

Reflections on Reading the Bible: From Flesh to Female Genius (Jane Leade)

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**Abstract**

Looking back over a couple of decades, the author recalls her appropriation of theoretical tools from the French poststructuralist philosopher, Julia Kristeva: first to read women and the feminine-identified flesh back into biblical texts and to resist older readings that viewed these presences as inferior agents or contaminants. Secondly Kristeva's idea of female genius gives theoretical support to the case that women continually challenge established, orthodox biblical readings in inauspicious male-normative circumstances by reading the Bible for themselves. Illustrating the concept of female genius, the article returns to Jane Leade, a seventeenth century visionary. She exemplifies the capacity of women to bring something singular and authentic – such as her electrifying descriptions of the biblical figure of Wisdom as female and her dream-visions of bodily restorations - to their readings of the bible. Leade's vivid reflections energise the community of Philadelphians for whom she provides leadership and inspiration. The author continues to pose the question in the light of these reflections as to whether or not women (and other genders) can continue to profit from reading the Bible.

**Keywords**

**Julia Kristeva, Jane Leade, female genius, Jacob Boehme, God's Eternal Virgin**

**Wisdom**

*...there came upon me an overshadowing bright Cloud and in the midst of it the Figure of a Woman most richly adorned with transparent Gold, her hair hanging down and her Face as the terrible Crystal for brightness but her Countenance was sweet and mild....Immediately this Voice came saying Behold I am God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom whom thou has been enquiring after; I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as Rebecca was unto Jacob, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again; this thou shalt know by the New Motion of Life, stirring and giving a restlessness, till Wisdom be born within the inward parts of thy Soul....<sup>1</sup>*

### **First steps into feminist biblical interpretation**

In 1998 I published a book exploring the idea that biblical interpretation was a gendered activity<sup>2</sup>. It focused on a theologically significant biblical passage: the Prologue to John's Gospel, a passage in which disembodied Word becomes human and fleshly with all the problematic associations of this notion with lust, disobedience and mortality, collectively summed up as sin. This was my first entry into the field of feminist biblical studies; posing the question of whether women could safely or properly read the Bible when it appeared to associate them so persistently with these elements of human existence or whether it would be better for them to leave it behind. The consensus at that time - Morny Joy, had already seen this a few years earlier -

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<sup>1</sup> Leade, *A Fountain of Gardens*.

<sup>2</sup> Jasper, *Shining Garment of the Text*.

was that ‘no woman in her right mind would have anything to do with religion’,<sup>3</sup> a term that I took at that time to include any investment in Christian churches, Christian theology or the biblical texts.

Of course, I was following pathways already laid out by feminist theology and biblical studies from the 1970s onwards—theology and biblical interpretation imagined by some of the women who in a critical sense had rejected this negative feminist consensus. I had entered the field a little late but was none the less attracted by the idea that women no longer had any need, as Carol Christ put it so eloquently, to ‘read themselves sidewise into traditional biblical texts’.<sup>4</sup> She gave words to something I had not been able to express, but that I recognised. I had always felt I needed to adapt - like a left-hander, in a right-handed world - to the normative ‘right-handed’ resonances of the biblical text to which I had listened growing up as a Christian in the western world. It was an appealing thought that this dutiful form of adaptation was no longer necessary and that it would be alright to bring a little more of myself into my reading. More appealing still however was the strategy Heather Walton ascribed to Judith Plaskow, according to which feminist theological thinking ‘does not seek to replace the sacred tradition’ but sets up a conversation with that tradition and acts in this way to ‘restor[e] voice to women’.<sup>5</sup> I was powerfully engaged by the biblical texts and loved to read them, but what I had done in my undergraduate degree and in following a Bible-based curriculum as an RE teacher in the 1980s, came to seem increasingly unsatisfactory because of the refusal of the

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Joy, ‘No Longer Docile Daughters’.

<sup>4</sup> Christ, ‘Spiritual Quest’, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup> Walton. *Imagining Theology*, p. 7.

academy, exam boards and the churches to notice its male normative take on the world at a time when it was clear so many more people were recognising widespread inequalities. Carol Christ's claim that women needed to be much more robust in framing their own traditions and symbols—in her case, followed up so powerfully in her unique development of the symbolism of the Goddess—made sense. Yet what struck me in particular about the biblical texts I was reading as a teacher at that time with sceptical young people, was that even though female readers were still being forced to adopt a 'sidewise' take on the texts, the signs and presence of women in these texts was equally clear to me. It was as if biblical texts were imprisoning women and the feminine, but they could still be seen between the bars. I understood the value and urgency of feminist biblical hermeneutics in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's sense of reclaiming or remembering and reanimating those traces<sup>6</sup> before they were lost to my students through neglect and incomprehension. In getting started on this task, the work of the poststructuralist critic and writer Julia Kristeva offered me a way to recover the feminine-identified body within the text – my specific focus in this first attempt - without giving critical quarter in the feminist struggle to challenge the underlying assumptions about the associations of feminine-identified bodiliness all human beings share, and the concept of 'flesh' conceived in terms of lust, disobedience and death.

