/>.

On top of this experience, I can recount that, on more than one occasion, I have been in a roomful of women where, upon sharing, we learned that *our* statistic was actually 100% percent of the women present. Taken together, this is starting to describe a situation where sexual violence against women can only be described as ‘normal’. It is just a part of life.

When violence of a sexual nature is normalised, sociologists refer to this as ‘rape culture’. According to the Shiloh Project, which is a research project run by the Sheffield Institute for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies that is tasked with researching ‘Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible’, ‘rape cultures’ can be defined as “cultures that conceptualise gender violence as an ‘inevitable’ or even profitable outcome of normative social gender roles”.<sup>6</sup>

This brings me to what is, as I see it, an overlap in discourse between what has happened with Catholic clerical abuse and what happens in the university setting: and that is the reinforcing of rape culture by silencing survivors. Institutions seem inherently structured to transmit the message that it is better for victims to suffer in silence than for people in power, whether rapists or the organisations with which they are affiliated, to be inconvenienced.

Now, let us pause and take a breath. This is a heavy topic, and likely not what you expected from a New Testament scholar. You were perhaps hoping for something nice on how carpentry fitted into the social economy of first-century Galilean towns, or how tropes in early-Jewish apocalyptic writing are reworked by the author of Revelation. How does all this political and personal stuff square with my alleged historical-critical classroom, where objectivity and neutrality are supposed to rule?

The answer is that I have lost my faith in an objective, neutral, scientific classroom, in biblical studies or in any other field. As Achtemeier puts it, ‘there is no such thing as a neutral, historical-critical, scientific, objective interpretation...’<sup>7</sup> The more I interact with students, the more I understand that to maintain an attitude that the classroom is *not* political is tacitly to convey to them that the *status quo* is acceptable, which is not an apolitical message in the least. Luise Schottroff wrote that “in traditional Western theology it is considered ‘scientific’ to adopt a (supposed) posture of neutrality toward the object of research and to take no account of one’s own context. This ‘neutrality’ conceals the patriarchal biases expressed by a theological discipline that imagines itself to be independent of its

<sup>6</sup> ‘The Shiloh Project: Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible’, Sheffield Institute of Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/siibs/sresearch/the-shiloh-project>.

<sup>7</sup> E. Achtemeier, ‘The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Theology’, *Interpretation* 42 (1988) p. 50.

social context.”<sup>8</sup> How many famous thinkers have been recorded saying something along the lines of Elie Wiesel regarding silence, or apathy, or neutrality working to benefit the powerful? This is what makes the classroom, even the secular classroom, a site of ministry – the ministry of acknowledging that students’ lived experiences in bodies of different colours, different gender identities, and different abilities make a difference as to whether barriers and struggles will reduce their likelihood of success and flourishing. Working to make my classroom a place where intersecting circles of oppression and privilege are acknowledged, instead of ignored under the auspices of ‘objectivity’, is, in this way, a ministry of healing, of justice, and of social change, and more specifically, a small but important step toward challenging and changing rape culture.

Does this mean I make rape a topic of discussion in every module, from Biblical Greek to the Historical Jesus? Of course not. However, I maintain in this paper that rape is at the extreme end of a very long spectrum – a spectrum of behaviours that *silence*. At the other, more subtle end of that spectrum, and all along it, are thousands of lesser instances of silencing and diminishing that occur every day, and that are gentler extensions of the notion that women’s bodies do not belong to them, that men are the default human beings, and that women are valuable only insofar as they are pleasing or useful from a male standpoint. In this paper, I posit that these thousands of subtle means of silencing certain voices and not others set our whole society up to collectively value certain people above others—and to encourage certain people to value themselves as greater than others. In turn, those attitudes and behaviours plant the seeds that teach a society which bodies are rapeable and which bodies are above reproach. All the points along this spectrum of silencing, right down to an innocent tendency to interrupt women and not men in a group discussion, are part of what allow rape-culture to flourish. While they may be far from that extreme end of the spectrum of silencing that erases bodily autonomy and voice in the act of rape, they are not, I maintain, unrelated.

