

(including, as it does, ourselves), we cannot then blame God for the necessary concomitant of some suffering. I think I have also shown that although there is no such case for the natural necessity of *moral* evil, the most we can say is not that God causes moral evil but that he does not prevent it – that he permits it; and I think I have shown that in not preventing it God is not failing in any duty and thus cannot be charged with neglect.

It remains of course, that I have not the faintest idea *why* God permits moral evil. I know why there is suffering, without it there would be no real animals, but I do not know why there is sin. This is an unfathomable mystery but it is not a contradiction.

Suffering (of the lamb) is not, of course, a perspicuous sign of God's goodness, but the fulfilment (of the lion), which is its concomitant *is* a sign of God's goodness in sin however, there is no *manifestation* of God's goodness at all. But it is one thing to say that sin is *not a manifestation* of God's goodness and quite another to say that sin is a manifestation that God is *not good*. We do not know *why* the good God has made a world which does not at all times manifest his goodness, but the notion is not contradictory. Somehow the infinite goodness of God is compatible with his allowing sin. We do not know how, but it is good to recognise this for it reminds us that we know nothing of God and his purposes except that he loves us and wishes us to share his life of love.

## Genesis and Patriarchy

Angela West

### *Part I What has feminist discourse got in common with the language of biblical theology?*

The authors of Genesis, and other books in the Pentateuch, created their text by taking myths and stories that had arisen in various sections of their society at different stages of its development, and by means of a process of combination, re-arrangement and redaction, they re-wrote them to provide an interpretation suitable for their society in quite new historical circumstances. These circumstances were extreme – they were a people cut off from their homeland and their origins, exiles in the superior and sophisticated civilisation of imperial Babylon.<sup>1</sup> In his account of the Creation and the Fall, the Yahwist historian (as scholars refer

to this one of the two authorial narratives of Genesis) addresses himself to a people experiencing political subordination and alienation from the culture in which they are living. Hence, he takes up what would be an understandable preoccupation for them in such circumstances – a reflection on the origins of human culture.

Juliet Mitchell, in her book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* embarks on a project that, in some sense, resembles that of the Yahwist historian. ‘All questions relating to the position and role of women in society’ she says, ‘tend sooner or later to founder on the bedrock of “where did it all start”?’ This, too, is a question about the origin of human culture, and what it implies for the subordinate position that women find themselves in. By taking Freud’s psychoanalytical myth of the origins of patriarchal society, together with Engel’s historical materialist account of women’s subordination in the institutions of the family, private property and the state, she re-appropriates for feminism two of the most important critical traditions of our society. I want to consider the way in which both the form and the content of her account parallel those of the Yahwist’s narrative, and how both provide an important key for the problem of language for women, how it relates to the nature of their subordinate status, and in what sense language, especially the language of biblical theology, can constitute the means of our liberation.

*Language is patriarchal: the problem of a feminist discourse*

It is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings, situated within the structures of gender and class. Drawing on recent work in psychoanalysis, Juliet Mitchell shows that the child’s entry into human culture is coterminous with its learning of language, and it is integral to the process of becoming a sexed individual; language reflects the fundamental cultural distinction between male and female. Recent work in the socio-linguistics confirms the existence of this distinction from another source; female speech has been shown to have certain identifiable characteristics:<sup>2</sup> it is more concrete, less abstract and logically coherent than male speech, and it is more adapted to its context than its male counterpart. And the normal and normative context for women’s speech is the private sphere. Female gender is constituted by the process of being socialised into the sphere of privatised discourse, thus making women largely inaudible in history and science. For language is not simply different between women and men, it is differently evaluated. The abstract is valued above the concrete, the public is more important than the private. To speak as a woman is to speak from a culturally subordinate position. This is the problem behind a crucial question for feminists – namely, how to construct a feminist discourse, a discourse that is not simply male, but is appropriate to women and yet not