### **Julia Kristeva: tools for the feminist biblical critic?**

Thus Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality<sup>7</sup>, for example had clear implications for women readers in view of the previously assumed priority of masculine authorial

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<sup>6</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her*.

<sup>7</sup> See Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue & Novel' in ed. Moi, *Kristeva Reader*, p. 37.

intention within the standard biblical hermeneutics of ‘the guild’<sup>8</sup>. Her interest as writer and practitioner in psycholinguistics and psychoanalysis also supported readings of the biblical text that encouraged complex, multi-layered readings of ancient texts that could do justice to the history of biblical hermeneutics, including Christianity’s tradition of understanding texts in symbolic terms.<sup>9</sup> Moreover Kristeva was clearly *interested* in the biblical texts and their Christian contexts; an interest signaled through references in her work on abjection to the Levitical purity laws in *Powers of Horror*<sup>10</sup> or to love and faith in *In the Beginning was Love*,<sup>11</sup> or through admittedly tantalising, never absolutely straightforward references to the Virgin Mary in the essay ‘Stabat Mater,’<sup>12</sup> or to the body of Christ in the essay ‘Holbein’s Dead Christ,’<sup>13</sup> or much later in her contributions to *The Feminine and the Sacred*.<sup>14</sup> Her theoretical ideas gave starch to my biblical reading; I tried reading the Prologue to John’s Gospel alongside her account of (divine) language emerging ‘in dialogue’ with the (human) maternal body and found that it worked for me as one way of re-visioning, in Adrienne Rich’s terms,<sup>15</sup> the Christian theological or dogmatic texts based on this passage in which women and the feminine in the past had been

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<sup>8</sup> See Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text*, p.29.

<sup>9</sup> See Jasper, *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, pp. 36-39.

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*.

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva. *In the Beginning Was Love*.

<sup>12</sup> See Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, in ed. Moi, *Kristeva Reader*, pp. 161-186.

<sup>13</sup> Kristeva. ‘Holbein’s Dead Christ’.

<sup>14</sup> Clément and Kristeva. *The Feminine and the Sacred*.

<sup>15</sup> Rich. ‘When We Dead Awaken’, p. 167.

drenched, through an identification with this body viewed as tainted flesh.<sup>16</sup>

Kristeva's psycholinguistic account of body and language provided a way to counter apparently normative Christian hierarchies of spirit over flesh in its refusal to rank one as more enduring or fundamental than the other within the process of describing a complex but astonishing human subject.

### **Feminist reservations?**

There has been a small price to be paid for this theoretical alignment with Kristeva's work. For different reasons, feminist theorists on the one hand and feminist theologians on the other have both been suspicious of her use of psychoanalysis. Suggesting that a psychoanalytical methodology could provide a way of reading the feminine, maternal body back into the text, typically generates a skeptical response: psychoanalysis as a whole is simply a recapitulation of paternal and patriarchal authority<sup>17</sup> that serves to reinscribe certain hegemonic, heterosexist norms through its insistent references to Father figures and their sons. More than this, the feminine is framed as exclusively maternal and little more than a prop in a masculine psycho-sexual drama.

Of course, I have disagreed. Looking a little more deeply into Kristeva's use of psychoanalysis and psycholinguistics, there seems much more here than an exclusive preoccupation with the son's story and the dead body of the Father.<sup>18</sup> In a fine article on Kristeva's (equally controversial) preoccupation with Christianity, Kathleen

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<sup>16</sup> Jasper, 'Feminism, Religion', p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> O'Grady, 'The Tower and the Chalice', p. 89.

O'Grady draws out powerfully the story of a daughter. Emerging within her prolific body of work, it is identified in particular through a series of references to the legend of Saint Barbara. This was a legend that has certainly been interpreted for its own patriarchal purposes by the Catholic Church—as a daughter martyred for refusing her father's pagan gods in favour of the true Father God—but as O'Grady suggests, the Catholic Church does not have exclusive rights over a story whose origins are lost in the mists of time where who knows what different ends it may have served.<sup>19</sup> Of course even divested of its Roman Catholic conventions, this story of a young girl trapped within a magnificent tower built by her father to imprison/protect her, plays into the hands of Kristeva's critics as the classic story—perhaps they think it is her own story—of a dutiful daughter of western patriarchal philosophy imprisoned within its phallic epistemological edifice. Alternatively, however, we can say with O'Grady that

...this legend is markedly feminist. After all, the story of Barbara is above all else a celebration of a patricide. Remember that the other two patricides offered by psychoanalysis are failed murders. In Barbara's tale she outwits her father, escapes his entrapment and destroys his power when she destroys his gods. And she does not flee the wrath of her father, but waits to confront him when he returns. She withstands his attacks and tortures, and does not relent her new-found identity, free from his influence ...<sup>20</sup>

Barbara, whose name, of course, relates etymologically to the foreigner, outsider or *barbarian*, is the one who stands beyond or outside the privileged and normative. And

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<sup>19</sup> See for example, another contemporary feminist reading of this in Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, pp. 275-83.