### Silencing in Classroom and Academy

What are some examples of subtle silencing behaviours that can occur in academia?

#### 1) Lack of Representation

Making no effort to provide diverse students or junior scholars with any representation in the form of role models, whether in publications

<sup>8</sup> Luise Schottroff, ‘The Sayings Source Q’, in *Searching the Scriptures 2: A Feminist Commentary* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994) p. 511.

or in permanent academic posts, is one subtle form of diminishing or silencing. When my handful of undergraduate students of colour look around the Humanities building where they study, and they see no black professors in the building, no black administrators in the office, and no black PhD students in the post-graduate study carrels, but they *do* see three black janitors, this is a lack of representation. A lack of representatives of people who look like one—whether disabled, women, non-white, etc.—in places of power subconsciously erodes one’s ability to imagine oneself in those places.<sup>9</sup> There is a lot of talk about commitment to diversity and equality, but when it is not reflected in who is hired, who is published, or who is cited, then those words lack adjacent actions.

I may not be able to bring about representation in the wider world of hiring and publication, but I can manipulate to some extent the degree to which a variety of students can see themselves represented and validated in spaces that I do control. Whom do I invite as guest lecturer? Who wrote my textbook? Who is appealed to as a definitive authority? Which readings do I assign? If they are all men, what message does that send to the young women who might be thinking of going further after their undergraduate studies? Are they all white? Are they all Protestant historical-critics, or can students from a range of theological backgrounds find themselves reflected in some of the assigned scholars? Does my list of readings reflect dogma or conversation? These are the kinds of questions teachers and leaders must keep in mind.

## 2) Gendered Group Dynamics

Another potential site of silencing over which I do have some control is in seminars and group discussions. Studies consistently show that despite the best efforts of instructors, male students receive about eight times more classroom attention than do female students.<sup>10</sup> It can be noted as an aside that, conversely, students’ perception of teachers is also heavily gendered, to the detriment of female teachers’ teaching evaluations, which can be used for decisions about promotion and tenure.<sup>11</sup> Do I step in and do something to change the dynamic when a small handful of overconfident male students monopolise

<sup>9</sup> For a collection of essays on gender and race representation, see Celine-Marie Pascale, ed., *Social Inequality and the Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> For an exhaustive investigation into gender dynamics in a classroom setting, see David Sadker, Myra Sadker, and Karen Zittleman, *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> A number of studies indicate that the language students use in teaching evaluations is radically different, depending whether the professor is male or female, favouring male professors for behaviours seen as negative in their female counterparts. See, e.g. Kristina

the whole hour, seemingly oblivious to the fact that hearing every half-baked thought that has ever occurred to them is *not* how other students expected to spend their tuition fees? Do I work with female students—or students who have what they tell me is the ‘wrong’ accent—in personal tutoring conversations to help them smash the filter in their heads that tells them not to speak in class because what they are thinking is ‘probably stupid’ and they don’t want to ‘waste other people’s time?’ These are issues that my colleagues and I deal with frequently.

### 3) The Politics of Citation

A specific area of silencing that I would like to flesh out in greater detail is one where I as a teacher do not have control—one that is systemically entrenched. It is an arena I call the ‘politics of citation’ and it is an excellent illustration of why so-called neutral historical-critical study is anything but. Rather, the agenda of neutral scholarship, whether deliberately or not, is the *status quo*. ‘Neutral’ biblical studies scholarship is typically Protestant. ‘Neutral’ biblical studies scholarship is typically white and male. But, as I hope to demonstrate in this section of my paper, ‘neutral’ biblical studies scholarship also typically does the work of re-inscribing and re-entrenching misogyny. We can see this when we examine who is cited and who is not, and how such citations are framed.

This summer, I came up with a name for a common citation problem. This problem is that *scholarship written by women and scholarship written about women only seems to be cited by other women or in chapters and books about women*. In other words, scholarship by or about women is tacitly not being treated as ‘real.’ I dubbed this practice of silencing scholarship by and about women ‘The Brooten Phenomenon’.<sup>12</sup>

I chose this term because of a crowning example: Bernadette Brooten’s masterful *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, published in 1982,<sup>13</sup> has yet to pass through the barrier to affect the classroom or the field outside what is incorrectly perceived as the realm of ‘women’s’ scholarship. In this revised dissertation, Brooten roundly refuted the argument (or, rather, the unargued assumption) that, unlike other

M. W. Mitchell and Jonathan Martin, ‘Gender Bias in Student Evaluations,’ in *Political Science and Politics* 51/3 (2018) pp. 648–652.