subordinate. At present such a discourse is largely a contradiction, an impossibility. Women's history is primarily one of silence – or of having been silenced in relation to the public stage of history. To speak publicly therefore, and remain a woman, is a problem. Public modes of speaking are patriarchal discourses, and when women enter these, either their presence in the discourse will subvert their identity as a woman, or it must act subversively on the nature of the discourse itself. Julia Casterton in her article, 'In the Kitchen: Problems of Women's Studies Courses' published in *Red Letters* No 9 says; 'A deconstructing of existing forms is needed before any true appropriation of the Word is possible. Straight appropriation re-creates old patterns. Language, like the state, is not just a neutral shell which can be appropriated by another sex or class; structures of dominance are implicit in both. The subject is inscribed sexually, politically, historically within them'. Theology is a language in which, like other discourses, the structures of dominance are implicit, and therefore presents women with the problem of true appropriation of the Word. The Word that is the subject of theology, that is the subject of the whole of Jewish and Christian history is, I want to suggest, the only one that feminists can appropriate without – ultimately – being appropriated by it – i.e. being made into a form of male property – and is therefore somewhat different from other discourses. Now Julia Casterton, is, I've no doubt, a properly secular feminist and would probably be scandalised at my appropriating her words in such a way as to give them a 'theological' meaning. No less offended, I'm sure, would be any proper theologian whose discourse I have just recommended for feminist subversion. But to him I'm suggesting that it may be necessary for the essential integrity of theology that it be subverted, that herein lies the hope for its own future: that theology as a discipline is such that only through the undermining of its own identity can it hope to reveal that which it takes as the object of its discourse – the Word.<sup>3</sup> As such, it has a unique potential for illuminating the problem of a feminist discourse.

*Scripture as collective text: a paradigm for feminist discourse*

One of the ways feminists have sought to explore the problem of a feminist mode of discourse is by means of the collective text, whereby a group of women jointly produce a text, the authorship of which then belongs to the collective. This has several advantages. It serves as a kind of commentary on the nature of authority, which in a patriarchal society, is a largely male-identified concept. Because the text has no single author, the text itself has an authorship/authority that is separable from any of its individual authors and their personal statuses. In relation to the text they may be actually or effectively anonymous. Secondly the text may be produced in such a way that its voice is not unanimous, but a div-

ergence of opinion is represented within the context of a single context. Within the textual boundaries, there can be both affirmation and contradiction.

The scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition are a paradigm of just such a form of collective text. They are the record of a community in the act of appropriating, transcribing and transforming its myths for a historical purpose, and its myths and historical traditions for a theological purpose; in so doing, they have created a text which continually presents contradiction within affirmation, uses words to supersede words and ultimately to affirm the Word – made flesh.

The texts of the Old Testament, like Genesis, have appropriated the myths of the nation of Israel, and put them to historical use. Myth itself can be seen as the archetype of the collective text; they are the product of the community with an authorship that is both collective and anonymous, and to the extent that they are not produced by an individual and conscious process of authorship, they are analogous to dreams that are the product of the unconscious which in Freudian terms is necessarily collective. As they are thus collectively produced, they may be seen as collectively owned, the property of the collectivity and its culture. I shall be suggesting here that it is part of the work of feminist discourse to identify this property of the nations of humanity in the form of its myths, and to reclaim for the whole collectivity those myths that have been sectionally appropriated by class and patriarchal society.

But it may be argued that many of those myths that are at the foundation of our culture are, in their essential form, like language, already patriarchal. In response to this discovery, some feminists have been tempted to invent their own. But this we cannot afford to do because it is the fastest route back to the kitchen. . . to reinvent language is to end up speaking to no-one but ourselves, which for women is the normal course of events in history, and for feminists to speak in the teeth of patriarchy, that is, through the contradictions that are implicit in its myths.

#### *Genesis as myth re-created for feminists*

Genesis is not simply myth, but myth is one of its functions and initially, at least, I'm going to treat it as such. The story of the Fall is a myth that has exercised a strong fascination on many people, feminists along with others, and which for some reason, we seem to be unable to leave alone. Here I shall take a look at it from the point of view of women who, by reason of their engagement in the task of reproducing humanity, haven't had time to give it serious consideration before. The first thing we notice about Eve when we meet her strolling in the garden is that she actually isn't engaged in this type of work (reproduction) or suf-

fering under any of its associated burdens; and this is not because the servants or even Adam are looking after the kids; the work of reproduction just isn't represented in the scenario of Paradise.

She meets the serpent who persuades her that eating from the fruit tree in the middle of the garden won't bring death, as God has said, but instead 'your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing Good and Evil' (Gen 3:5). The reasons why Eve decides to act on this suggestion show that her interests and concerns at this point are characteristically human and not specifically female. They are practical and materialist ('the woman saw the tree was good for food') aesthetic ('that it was a delight to the eyes') and intellectual and spiritual ('that the tree was to be desired to make one wise'). Her concerns are those of many feminists today; and her experience, as a result of her initiative here, also parallels that of many feminists who set out to pursue these concerns; her/their eyes are opened only to discover that the structures of human society are patriarchal, that both science and morality are essentially patriarchal.