<sup>20</sup> O'Grady, 'The Tower and the Chalice', p. 95.

this is a constant theme in Kristeva's work emphasising the transformative value of otherness, foreignness and strangeness as constituent factors of psychic wellbeing for both individuals and cultures. In the 1990s, she engages in *Strangers to Ourselves*,<sup>21</sup> or in the essay 'Open Letter to Harlem Desir,'<sup>22</sup> for example, with themes reflecting racial tensions in France at the time. She develops her idea of 'heretical' ethics—'herethics'—to contest xenophobic, patriarchal policy-making that seeks to exclude what is socially or psychically different. This, she argues, frustrates rather than fosters our deepest capacities for pleasure and creativity derived from the resistance of the outsider/foreign/female body to the paternal, patriarchal order of language and law. In other words, rather than necessarily reinscribing the patriarchal narrative of unbreachable hegemony, Kristeva gives us tools with which to do full justice to the presence of woman and the feminine as that powerful, resistance that forces dominant structures out of tyranny and into creativity. Some still accuse her of a heterosexist privilege and bias, but to argue that there is a transformative openness to difference at the heart of human subjectivity is arguably not to say that this must always be seen in these particular hetero-gendered terms. On the other hand it is certainly one way to attack the sedimented sense of patriarchal entitlement laid down in over two millennia of biblical reading contexts.

Nor of course, is Kristeva blind herself to the shortcomings of psychoanalytical traditions and orthodoxies. She argues repeatedly that the psychic economy is dependent as much on the female/maternal body as on the role of the male and paternal (but absolutely not the last) Word. It could be said that she is herself involved

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<sup>21</sup> Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves*.

<sup>22</sup> Kristeva 'Open Letter to Harlem Desir'.



in re-visioning—entering from a new critical direction<sup>23</sup>— the Freudian or Lacanian texts and that this informs the choices she makes as a scholar. For example, when invited by the art historian Régis Michel to curate an exhibition at the Louvre in Paris as part of a series under the heading of '*parti pris*' or taking sides, she takes the phallic, severed head— representing a western infatuation with the disembodied rational masculine mind and its violent limitations—as her theme.<sup>24</sup> She gives full credit within her psychoanalytical account to the vital spaces created by the intrusion of the male/paternal into the initial absorption of mother and child<sup>25</sup> yet for her, this is not equivalent to the annihilation of the maternal body but only a part of a continual dynamic oscillation between equally significant principles.<sup>26</sup>

Kristeva has other feminist detractors besides those who dislike her emphasis on psychoanalysis and psychlinguistics. Gayatri Spivak for example, notoriously took her to task over what she saw as the orientalist assumptions underpinning her essay, 'About Chinese Women'.<sup>27</sup> And it is true that Kristeva is positioned as a definitively western intellectual, in spite of coming from Bulgaria in Eastern Europe. Biblical texts cannot be simply or pre-eminently regarded as western texts and it is not only

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<sup>23</sup> Rich, 'When we Dead Awaken', p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva. *The Severed Head*.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, p. vii.

<sup>26</sup> Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir*, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Spivak. 'French Feminism', p. 157.

white, western women who have been excised from its pages.<sup>28</sup> However, it has to be said that she is largely unrepentant when it comes to upsetting feminists and it sometimes seems as if she is deliberately intent on irritating them by refusing, for example, to abandon the generic masculine form or by continuing to present herself as ‘not really’ a feminist at all,<sup>29</sup> or roundly chastising those who as feminists in her view attempt to ‘encompass all women, like all proletarians or the entire Third World, with demands as relentless as they are desperate’.<sup>30</sup> What is clear, nonetheless, is Kristeva’s commitment to intellectual integrity and an awareness of the temptations of all orthodoxies; an approach that cannot in the long run harm feminist theory, theology or biblical reading and one key reason why I continue to work with this material. She will not identify herself as a feminist, in other words, if this means she cannot express doubt or skepticism when she feels there is need. On the other hand neither will she be put off taking a critical interest in the Christian theological imagination even if this goes against the dominant trend of intellectual opinion. And certainly she does not minimise the problems women continue to face;<sup>31</sup> she acts—writes—in accordance with the revolutionary principles of equality;<sup>32</sup> and she understands very well how far misogynist and gynophobic traditions underpin, for example, the marvels of western art and philosophy. Thus in her venture into curating

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<sup>28</sup> See for example Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible* and Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology*, both of which attempt in different ways to deterritorialise the western guild of biblical interpretation.