<sup>12</sup> The following section on Brooten has been reworked with permission of the publisher from Sara Parks, “‘The Brooten Phenomenon’: Moving Women from the Margins in Second-Temple and New Testament Scholarship,” *The Bible & Critical Theory* 14/2 (2018) pp. 2–6.

<sup>13</sup> Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Chico: Scholars, 1982).

religions in Greco-Roman antiquity, ancient Judaism had no female religious leadership. The book is a thorough catalogue of ancient inscriptions, each of which provides evidence for women leaders in Jewish antiquity. The effect is very strong when the totality of the evidence is considered.

When Brooten lays before the reader the lengths to which commentators through the centuries have gone in order to avoid the plain sense of the readings, the effect is almost hilarious. Each inscription had previously been read blatantly unnaturally, including by revered specialists of Jewish and Christian antiquity. Brooten re-analysed (or perhaps *actually* analysed for the first time) much of this previously-misread inscriptional data using the same methods that one might use for other religions of ancient Greece and Rome, such as the cult of Isis or Rome's Vestals. In so doing, she piled up a veritable avalanche of evidence for ancient Jewish women in leadership roles of various kinds.

The scholars before Brooten who had treated these inscriptions—which we now know to provide evidence for ancient Jewish women who were heads of synagogues, elders, or even priests—may have been cautious enough in their other work. But in the case of the evidence for women in positions of power within Jewish antiquity, each scholar, to a man, had dismissed the plain sense of such inscriptions as being impossible. *A priori* they had collectively said, ‘we know that women were not leaders in ancient Judaism, so this inscription must have a meaning other than what it says’. But, as Brooten notes, if it had been newly-discovered evidence for a mystery cult, no one would have thought that it made any methodological sense to doubt what it said.<sup>14</sup>

I want to share with you just a few of the acrobatic antics performed in order for interpreters to maintain their assumptions in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. In three Greek inscriptions in particular, women are accorded the specific title ‘head of synagogue’ (*archisynagōgos*). The inscriptions are not ambiguous. One, found on a tomb, reads: ‘Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue, built this tomb for her freed slaves and the slaves raised in her house. No one else has the right to bury anyone (here)’.<sup>15</sup>

Brooten traced the history of scholarship on this epitaph and found that Solomon Reinach first published the inscription; he declared that the title *archisynagōgos* must have merely been *honorary* rather than *functional*. To get over the fact that *archisynagōgos* had already been established as a functional title, he decided, when faced with female *archisynagōgoi*, that there must have been two stages in the

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p. 5.



history of the word's usage: an early functional stage, and a later honorific stage.<sup>16</sup> His reasoning was that, *a priori*, the word could not have meant what it usually meant because in this case it was referring to a woman. Next, someone named Weinberg solved the dilemma of a Jewish woman in a position of power by explaining that Rufina was clearly the *wife* of an *archisynagōgos*. His reasoning for this little linguistic minuet was completely circular: 'for women have never held an office in a Jewish community, and certainly not a synagogue office'.<sup>17</sup> Brooten reveals that Emil Schürer had been equally dismissive: 'Rufina herself bears the title *archisynagōgos*, which in the case of a woman is, of course, just a title'.<sup>18</sup>

Brooten collects example after example of this sort of sidestepping of the not one but three clear inscriptions assigning the term 'head of synagogue' to a woman. She cites another scholar who writes that Rufina 'was very likely a lady whom the congregation wished to honour, but to whom it could hardly have entrusted the actual charge of an office'.<sup>19</sup> Another concluded that, 'concerning the women, it can certainly not mean that they were bestowed with the dignity of a head of the synagogue, for the synagogue did not allow women such honours; it is rather the wives . . . who are meant'.<sup>20</sup> Brooten's catalogue of previous scholarship highlights the stunning fact that not one of these scholars even bothered to *argue* their positions, which represented extremely awkward readings of the evidence; they simply mentioned their conclusions, without evidence, as obvious.