The expulsion of Eve and her mate from the garden signifies the inauguration of human culture, and here at its outset we find represented the division of labour between the sexes; the work of reproduction falls to her and sexual subordination is its consequence. The experience of Eve is reproduced in countless female biographies that have gone largely unrecorded in history: when the work of reproduction begins, the brief interlude of comradeship with men is over, the Fall is concretely experienced in their lives as sexual subordination. As young women they possessed, as human beings, the desire for the knowledge of good and evil; as mothers (and those who are sexually initiated) they are in possession of that knowledge of good and evil that is the coming of patriarchy -- and it has rendered them powerless. It is for this reason that, as Mitchell has shown, it is *fathers*, not men, that have the determinate power, and it is thus patriarchy, not andrarchy, that we are concerned with.

God had said that if Eve and Adam ate the fruit of the tree, they would die: the serpent in his conversation with Eve, contradicts this. In the event, both predictions are shown to be true. The sequel story to the Fall is that of Cain and Abel, in which the children of Eve start to murder each other and clearly death has made its way into human history. The desire to know good and evil has split the bond of obedience and uncritical trust between God and the human pair. But the uniqueness of this Creator God is revealed precisely by the power to break through beyond the breaking up ... The other side of death is birth; the processes of generation that have come as a result of the Fall are death and birth, whereas before there was only life. The destruction of the good, seen to be

absolute, has become at the hands of God, the destruction of the limited good, beyond which there is a greater good to be sought and found. With birth, there is the birth of descendants; and it is to one of these, Abraham, that God, in a further sequel, gives a new promise – to multiply his descendants as the stars of heaven, and through these to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. With the faithfulness of Abraham, God can begin the recreation; from out of the bonds smashed by the Fall, God makes the covenant.

The coming of the sexual processes of generation has meant the tying of gender to reproductive role. After the Fall, Eve's new gender identity is as 'mother of all living' and with this, woman is placed in primary relation to the poles of birth and death, the points at which nature touches culture.<sup>4</sup> And situated as she is thus, as it were, on the boundaries of human culture, she embodies ambiguity towards its creation. Women are, in one sense, without a place of their own in human culture, that is patriarchy. The implications of this radical ambiguity are in its critical potential for feminists. In a society that is, human society – where women are dispossessed, they are also uniquely well placed to become its critics.

*Genesis as exit from myth: Israel enters the historical by way of Genesis' critique of the mythology of class society*

To treat the story as myth has been to use it to make sense of one's present experience in terms of the apparently universal pattern that the myth displays. It is thus that the work of re-appropriation is carried on. However, feminist re-appropriation of myths is one thing ... but the canons of Marxist-feminist literary criticism require that one be engaged on de-constructing the text – that is, uncovering the precise historical and social determinants that are responsible for the narrative coming to be in the specific form that it is. To make historical is to particularize, and the resultant specificity ruptures the claim to universality. Thus, in this case, we must ask, what is the historical genesis of Genesis?

And here (elsewhere, certainly but particularly here) I'm much in debt to Timothy Radcliffe's recent work on the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> The Yahwist's narratives took shape in sixth-century Babylon, where the Judean exiles were confronted with the most powerful and sophisticated civilisation that their world had ever known, which must have made their own cultural traditions seem puny and provincial by comparison. Yet faced with the manifestly superior wisdom of the dominant culture, symbolised in its two great literary creations, the *Enuma Elish*, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the exiles nevertheless took upon themselves the seemingly impossible task of devising a cultural critique from their own position as dispossessed subjects, that would demonstrate the ultimately more

significant understanding of wisdom that was the unique possession of their people and which had its source in their relationship with their one God, Yahweh.