<sup>29</sup> Kristeva, *This Incredible Need*, p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> Kristeva. *Female Genius: Colette* (Volume 3), p. 405.

<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, *Incredible Need to Believe*. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Kristeva. *Incredible Need to Believe*, p. 83.

at the Louvre—the preeminent exhibition of classic white, western French culture one might say—she picks the 16<sup>th</sup> century Florentine artist Benvenuto Cellini’s bronze of Perseus standing in what she calls ‘jubilant anxiety’<sup>33</sup> over the body of Medusa, sword/penis in one hand and monstrous vulva, violently severed head held aloft in order critically to highlight this violent obsession.

### **What then of female genius?**

Having explored the possibility in this way of reading woman and the feminine into the biblical text with tools taken from the work of a contemporary (I would argue, feminist) writer, I have shifted my emphasis more recently from biblical texts to women as readers of biblical texts.<sup>34</sup> Of course just as women and the feminine were shown by second wave feminist theologians and biblical readers like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible to have been excised from the historical account of biblical texts, so too historical research reveals they have also been removed from accounts of reading and interpreting biblical texts, and of institutions that authorise reading practices and readers.

Simone de Beauvoir claimed in the middle of the twentieth century that ‘woman’ was simply a constructed otherness; a reflective surface providing men and masculinity with sharper focus.<sup>35</sup> Women biblical readers, according to this analysis, would presumably simply take on the same role of reflecting in other tones, the normative

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<sup>33</sup> Kristeva, *Severed Head*, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Although I would continue to suggest that readers are always implicated in texts and vice versa. I have discussed this issue at length in *Shining Garment*, pp. 13-33.

<sup>35</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

readings of ordained men. However, in spite of Beauvoir's analysis, it seemed counterintuitive to imagine that women were ultimately any more (or less) absent from practices of biblical reading than women and the feminine had been shown by feminist biblical analysis to be absent from (or imprisoned within) the biblical texts. There was, in other words, a different but similar challenge. Once again Kristeva provided theoretical support; this time in terms of 'female genius'.

Female genius is a theoretical position Kristeva explores within three substantial books about the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and the writer and performer, Colette.<sup>36</sup> Female genius is revealed in these books to be, in response to Beauvoir (and perhaps because of Beauvoir), the capacity to relate, think and to innovate rather than simply to reflect the normatively male or masculine. And thus in this way the female genius does not need to disconnect herself from whatever constitutes the feminine or from what is perceived as the feminine in any particular context. For example, Melanie Klein sought to make her children the subjects of her psychoanalytical work. She might be criticised for the way in which she made use of this maternal access, but it is clear she accorded these observations of children's play - that might easily have been dismissed within a still male-dominated field - the status of a profoundly serious source of information about the developing child. In the simplest terms, female genius comprises three characteristics: first there is the sense in which it is defined as maximising psychic, social and sexual relationships—against any Romantic notion, for example, of the isolated masculine genius. Secondly the female genius is fully engaged in thought and reflection on what she is doing and on what relationships she chooses to enter, representing experience and feeling in words

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<sup>36</sup> Kristeva. *Female Genius*.

and language from which, traditionally, she has been excluded. Finally she is constantly engaged in bringing new thoughts, plans or bodies to birth;<sup>37</sup> her female genius is recognised in terms of its tendency towards revolt and towards putting things in question, to its prioritising of singular pleasures and ambitions and, in this way, to new beginnings.

In relation to biblical reading the application of this idea works in two ways. First by establishing grounds for claiming a distinctive female subject; it refers to the work of becoming human—a subject in process<sup>38</sup>—apart from the definitions of the normatively male or masculine. And secondly of course, it does not require the female genius to bracket off any experiences identified or constructed in terms of normative or counter-normative definitions of ‘woman’ or the feminine; to explain or apologise for her own body, or her work with and enjoyment of other-gendered bodies. Thus arguably, although the idea of female genius appears to reflect gendered, even cissexist assumptions, it contains within itself a revolutionary potential for undoing itself in terms of these restricted notions. The idea of female genius as set out here helps us to recognise that – in line with the non-essentialised feminine – it is at work in all kinds of contexts including those that pre-date modern feminism(s). Female genius is thus a term to describe women – and this might certainly include transwomen within normative hetero and cissexist communities – who achieve subjectivity within the kinds of circumstances within which they are often

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<sup>37</sup> Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> This is the English translation of Kristeva’s terms ‘*sujet en procès*’ that she uses to indicate ‘both biological organism *and* talking subject, both unconscious and conscious’ (Kristeva, *In the Beginning*, p. 26, emphasis original).

unrecognized. Thus female genius revisions, reclaims and promotes any and all achievements and experiences that would previously have been invisible or simply dismissed as too insignificant or too ‘feminine’.