Brooten's book covers numerous additional assignments of titles to women, ranging from 'elder' to 'synagogue mother' to 'synagogue head' to 'priest', again and again exposing the gymnastic contortions to which male scholars subjected the inscriptions in order to avoid taking them at face value. In every case where an inscription which suggested female leadership had been unearthed, scholars had posited bizarre explanations. The term 'priest' (*hierialhierissa*) had to be a proper name. Had to be the title of the woman's father. Had to be a misspelling. Or the priest had to be male, but—for reasons unknown—had a female name!

Brooten points out that "if these inscriptions had come from another Graeco-Roman religion, no scholar would have thought of arguing that 'priest' does not really mean 'priest'".<sup>21</sup> While these cases are mainly evidenced in diasporic Judaism, they should at the very least complicate the question of all-male Jewish leadership in

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p. 99.

antiquity. The oversimplified dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism that persists despite Martin Hengel's best efforts<sup>22</sup> is no excuse to ignore Brooten's findings.

Yet despite Brooten's exhaustive publication of clear examples, the old assumption *still* reigns: ancient Judaism had no women leaders. I posit that the case of Brooten's still-unincorporated yet completely convincing and exhaustive work of over thirty years ago indicates that the question of women in antiquity is not one that is gaining traction beyond what is perceived as its own niche of 'women and gender studies', precisely because, in general, women's research is side-lined and compartmentalised. For too long, research by and about women has been treated as ancillary to what are considered primary (that is, male-centred) topics and fields.

*Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* has been incorporated into, say, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*,<sup>23</sup> or *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*,<sup>24</sup> but it is not incorporated into *general* scholarship on synagogues or on Jewish priesthood. If it is, it is in the manner of the recent volume *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* by Lee Levine.<sup>25</sup> That is, it has a chapter on women in which Brooten's and others'<sup>26</sup> work on female leadership in early Judaism is discussed. The contents of this one chapter, called 'Women in the Synagogue', remain hermetically sealed off from noticeably informing other chapters.

For instance, despite Levine's treatment (in the chapter on women) of the cases where Jewish women are referred to as *hierieia* or *hierissa* (priestess), the very next chapter, called "Priests," avoids any such complication. Furthermore, the conclusion of the treatment of these inscriptions in Levine's one chapter on women is dismissive. It reads: 'In sum, there is certainly a possibility that most, if not all the titles that appear in over a score of Diaspora inscriptions are those of functioning women officials. The challenge, however, is finding a way to substantiate this claim, and not merely assert it.'<sup>27</sup> This, of course, misses the whole point of Brooten's work, which is that

<sup>22</sup> Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus: Studien zu ihrer Begegnung unter Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2 Jh.s v.Chr* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Sharon James and Sheila Dillon, eds., *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, eds., *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer, 'A New Inscription from Malta and the Question of Women Elders in the Diaspora Jewish Communities', *Harvard Theological Review* 78/3-4 (1985) pp. 431-38.

<sup>27</sup> Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 511.

*unsubstantiated claims and assumptions have marked the opposite view*, that is, that Jewish women could not, *a priori*, have been leaders, and Brooten's challenge is that the burden of proof should fall on those who wish to read all of these inscriptions against their simplest reading.

Levine goes on to spend some time making sure that the reader knows that such cases of women's leadership were aberrations and 'departures'. He forms a narrative where Judaism had, in cases where women's leadership could not be denied, been 'influenced by the surrounding culture',<sup>28</sup> as though such a thing were somehow not the case for every human group, everywhere, at all times!