The *Enuma Elish* is the Babylonian myth of Creation, and it features a pantheon of gods who quarrel and make alliances (as gods do) and where the junior gods get fed up with doing all the work and stage a rebellion, the final outcome of which is that the gods create humanity as a slave of the gods. As Timothy Radcliffe says, citing Saggs,<sup>6</sup> 'This theology is a legitimization of the social structures of Mesopotamia in which the vast majority of the population were, in fact, the slaves of the gods, working on the enormous temple estates, digging the canals and offering sacrifices. The mythology is a projection of the state'. For the stateless Judeans, their Creation and Fall story in Genesis is a riposte to the *Enuma Elish*, which asserts that Yahweh, not Marduk, was the Lord of Creation and that he created the human pair as the friends of God, and not as God's slaves. The Fall is, as Timothy Radcliffe says, a meditation on the ambiguity of human wisdom. It's also a polemic against Babylonian culture showing its wisdom to be a form of hubris. In Genesis, wisdom is seen as a great gift to the race which Yahweh shares with Adam and Eve in naming and ruling the rest of creation. But in the attempt to take wisdom for themselves, to appropriate and privatise it, he and she become the entry point for evil, for death. Man becomes the maker of moral systems, the source of value judgments and absolutised knowledge outside the bond with God. The consequence, as Eve discovers, is the rupture of egalitarian social relations, and the entry of class society based on the division of labour (that which in the Babylonian story is treated as original to creation). The fracturing of human society, with the entry of the principle of ordination, becomes immediately apparent in Eve's relation with Adam, as we saw.

For the Yahwist historian, the human community represented by Eve and Adam is also the ethnic community of Israel, who have been expelled from the fertile garden that was their homeland, to live as exiles in the wider world. Exiles they are and aliens, but not merely slaves in the hierarchic, class society of Babylon, for they still possess a memory of a time when things are not as they are now.<sup>7</sup> The Creation story mirrors an irrevocably broken relationship with their own Creator God and yet ... the relationship still continues. Unlike in the Babylonian story, where it's evident that the gods ultimately depend on their slaves as much as these depend on them, there is not shown here the internal necessity to return to the status quo, to re-create the ideal at whatever cost. Yahweh is free and gracious — and can contemplate the ruin of his order without thereby being ruined. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden but Yahweh, as it were, follows them and is seen

to make the protective gesture of clothing them. Yahweh, unlike Marduk (the Babylonian god) can recognise the new state of things, can create blessing out of curse, as the story of the blessing of Abraham and his descendants confirms. It is not an idealist narrative, but has a dialectical structure that can bear a historical materialist interpretation. Here God, you might say, descends with Eve and Adam from the world of the universal, of myth and ideology, into the world of history, generation and daily bread.

*Descending from the eternal present.<sup>8</sup> Women's entry into the historical – a problem for women and for patriarchal history*

Thus Genesis functions as myth, but it is also much more than a myth. It is the beginning of a history of liberation, the history of a people forced by social and political circumstances to emerge from the timeless and cyclical structures of a myth-dominated universe into a conscious and written reflection on their history-constituted-as-theological-identity. Genesis, then, marks for Israel, the moment of descent into history, which for a subject people, is the way out of 'eternal' bondage. In order to appear on the stage of history, a subject people must ask themselves, 'How did it all start?' By conceiving the genesis of their own history, the Israelites could avoid total incorporation in the oppressive structures of the eternal present of Babylon. To 'create' the memory of a time prior to defeat (Fall) is to keep alive the possibility that things have not always been, and therefore need not always be as bad as they are now. It is a move from a static, ahistorical social orientation to one that is critical and utopian – a projection into the future.<sup>9</sup>

Thus Genesis constitutes a mode of exit from ideology into the historical, whereby those who are in subjection find a way of becoming the subjects of their own history. As such, it has relevance for women or for those women who are finding themselves obliged to enter history in a way hitherto unknown to women. And here it might be useful to reflect on the fact that Genesis, though it comes at the beginning (of the Bible) and deals with beginnings, is not itself originally a beginning. It is a product of a stage of development that is already quite far advanced in relation to the historical process with which it is concerned. To have reached the stage where one can ask questions about the beginning is a sure sign that one has already advanced quite a way beyond it; thus my 3½ year old daughter is rather anxious to know how it was that she came out of me; with her, as with the Israelites, consciousness of being definitely outside their place of origin, has caused her to reflect how this expulsion came about. I begin to see that it will take a further act of reflection and a slightly greater degree of sophistication on her part to start asking questions about how she began there in the first place – her genesis. All this makes it clearer why the Israelites, faced with the fact of expulsion from



their fertile native land, came to construct a story to account for the origin of this fertility; it also brings home to me the necessity for narratives in situations like this when daughters ask their mothers such questions; which brings me, in a roundabout way, back to where I began – that is, with Juliet Mitchell's question about the genesis of women's oppression.