### **Jane Leade**

To sum up at this point: in the past I have used Kristeva’s work to help me read the feminine and the feminine-identified flesh back into the biblical texts and to resist older readings of the Bible, that viewed these presences as inferior actants or mere contaminants to be demonised or denied. Thus in *The Shining Garment of the Text* I looked at the sense in which western Christian orthodoxy has wrestled continually with the implications of biblically attested God-made-flesh; constantly finding this flesh in Kristeva’s words again, as abject and yet also ‘edged with the sublime’<sup>39</sup>. I have subsequently taken up Kristeva’s idea of female genius –in *Because of Beauvoir* - to address another instance of the Otherness or difference that challenges established, orthodox biblical readings. In this present context I am interested in the female genius – and perhaps she may also begin to gesture towards the possibility of a range of other ‘intersectional geniuses’ - who commits herself to reading and interpreting the bible in (white, hetero/cis sexual male) normative contexts without surrendering the difficult project of developing a distinctive understanding based upon a different perspective.

Here then I return to Jane Leade<sup>40</sup> to illustrate this idea of the committed biblical reader. She was born in 1624 and grew up in Norfolk, England in an area with strong

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<sup>39</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4, 210.

<sup>40</sup> See Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir*, pp. 73-97

Puritan leanings.<sup>41</sup> As the daughter of a justice of the peace, she probably received an education at home.<sup>42</sup> On her marriage, she moved to London, remaining there during a period of revolution and upheaval. Aside from the consequences of the English civil war, her life coincided with a time of extraordinary change in the fields of science, astronomy and medicine<sup>43</sup> vying with the still serious pursuit of alchemy and magic amongst other forms of what we might now call esotericism. Fissiparous theological dispute in a millenarian age was also characteristic of the period, and this expressed itself in the arguments associated with the Cambridge Platonists<sup>44</sup> who challenged Calvinist ideas of predestination in the Universities as well as in the flourishing of more or less controversial mystical and visionary groups<sup>45</sup> such as John Pordage's communities in Bradford and London<sup>46</sup> and the Philadelphians,<sup>47</sup> of whom Leade eventually herself became leader.<sup>48</sup> At the same her life provided her with the kind of intimate challenges that characterized seventeenth century life, even for the

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<sup>41</sup> Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir*, p. 80-81.

<sup>42</sup> Hirst, *Jane Leade*, p.13.

<sup>43</sup> Hessayon & Apetrei, 'Introduction' in eds, Hessayon & Apetrei, *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Apetrei, 'The Universal Principle of Grace: Feminism and Anti-Calvinism in Two Seventeenth-Century Women Writers' in *Gender and History* Volume 21 no 1 pp. 132-3.

<sup>45</sup> See Hirst, *Jane Leade*; Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams' in eds Harris & Scott-Baumann, *Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women*,

<sup>46</sup> See Smith, 'Did Anyone Understand Boehme?' in eds Hessayon & Apetrei, *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme*, p. 110; Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 191.

<sup>47</sup> Named after the sixth of the seven churches in Revelation 3:7-13, which has "but little power and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."

<sup>48</sup> Smith, 'Did Anyone Understand Boehme?', p. 111.

relatively well-to-do; two of her four daughters died in infancy and in 1670, her husband also died intestate leaving her to support herself and a dependent child.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Leade lived as a woman of a certain class and Christian background with all that entailed at a period of intense and exciting if sometimes risky intellectual and spiritual possibility. However, once widowed, she responded by quite consciously stepping beyond the circle of conventional relationships to establish herself, arguably in the manner of female genius, according to her singular desire for a network of new relationships with thoughtful, people who could help to sustain her and collaborate with her passion for reading Christian scripture towards distinctively new ideas and understandings.

Perhaps most notably many of Leade's visionary and dream experiences and the texts in which they are recalled make reference to the purifying work of Wisdom. This is a female personification of divine creativity who is of course derived from biblical Wisdom literature,<sup>50</sup> and Leade will no doubt have been aware of this biblical figure from liturgical or private Bible reading during her childhood and early married life. However she probably first encountered Wisdom as the electrifying figure who so attracted her in later life, through reading English translations of the work of the controversial mystical writer, Jacob Boehme (d. 1624). She undoubtedly first encountered this work as a result of her meeting and collaboration with John Pordage, a highly contemplative clergyman who 'wrote within a paradigm defined by Boehme's understanding and expression'<sup>51</sup> and who was eventually ejected from his

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<sup>49</sup> See Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir*, p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> See Brenner ed, *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, 'Did Anyone Understand Boehme?', p. 109