As though asking for more proof of Jewish women leaders, isolating the proof we have as aberrant, and then associating women's leadership with 'other cultures' had closed the case, the book goes on to largely tell the history of men, and treat subjects topically without having to bother too much more with women's history. The author even concludes:

Jewish society was quite different from its social environs. To the best of our knowledge, women did not play any kind of liturgical role in the synagogue . . . . Perhaps it was the Semitic, Near Eastern roots of Israelite tradition that might explain why Jews looked askance at women's cultic participation . . . or perhaps it was because of the monotheistic nature of Judaism: at the centre of Judaism is one God, of masculine gender.<sup>29</sup>

Although Brooten is now a distinguished and world-class senior scholar, her seminal work in many ways still languishes. Scholars and theologians still say things like 'unlike all other religions of Greco-Roman antiquity, Judaism had strictly male religious leadership'. Or, worse, they contrast this stereotype of Judaism with early Christianity using the trope that many scholars have pointed out within Christian scholarship, whereby 'ancient Judaism was hopelessly patriarchal until Jesus came along and emancipated everyone'.<sup>30</sup> This

<sup>28</sup> Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 515.

<sup>29</sup> Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 518.

<sup>30</sup> Amy-Jill Levine sounds an alarm about the dichotomy that much of the scholarship on women in early Christianity has set up between 'women in early Judaism' *versus* 'women in early Christianity', noting that both are extreme caricatures, with Judaism assumed (*a priori*) to be hopelessly patriarchal and restrictive for women, and Christianity depicted as unflaggingly emancipatory. See Amy-Jill Levine, 'Second-Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women: Yeast of Eden' in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) p. 307 and 'Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?' in *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism* (ed. P. Fredriksen and A. Reinhartz; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) pp. 77–98. See also Judith Plaskow, 'Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Interpretation' in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993) pp. 17–29.

lack of integration of Brooten's work into 'regular scholarship' is not because Brooten's work is lacking in any way as research. It is because *work on or by women often struggles to cross the bridge into scholarship written by men or purportedly about general (rather than gender-specific) topics*. This is what I mean by 'The Brooten Phenomenon'. When more women than ever before are working in the fields of early Judaism, early Christianity, biblical studies, and theology, and more scholars in those fields have their eye on women and gender, but their conclusions are quite frequently remaining in closed feedback loops without dissemination and integration, this is unquestionably another example of silencing and devaluing of certain topics, certain scholars, and certain categories of human beings.<sup>31</sup>

### Toward Solutions

One way educators might shift away from participation in these silencing tendencies is to marshal whatever assets we do possess, in the economy of privilege and power, to act as allies with sisters and brothers from less privileged circles of identity. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has nuanced the notion of patriarchy (the hierarchical rule of women by men) by describing it instead as 'kyriarchy' in order, in her words, 'to connote a complex systemic inter-structuring of sexism, racism, classism, and cultural-religious imperialism'.<sup>32</sup> Kyriarchy is thus a sticky web of oppressions and powers that is far more complicated than men oppressing women. Instead, class, ability, social status, ethnicity, etc. are all factored in to the equation. Elite women's voices are heard over those of non-elite women. English-speakers' voices are heard over those of Korean-speaking voices. Wealthy and educated men of colour wield power over impoverished people of colour. Clerics wield power over laypeople . . . and so it goes on. Each individual falls both 'under' and 'over' various other individuals in various intersections of domination and subjugation.

This means that although I am a woman and thus marginalised in the field of biblical studies, I am, on the other hand, a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, straight, Christian voice, which is automatically accorded more respect and gravitas than the voices of many of my differently-abled and differently-racialised sisters. I thus propose that when I use these privileges to make my voice heard, in places such as this conference, a university classroom, and scholarly publications,

<sup>31</sup> This ends the section of material reworked from Parks, 'The Brooten Phenomenon', pp. 2–6.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist/Women Priests – An Oxymoron?" *New Women/New Church*, (Fall 1995) p. 18. The neologism first appeared in her *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

it is my duty to use them in order to amplify more marginalised interests. It is my duty to be skewed toward listening for and augmenting the needs and interests of people who are traditionally at the periphery.