In picking up the question, 'Where did it all start?' Mitchell attempts an answer to the problem by revising the question. 'It seems to me' she says, 'that why did it happen? and historically when? are both false questions. The questions that should, I think, be asked in place of these are; how does it happen and when does it take place in our society?' Thus by re-constituting the questions about women's oppression as she goes on to do, Mitchell engages in a project similar to that of the Yahwist historian and the other exilic writers; taking myths, fragments and themes from the various religious and historical traditions they had brought with them into exile, they re-arranged and re-interpreted these into a text that could provide them with an understanding of the true significance of their present unhappy historical situation. In her case, it is the categories of Freudian psychoanalysis that she re-instates for feminists as a myth of origin of patriarchal society. It is in one sense, not exactly a myth since Freud invented it himself, but it can be seen as a genuine myth to the extent that he discovered it repeatedly and consistently in the case histories of his patients' unconscious memories. 'In the individual as Freud depicts it' says Mitchell, 'the world-historical defeat of the female takes place with the girl's castration complex and entry into the resolution of her Oedipus complex, her acceptance of her inferior feminine place in patriarchal society'. But Freud's myth confirms, what Genesis also tells us, that there is no question of the innate biological inferiority of women, but it is the creation of woman as sexed individual in relation to the reproduction of the species that accounts for her inferior position in human culture.

For the girl (as indeed for the boy, but differently) the resolution of the Oedipus conflict is another enactment of the Fall that precedes and in a sense preconditions the subsequent entry into the work of reproduction itself. As Mitchell says, 'The sphere of reproduction is the place of all women in patriarchal culture; men enter the class-dominated structures of history while women (as women, whatever their actual work in production) remain defined by kinship patterns of organisation! ... And later she concludes, 'In this instance, biology is no longer relevant. It has not been relevant since the foundation of human history. That foundation itself distinguished between the sexes and under patriarchal order, women are oppressed in their very psychologies of femininity'.

Thus women have not simply been 'hidden' or 'absent' from

history; they have been present from the start as the already defeated. Like the authors of Genesis, their perspective on history is that of the defeated. And the question that is necessarily raised by women's 'entry' into the historical (of which feminists are a symbol) is, 'what is the meaning of history for those for whom history has been a perpetual defeat?' Patriarchal history, the history of the victors, is called to give an account of itself.

*Engels and the Yahwist confirm the egalitarian nature of the bonds of sex and the materialist nature of equality.*

When Juliet Mitchell speaks psychoanalytically of the 'World-historical defeat of women' she is employing a concept originally developed by Engels in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* to describe the transition from a period of primitive communism characterised by 'mother-right' to forms of society characterised by patriarchy (father-right) and the essentially related institutions of private property, monogamy and the emergence of the state. But the postulation by Engels of a period of matriarchy, in which he has been followed by a number of feminist researchers concerned with the historical genesis of women's oppression, is, I think, a mistake because paradoxically, it is a product of patriarchal thinking;<sup>10</sup> it is derivative, a mirror image of patriarchy because it seeks to know 'when did women rule?' This is a hopeless quest because history does not lead back to the rule of women in a sense that is parallel to that of men. What history does indicate, however, is a period in the life of all societies when the principles of kinship – what Engels calls the 'bonds of sex' – were the governing mode of organisation. There is no society in which kinship, and the bonds of sex in the structure of marriage relations, do not exist to some degree as an organising principle, but it is only in small-scale, primitive society, prior to the emergence of a class society and the state, that kinship (extended family networks) exists as a governing principle (which is not the same as saying that in such societies women held governing power). But kinship and the bonds of sex can be seen as the female principle of social organisation, because it is a conception of social relations that takes blood ties as its ultimate basis, and for these, women are the indispensable focus and source. The characteristics of kin-based society are egalitarian and horizontal, of brotherhood and sisterhood, rather than vertical and hierarchical, and implying a relatively unstratified society. The emergence of class society has subordinated the kinship organisation as a governing principle, and it is in this sense that one can see the coming of class society and the rise of the state as being linked to the 'world-historical defeat of women'.