Bradford living on charges of blasphemy and immorality before moving to London in the 1650s<sup>52</sup>. The Behemist Wisdom was however, clearly in every sense a revelation for Leade, and becomes for her a key figure within her own and the Philadelphians' mystical and visionary experience. Yet Leade is also an prophetic voice in her own right: "Boehme has undoubtedly been learned from in a very fundamental way but also quite distinctly left behind." <sup>53</sup> Leade works and worships alongside others and out of this experience of connection with others, she develops an understanding of this extraordinary feminine figure of Wisdom as a personal visionary guide, close enough to Goddess for her first publisher to feel he needed, to reassure more orthodox readers by explicitly denying the suggestion.<sup>54</sup> However there is no doubt that Leade invests her Mother and guide with qualities of majesty, beauty and compassion<sup>55</sup> that closely correspond with more orthodox Christian descriptions of God. At the same time there is no downplaying her embodied, feminine nature and she appears on more than one occasion as a pregnant and birthing mother. As Wisdom's initiate or pilgrim, Leade is herself implicated in images of birth from the very beginning of the first vision described in *A Fountain of Gardens* (1696). Whilst the image of being born again is a familiar biblical trope, it is striking that in Leade's account of her first encounter with God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, she promises to be 'a true Natural Mother' to her: 'for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again.'<sup>56</sup> In *A Fountain of Gardens*, Wisdom is compared

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<sup>52</sup> Smith, 'Did Anyone Understand Boehme?', p. 110

<sup>53</sup> Smith, 'Did Anyone Understand Boehme?', p. 112.

<sup>54</sup> See Jasper, *Because of Beauvoir*, 91; Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 195.

<sup>55</sup> Leade, *A Garden of Fountains*, p. 17

<sup>56</sup> Leade, *A Garden of Fountains*, p. 18

to Rebecca and her relationship to Leade as Rebecca's 'unto Jacob'. A little later, she promises 'to contrive and put [Leade] in a way how [she] should obtain the Birth-right-Blessing.' This reading is audacious to say the least implying as it does that - Leade's claims, displace those of the more conventional recipient of particular divine blessing or authorisation whom we might reasonably assume to be men.

By the same token, of course, Leade's understanding of Wisdom lays heavy emphasis on the feminine as maternal and this will trouble contemporary feminist readers, seeming perhaps to position motherhood within a fundamentally heteropatriarchal cissexist context. Whilst this particular discourse of motherhood may have resonated with Leade's own experience - perhaps of pleasure and pain, perhaps of marginalisation - it can also appear exclusive, or in an even more sinister sense to invoke the pattern of the tyrannical, phallic mother. Certainly for Leade, Wisdom is on equitable terms with God the Father; she is a figure of ultimate authority. In *The Laws of Paradise*, following the biblical commandments in Exodus 20: 1-21, Leade interprets the fifth commandment which calls on us to honour our parents—Father and Mother—as a reference not to earthly parents but specifically to God as 'thy Eternal Father and Wisdom, thy true Natural Mother'.<sup>57</sup> And it is quite startling to see the sense in which, Wisdom is framed so boldly as feminine and maternal in this quasi-Trinitarian formulation:

Consider thy JESUS then in his high and holy Calling, from his Birth to his Ascension, holding forth one pure Act of Glorifying his Father, in

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<sup>57</sup> Leade, *Laws of Paradise*, p. 43.

observing the Law of Wisdom his Mother, from whose Eternal Virgin Nature he had his Existence.<sup>58</sup>

However it is more likely that Leade shared the Behemist view that regarded sexual difference (and hierarchy) as part of a fallen world; Adam was in origin androgynous and his patriarchal dominance was not part of the original settlement. Some of these Behemist-influenced groups also thought of women as themselves as the incarnations of Wisdom. This was not something Lead or her circle made explicit although clearly female prophecy as embodied in Jane Lead was in no sense discounted.<sup>59</sup>

Another aspect of the distinctive reading Leade and her community developed during their long association and collaboration, is its attitude towards the Calvinist theology of predestination. It was central to her prophetic message in an age when Calvinist teaching about predestination to heaven or hell was still widely accepted, that all believers could be saved.. And here we see the tendency of female genius to put things in question; not only to dispute the idea of predestination but to continue reflecting so that something new and different can emerge. Through a process of consultation and discussion that seems to have emerged early in her life<sup>60</sup> Leade continually illustrates this aspect of female genius as here defined. Thus strengthened by her desire to engage with others, she consolidates her capacity to trust her own judgement and to discern how best to reach the ultimate prophetic goal of bringing

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<sup>58</sup> Leade, *Laws of Paradise*, p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 195.