When the three “Bible bros” who sit at the front of my New Testament class banter boisterously every day about their dogmatic conflicts as though their denominations were their football teams, it is my duty to remember that the three Muslim women sitting in the back paid tuition fees to learn about the first-century Jewish and Roman contexts of the New Testament texts, not the inter-denominational social dynamics of twenty-first-century British Protestantism. It is my duty to remember that when assigning grades for participation that some of the class has been socialised into confidence and a robust sense of self-worth, while some of the class may never have been encouraged to speak. It is my duty to find out why certain students miss more lectures: are they out too late partying, as we tend to assume, or are they working two part-time jobs to pay their own way through and even help their families back home? It is my duty to take the extra time to seek out scholarship like Brooten’s *when I am teaching about priests and synagogues, not only when I am teaching about ‘women’*.

And to turn this around to the men in my audience in positions of authority over students or over parishioners, I will repeat what I have written elsewhere:

The societal frameworks that make sexual assault against women commonplace may have far more traumatising results than those which make scholarship on ancient women remain ancillary, but they both fall along the same patriarchal—or kyriarchal—spectrum of silencing and domination. As women are the ones most frequently marginalised along the spectrum of silencing that is patriarchy, it should not fall exclusively to women to drive change toward the more integrated and ethical scholarship we want.<sup>33</sup>

If my white, educated woman’s voice can be marshalled to amplify the voices of other junior women scholars and people of colour, then how much more powerful is it when men choose to act as allies in this way? If anything at all can be taken away from this paper, I hope it is that the men in the room are inspired to—dare I coin a term—manplify the interests of those outside their own circles of identification.

Perhaps it has by now become at least arguably apparent that the politics of citation and the politics of inclusion in the classroom are important sites of ‘ministry’ for secular biblical studies. Maintaining a secular space—that is, a pluralistic space that does

<sup>33</sup> Parks, ‘The Brooten Phenomenon’ p. 10.

not cater to one demographic only, but is committed to diversity and inclusion—is the way forward if we want to invite to the table of biblical scholarship those who have experienced systemic inequity and abuse. Making a secular space to do biblical studies is thus a sacred duty.

You will have noticed that hidden in my introduction, where I mentioned being in situations where 100% of the women had experienced sexual assault on some level, is the admission that I am one of those statistics. And for an academic woman to admit having survived violent sexual assault, in a public professional setting, is not the norm. Personally, I would not have done it even two years ago. What has changed? Well, last year the #MeToo movement unexpectedly changed the discourse around sexual assault, at least in the Western world. A few bricks were knocked out of the wall of stigma around rape, as overwhelming numbers of people from all walks of life including typically apolitical academic professionals went public, almost of one accord, as survivors of sexual violence, in order to show those who were traumatised and alone that they were far, far from alone, as well as to show those who resisted feminism saying “it’s not that bad,” “we don’t need feminism anymore,” “most men are nice and respectful,” that yes, actually, it is still that bad. Candid admissions of vulnerability and situatedness are another way of pushing back against the spectrum of silencing, and are another way of working to construct spaces that feel safer for students (and faculty and parishioners) who come from hitherto marginalised, fearful, abusive, and voiceless contexts.

I was particularly heartened when more than one of my male colleagues in the theology department at the University of Nottingham chose to bring the #MeToo discussion into their own seminars and even public talks. Let’s be very frank: if a picture is worth a thousand words, a man’s voice is worth a thousand women’s voices in terms of lending legitimacy to a topic. If women’s voices are so easily ignored in research, as we have seen above with Brooten, they are also easily ignored in lecture theatres. It would have been understandable for my colleagues to ignore the fact that academics and post-graduate students the world over were suddenly sharing, along with the rest of the social media world, their own experiences of gender-based violence in places that could be seen by their students, employers, potential employers, and colleagues. It would have been considered professional and neutral. But you can bet that when these men flagged up #MeToo in their seminars on Systematic Theology and Introduction to Islam as noteworthy and relevant, the message got across far more powerfully than if it were me flagging it up in the Women and Gender in the New Testament module, if you see what I mean. Society has given these men a microphone, and they deliberately chose to use it to lift up the plight of others.