It is clear that to identify the bonds of sex as the realm of women in history is merely to confirm what feminist discourse has already established – namely that sexual and familial structures

are its principal terrain. The basis of the tribal 'mother-right' societies, organised along kinship lines, as Engels notes, is carnal and not ideal. Similarly the Yahwist text of Genesis that deals with the creation of woman suggests the carnal basis of the primordial community, when Adam greets Eve with the words, 'This at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh'. Bodily unity stands here as a metaphor for unity at the profoundest level. I take it to mean that the equality of woman and man rests in the fact that they are made of the same stuff, the same matter; that is the materialist foundation of the bond.

*The Ambiguity of the bond; Covenant as the real alternative to patriarchy*

Immediately after this remark of Adam's the Yahwist historian states, 'Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh'. The context here is somewhat surprising, as Roger Ruston points out,<sup>11</sup> because in patriarchal (in the traditional sense) Israelite society of the time, it would certainly have been the woman who had to leave her family and join her husband and not the other way round. I think this statement, with extraordinary succinctness, suggests the essential ambiguity of the sex bond. As traditional monogamy, it underpins patriarchal society, provides for the inheritance of private property through heirs and reinforces the division of labour in relation to reproduction. Yet sex bonding in another context can also represent the antithesis of monogamy, a threat to the orderly hierarchies of patriarchy and the radical breaking away from father and mother wherein lies the possibility for change in a static society. It explains why woman can accurately be seen both as the conservative upholders of the values of the status quo, or alternatively as epitomising that which threatens to undermine those values and to usher in a new and unknown future. It is this challenge that is implicit in the sex bond that feminists must articulate in the form of a political and theological critique of patriarchy.

In the narratives of the Old Testament, the imagery of the bond in its dual manifestation of bondage and covenant, is absolutely central to the theology of the Israelites and the growth of their self understanding as a people. 'Genesis is a retrospective theology of Israel's choice by Yahweh' says Roger Ruston in 'Theology of Sexuality and Marriage'. 'The Creation narratives are a kind of pre-history of the covenant, which must be accepted as a preparation for the dealings of God with Israel'. Yahweh is God alone (unlike other Near Eastern deities) and is in relation to no other god but only to the people of Israel; it is a relationship characterised not by a hierarchy of fixed positions and maintained by sacrifice, appeasement and ritual reassurance, but rather by the demand for trust, failure, dissolution and renewal – a relationship

that can only be constituted in and through a history (not a rite) and expressed in a language that has been forged in that history. Referring to Genesis as the pre-history of the covenant, Roger Ruston says, 'The natural love between man and woman is the climax of God's good creation but also a paradigm of nature being prepared for grace'. It sounds nice but the reality, to say the least, is a lot less smooth. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel is, in many respects, the Perfect Paradigm of the Impossible Relationship . . . For a start, it confronts the problem that most women have become familiar with in their relationships with men – that of inequality of power. Love demands an equality – the absence of the subjection of one party to the other is its pre-condition. Yet the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is the epitome of the extreme discrepancy in power . . . Unlike the petty godlings in the pantheons of other Ancient Near Eastern deities, Yahweh was utterly Other and totally omnipotent; clearly not much basis for equality here. The second problem is equally insurmountable; it is, as we piously reiterate from time to time, in the nature of love that it is unconditional. Yet Yahweh – as the Old Testament prophets have a habit of reminding us – is a God of righteousness; and it is in the nature of righteousness that certain conditions have to be fulfilled. Justice is eminently conditional -- can a covenant with the God of justice be anything other than conditional? Similarly, most people's relationships – though neither side embodies justice – are in practice, distinctly conditional. But, as Herbert McCabe has said, 'God is hopelessly in love with his people' – who are anything but righteous for most of their history. God's problem here reminds me of a friend of mine who traced the source of her troubles to the fact, that, as she said, she had a fatal attraction for unreliable people . . . Israel was for Yahweh distinctly unreliable; and in fact, it would be reasonable to conclude on the basis of the evidence that the relationship from the outset was most unpromising. It is a little alarming then to realise that the course of this relationship in history is the history of promise; the fate of the covenant is the future of salvation, and only with its fulfilment can we hope for the supersession of patriarchy.