<sup>60</sup> See Jasper *Because of Beauvoir*, pp. 73-97 and Hirst *Jane Leade* on her years before marriage.

herself and others to salvation. Notably in addition, Leade's position on predestination went along with a strong emphasis on the restoration of the human body. This prioritising of bodily integrity that suggests a sympathetic understanding of its pains and pleasures is again, one of the qualities of the female genius. Thus torn and damaged bodies move as they are perfected and purified towards the refined bodies that can eventually share in the Godhead.<sup>61</sup> In this process, birth – so often associated with impurity – comes to the fore to signify purification.<sup>62</sup> And in her dreams, perfected bodies are actually reborn so that she believes she can change the world with her dreaming.<sup>63</sup>

In other words Leade demonstrates her capacity through distinctive biblical reading practices developed and expanded through her involvement with others, imaginatively to conceive new structures and pathways to sustain a journey towards salvation of the soul and restoration of the flesh. And in this role she also proposes new ways, of being a woman and of relating both to God/Wisdom and to others or maybe Others. She wrestles limitations within difficult and restrictive contexts, bringing new ideas and framings to birth including—as is particularly relevant here—different visions of God and of God-filled worlds built on biblical foundation but also nourished by what she experienced as the direct revelation of God's Virgin-Wisdom.

However, though Leade's striking representation of the divine in distinctively feminine terms would certainly have excluded her from more conventional social or

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 192.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 192.

Church circles of the period it still makes better sense to understand her as a pro-feminine rather than as a proto-feminist biblical reader. By way of contrast, Sarah Apetrei, identifies two of Leade's near contemporaries in London who would have been stronger contenders for the title (of protofeminist). Theologically, like Leade, they proposed universal salvation but significantly, they also articulated a much clearer defence of the controversial issue of women's preaching and Christian leadership<sup>64</sup> which is not something Leade seems to have been very much concerned about – perhaps because within her own circle this was clearly not an issue; at least not for her<sup>65</sup>!

In conclusion although Leade's influence and what is seen as her mediation of Boehme's thought has sometimes been acknowledged over the centuries<sup>66</sup> especially in continental circles, she remains a marginal figure in the English-speaking world. A number of more recent works on her life and thought by scholars such as Julie Hirst, Nigel Smith, Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei are beginning to make her a more familiar figure at least within early modern studies, but very few outside the academy have heard of her today and even here she continues to be viewed as a marginal figure. Yet as Nigel Smith says '...anyone who read her work seriously and sympathetically, or who heard her enunciate visions, would have had to accept a conception of divine immanence in the universe that was strongly pro-feminine and distinctly against nearly all the prevalent sexual ideologies of the time.'<sup>67</sup> And in this way we see once

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<sup>64</sup> Apetrei, 'The Universal Principle of Grace', p. 132.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 195.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, 'Did Anyone Understand Boehme?', p. 112.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, 'Pregnant Dreams', p. 195.

more how Leade shows the qualities of female genius in her capacity to reach unconventional but sustaining female and bodily configurations of divinity and salvation within a context that did not readily prioritise the needs and desires of women.

### **Back to the original question?**

So, having reflected on female genius in theory and application, does this support the idea that women can or should continue to read the Bible? Does highlighting the ways in which it is possible to read women and the feminine (back) into the biblical texts or to identify ways in which they possess the capacity to act as gifted biblical readers in normative contexts that might seem discouraging, bring us to a place where we can confidently claim that ‘the Bible’ is liberating or sustaining or in other ways ‘good news’ for women - or any other marginalised group? Or, given that we still mostly live in contexts that are dominated by conventional hetero and cissexist assumptions and the failure to acknowledge a wide range of other intersectional discriminations, do we have to accept that however we read the Bible it is not as straightforwardly ‘good news’? Another way of putting it would be to ask whether we understand Adrienne Rich’s approach to revisioning to be simply a matter of eliminating texts such as the Bible, that feminist critique reveals to be blind to women or more distinctly misogynistic or whether we understand her concept of ‘seeing with fresh eyes’ to imply something else – as different and sustaining as Leade’s vision of Mother Wisdom perhaps. Or maybe more so? Do we, for example respond by seeking all the more urgently to identify the presence of women and the feminine within those biblical texts to show what they have suffered but also to indicate their distinctive and significant roles and achievements? Do we seek all the more urgently

to acknowledge variant reading practices - such as Leade's - that show where female genius is alive and capable within reading communities, even when they may appear quite unpropitious.

At this point a question raised by some more recent feminist theologians needs to be addressed briefly. They ask whether theoretical tools that have developed outside the context of Christian theology and sometimes quite in opposition to its fundamental premises are actually the most appropriate means of taking forward projects such as feminist theology<sup>68</sup> of which feminist biblical hermeneutics constitutes in my view one enormously important area. These more conservative voices suggest that feminist theologians risk the very transformation of the social order they write about and long for by placing too much faith in purely human, 'secular' approaches. The biblical and historiographical hermeneutics that I have developed out of a reading of Kristeva would appear to be critiqued under this rubric. However I would argue that this concern rests on some questionable definitions. For one thing the term 'religion' is not innocent. It has been ably argued by others that it was largely developed within the modern western world as means of trying to limit resistance to the commercial, legal and scientific goals of modern nation states and their capitalist economies from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>69</sup> The identification of 'religion' with a purely private sphere of individual moral reflection made it easier to take forward these key historical changes without having too overtly to confront still influential, bodies such as the Church and its historical establishment. Scholars have argued that over time