## The Long History of Silencing

Just to make sure that I include at least a little New Testament scholarship, I close with a reminder that systemic silencing is nothing new. When we say #MeToo, we say it not only in relation to living sisters, but to sisters from our deep Christian past. Women at Christianity's very beginnings fell victim to various actions along the patriarchal and kyriarchal spectrum of silencing that contributes to a rape culture dating all the way back to Greece and Rome. We say #MeToo with Junia, with Mary Magdalene,<sup>34</sup> with Phoebe, with Thecla, and with the church leader nicknamed Jezebel by the author of Revelation (Rev 2:20–23)—now there is a text ripe for analysis with regards to gendered sexual violence.<sup>35</sup> The strong women at the roots of early Christianity, without whom Christianity may very well not exist today, have all been given short shrift, erased, replaced, sexualised, virgined, or otherwise dehumanised, diminished, and downplayed, in misogynistic efforts that began as early as the first-century. As many scholars of early Christianity have noted,<sup>36</sup> there is a striking downward progression from where women stood at the earliest stages of the Jewish Jesus movement to where they stood by the time of the Patristic period. According to what historians can glean from the New Testament alone, women began as the main financial backers of the whole affair (Luke 8:2–3; Acts 16:4–5; Rom 16:2), were counted among the movement's first missionaries and teachers,<sup>37</sup> were *the* driving instruments in a narrative of resurrection, were named by Paul as having been apostles (Rom 16:7) and deacons (Rom 16:1) long before he ever joined the programme, were leaders of churches,<sup>38</sup> were prophets (1 Cor 11:5), and were brave martyrs in every sense of the word. Within a single century, their

<sup>34</sup> For a good discussion of historical sources for Mary Magdalene and for key moments in her sexualisation and diminishment, such as her erroneous conflation with a prostitute by Pope Gregory in 591, see Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 185–192.

<sup>35</sup> See John Marshall, 'Gender and Empire: Sexualised Violence in John's Anti-Imperialist Apocalypse' in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John* (ed. A.-J. Levine; London: T&T Clark, 2009), and Meredith Warren, (forthcoming) 'This Is The End: Rape Jokes, Sexual Violence, and Empire in Revelation and Apocalyptic Film.'

<sup>36</sup> e.g. Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> See Luise Schottroff, 'Itinerant Prophetesses: A Feminist Analysis of the Sayings Source Q' in *The Gospel Behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* (ed. R. A. Piper; Leiden: Brill, 1995) pp. 347–360.

<sup>38</sup> See Romans 16:3–5 as well as Francois Bovon, 'Women Priestesses in the Apocryphal Acts of Philip' in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (ed. Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson-Debaufre; London: Trinity Press International, 2003) pp. 109–121, and Ute Eisen,

removal from places of authority and honour can only be described as a systematic and deliberate rhetorical war on women. While vestiges of women's power remain in the record down through several centuries, every effort seems to have been made to construct a canon and an orthodox practice that not only pushed women back into subordinate roles, but painted this as the will of God, in some cases even advocating a view of women as less than human, blaming women along with Eve but not Adam as Christ-killers,<sup>39</sup> and as carriers of original sin, and associating them with luring men to temptation and downfall,<sup>40</sup> being useful only for procreation.<sup>41</sup>

Each reader must then decide whether, and if so, how, our own communities are working to entrench systems of silencing, bullying, and selfish abuses of power, or whether, and if so, how, we are working to dismantle oppression and minister to the oppressed in classrooms, in our scholarly work, in our communities of faith, and in the wider world.

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*Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum: Epigraphische und literarische Studien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* 1:1: 'The curse God pronounced on your sex still weighs on the world... You are the devil's gateway... You are the first that deserted the divine laws. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because you deserved death, it was the son of God who had to die.'

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *Soliloq.* I 10: 'I consider that nothing so casts down the manly mind from its heights as the fondling of women, and those bodily contacts which belong to the married state.'

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *De genesi ad litteram*, 9, 5–9: 'I don't see what sort of help woman was created to provide man with, if one excludes the purpose of procreation. If woman was not given to man for help in bearing children, for what help could she be? To till the earth together? If help were needed for that, man would have been a better help for man. The same goes for comfort in solitude. How much more pleasure is it for life and conversation when two friends live together than when a man and a woman cohabit?''