*The historical relationship between woman and man as a paradigm of salvation history – according to Engels*

The work of Engels<sup>1 2</sup> could be seen as an attempt to understand, by means of a survey of the whole history of Western civilisation, how a harmonious relationship between the sexes can be possible – one that is manifestly impossible in the patriarchal capitalist society that this civilisation has produced. If we were to describe his project in terms utterly foreign to his discourse, we might well say that he is concerned with the redemption of marriage. 'If only marriages that are based on love are moral' he says, 'then

only those are moral in which love continues'. His vision of a post-revolutionary generation is 'of men who never in all their lives have had occasion to purchase a woman's surrender either with money or with any other means of social power, and of women who have never been obliged to surrender to any man out of any consideration other than that of real love, or to refrain from giving themselves to their beloved for fear of the economic consequences'.

But what exactly is 'real love'? That is what most feminists and some other sceptics would want to ask. Liberation from the myth of love is one of the first fruits of women's present entry into the historical; learning to recognise it as the cunning device designed to ease the passage of women into their life sentence under patriarchy, is an important beginning. But as with ancient Israel, liberation into the historical (Genesis) is only the beginning – of more and mightier contradictions; we are exposed to ever more ruthlessly radical questioning of our received pieties about love; does it exist? You may well ask . . . well, love, you might say, is an experimental hypothesis, and we are awaiting the outcome of history before drawing any conclusions as to whether it exists or not.

*Feminist discourse and the language of biblical theology;  
an eschatological relationship*

In this case, it is fortunate that the collective text that we are taking as our source and model (i.e. the Bible) represents history in a chronologically rather different fashion from most historians. Biblical scholarship reveals that the oldest bits of the Old Testament (i.e. folk songs from Deborah) don't come at the beginning, but somewhere in the middle (Judges). And Genesis, which comes at the beginning and is about origins, is as we saw, the product of a reflection that emerges from half-way through the historical process that it is concerned with. And it is likewise with endings; the end of the Old Testament history of the Jews, concluded with the closing of the canon some time in the first century AD, also marks the beginning of Christian history. In Jewish history, once again, what was an end was also a beginning; from the time in AD 68, when Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakai had himself smuggled out from the siege of Jerusalem in a coffin, so the story goes, and presented himself before Vespasian to beg permission to found a school, Rabbinic Judaism can be said to have begun its normative history. And for Christian history, what was its beginning? – The Word made flesh and born in a Palestinian outhouse – can also be understood as its End. What characterises the language of biblical theology is that it ultimately devolves upon this End. For Christians, the outcome of history can be said to have already happened, and this is its eschatological meaning. And what I am suggesting here is that the implications of the achievement of a feminist discourse

are also, eventually eschatological, because it is only by this means that such a discourse can surmount its inherent contradictions, which as I've been trying to show, are both necessary and irresolvable. I think the true significance of biblical theology is to be found in the language of eschatology, and for a feminist discourse, seeking to situate itself in history, this language alone is the one that does justice to its task. What this means, in terms of its concrete implications for Christian and feminist practice, is what I hope to go on to consider.

- 1 Here I'm following Timothy Radcliffe's dating of the Genesis texts from the exilic period, though I'm aware that many exegetes still opt for a Solomonic dating. If the latter were to be established, obviously this text would require some modification ...
- 2 See the work cited by Inga-Stina Ewbank on p 130 in *Women Writing and Writing about Women* ed. Mary Jacobus. Croom Helm, London 1979.
- 3 Cf Timothy Radcliffe's parallel argument about the Church on p 274 of his article 'The Old Testament as Word of God Canon and Identity' in *New Blackfriars* June 1980.
- 4 My observation here originated from Edwin Ardener's article, 'Belief and the Problem of Women' in *Perceiving Women*, ed. Shirley Ardener, Halstead Press, New York, 1977.
- 5 See article cited above in No 3.
- 6 *Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel*, H W Saggs, 1977.
- 7 I do not mean to imply here that Israel itself was a classless society which encountered class society for the first time in Babylon. Marked social stratification had been apparent in Israelite society since the 8th century BC (the time of Amos) and Israel in exile was only 'classless' because the lowest strata had never been taken into exile, and among those who were, other religious and social differences were rendered irrelevant by their new common socio-economic situation as exiles.
- 8 See forthcoming article by Timothy Ashplant on 'The Eternal Present'.
- 9 See Chap 11 'Eschatology and Politics' p 232 of G Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.
- 10 See Joan Bamberger's article, 'The Myth of Matriarchy; Why Men Rule in Primitive Society' in *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. Rosaldo and Lamphere, California 1979, for an analysis of the reactionary function of the matriarchal myth.
- 11 See Roger Ruston's unpublished paper, 'The Theology of Sexuality and Marriage'
- 12 *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Fred Engels.