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<sup>68</sup> Walton. *Imagining Theology*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>69</sup> The argument underpinning this assertion is well laid out in Fitzgerald, 'Encompassing Religion'.

rival influences working with mystified entities – such as market forces or the nation state – have attempted to deflect attention from their own ideological assumptions, by claiming the binary term ‘secular’ for themselves and presenting it as neutral, progressive and safe. Projecting narratives of fear or failure onto ‘religion’, inconvenient elements of doubt and critique and the possibility of any alternative are kept in check. Thus to identify what is human with what is ‘secular’ is unhelpful. Crucially this approach downplays the very sense in which (human, so-called ‘secular’) feminist thinking has contributed to a critique of theologies characterized by very (human) exclusive masculinist certainties. Heather Walton also responds to the more conservative call not to rely on ‘purely human strength’ by resolutely refusing to endorse religion/secular distinctions. For her, imagining theology is about imagining worlds in which women feel welcomed and safe;<sup>70</sup> theology is not something apart from that work of critical vision and imagination leading to social transformation. For her, the work of theological imagination is what she calls politics—or perhaps the work of living in the world in community without excluding or objectifying others. Her claim too is that this politics is a leap of faith,<sup>71</sup> an intuition that modalities of vision and power do not divide up neatly into discrete spheres. In this way, although coming from a different critical direction, Walton builds agreement that the religion/secular binary is too simplistic a distinction to cope with the insight that what lies at the very heart and origins of human subjectivity, including female genius is an act of faith or commitment.

In relation to these terms of reference, it should perhaps also be said that Kristeva

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<sup>70</sup> Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p. 16.



herself is not easily pigeonholed. She makes no secret of her atheism and she absolutely rejected the idea mooted some years ago by several leading European intellectuals that the revival of Christianity had to be seen as Europe's 'last chance' in the modern world.<sup>72</sup> She proposes instead a psychoanalysis of contemporary maladies of the soul concerned as she is by how many – especially young people – are 'ill from ideality'.<sup>73</sup> Suffering from the inability to work through the loss of powerful idealisations – when parents or leaders or so-called 'religious' or 'secular political' systems invariably fail to fulfil our dreams – she sees no future in returning to the kind of self-punishing resistance to change or challenge not the least in relation to women, sex and gender<sup>74</sup> that she thinks is motivating this call to return to Christianity. Though she acknowledges that Christianity has been superbly successful in providing sustaining stories in the past<sup>75</sup>, it is failing to do so in the present and she urges instead that we attempt to undertake the creative work of writing or telling new stories – the kind of work in fact that she associates particularly with female genius. She does not discount the significance of faith and argues in fact for a foundational psychic leap of faith that allows the very young child to believe in her or his own separate existence.<sup>76</sup> However for Kristeva the answers for women clearly do not lie in trusting the human less, but in recognizing and supporting the capacities they already have to flourish, even in unpropitious circumstances.

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<sup>72</sup> Kristeva, *Incredible Need to Believe*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>73</sup> Kristeva, *Incredible Need to Believe*, pp. 13, 16, 19.

<sup>74</sup> See Jasper, 'Feminism, Religion etc', p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> See Jasper, 'Feminism, Religion etc'.

<sup>76</sup> Kristeva, *Incredible Need to Believe*. xi.

## **Conclusion.**

In this chapter, looking back over a couple of decades, I have revisited my earlier appropriation of theoretical tools taken largely from the French poststructuralist philosopher, Julia Kristeva: first to read women and the feminine-identified flesh back into biblical texts and to resist older readings that viewed these presences as inferior agents or contaminants. Secondly Kristeva's idea of female genius gives theoretical support to the case that women continually challenge established, orthodox biblical readings in inauspicious male-normative circumstances by reading the Bible for themselves. Illustrating the concept of female genius, I have returned once more to Jane Leade, a seventeenth century visionary. More clearly than ever I see how she exemplifies the capacity of women to bring something singular and authentic – such as her electrifying descriptions of the biblical figure of Wisdom and her dream-visions of bodily restorations - to her readings of the bible. Leade's vivid dreams and reflections energised the community of Philadelphians for whom she provided leadership and inspiration. Most poignantly perhaps her extraordinary dreaming of reborn and purified bodies would have brought comfort and relief to many women like herself who had been taught to distrust their own embodiment and had so often also lost the children to whom they had given birth before they were old enough to speak.

The final question is whether in the light of these reflections women (and others) can continue to profit from reading the Bible. The answer has surely to be that they can do so provided they can approach it with confidence. That is to say, they should be able to approach these texts with the confidence that they will provide readers with scope

for working out their female genius; allowing them to expand the psychic, emotional and intellectual range of their relations with others and to create and bring new things to birth, however hard they are pressed. Where this prevenient confidence is not established and maintained, the Bible will I fear, remain a hostage to fortune.

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