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The value of a collective text in the struggle to create a feminist discourse has been sketched above. Such a text can take a variety of forms, with varying degrees of collectiveness and anonymity. An earlier example in this journal ('On Breaking the Rules' – a Feminist Reply to J M Cameron, *New Blackfriars*, Dec 1978) was the product of a wholly collective effort. The current text, though it has a single author, has been extensively discussed and revised with fellow members of several theological groups in Oxford. There still remain some points of difference or reinforcement

which could not be contained within the single context. The most important of these are briefly stated below.

*Daphne Nash:*

Engels p 7-8. Societies organised on a kinship basis are only 'egalitarian' when seen from a male perspective. The 'world-historical defeat of women' took place long before the coming of class society. It is already implicit in the rigid sexually-defined social roles on which kinship societies are based. In these societies, men, as elders and fathers, determine the public history of the community, and organise the distribution of women in a manner which ensures both the reproduction of the community, and their own progress within it. There is nothing peculiarly female in this type of organisation.

p 8. An alternative interpretation of this text (Gen 2:24) is possible. The Yahwist is saying something not about domicile but about a man's change of status on marriage. A man leaves his junior status as son (of his father and mother) to become a household head and father, by taking a wife. This is the moment at which he attains full adult membership of his community, the prime social significance of marriage. It can only be achieved by 'cleaving to his wife' – in other words, his full adult status is not independent of her, and this is of course extremely important. But on this interpretation, there is no need to assume that the man has left his paternal property; quite the opposite in fact – he possesses it fully only by founding a new generation.

A wry thought: you argue that women's language is peculiarly concrete and particular, yet your text is highly abstract . . . an instance of the contradiction of women engaging in theoretical discourse – indeed, of the problem of theoretical discourse itself.

*Roger Ruston:*

p 4. There remain unsolved enigmas in the Fall story when it is interpreted this way; why did the woman's natural desire for these good things lead to her downfall? Was God really trying to keep them away from her? And so is he therefore the real guardian of patriarchy? He seems to take on the shape of Blake's Urizen.

Showing what the Fall means in a woman's life certainly allows insights into its meaning that male commentators on Genesis could never arrive at on their own. But we may now recall that men too, may deeply regret the ending of that brief interlude of comradeship, and very often attempt to recover it after some years of marriage, with another woman who seems to 'understand'. This is not to say that men and women suffer on the same level or to the same extent in the process of reproduction; only that the woman's loss is also the man's loss, if he did but realise it. But men will have to rely on women's self-liberation to find their way back to the

wholeness which they too have lost.

And I have a question about the way the text is used; it is true that according to the J narrative of Genesis, reproduction follows the Fall, but it doesn't say, even there, that it is a *consequence* of the Fall. In the P narrative of Chap I, reproduction is the first command of God upon creation itself. Do we not have to opt for the final redaction – both J and P together – for the complete collective text?

*Julia Brosnan:*

p 5. Women actually experience the Fall from innocence very concretely. We may assume a kind of mutuality with men, but when it comes to sexual mutuality our assumptions are soon found to be unfounded; it is not without good reason that women have traditionally with-held their 'favours' or manipulated them very carefully. Sex turns women into whores or wives, and men into conquerors; by nature, of course, we are so weak or so wicked that we are only fit for the ultimate responsibility – dependent life.

*Timothy Radcliffe:*

It might be worth stressing what is implicit in the text, that the myths that are appropriated come not so much from Israel (though they may have been held earlier and re-told within Israel) as from her oppressors.

*Timothy Ashplant:*

I think the text is ambiguous on the question of the importance of asking about origins. Juliet Mitchell does after all reject the question. 'Historically, when did it happen?' in favour of 'When did it happen in our society?' The search for the origins of oppression may be a necessary symbolic and metaphorical explanation of how oppression continues. This should not be mistaken for a historical enquiry. Some oppressions (e.g. of blacks in Africa by whites) have a historical beginning others (e.g. of the working class) are co-extensive with the existence of the oppressed group. In the case of women, it is not clear that there has ever been a form of human society in which they were not oppressed. An escape from the eternal present of oppression can also come from a utopian vision; it can never come from the imagining of a better past.