

## Abiding in the Fourth Gospel: A Case-study in Feminist Biblical Theology

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**Abstract:** From a hermeneutical perspective, the method of examining the prominence and status of women and female characters in a given text is an important but partial way of dealing with biblical texts. Feminist theology needs to recover a sense of "biblical theology" (despite the problems associated with that term), a theology that is sensitive to women's experience and theological reflection. The Johannine notion of "abiding" provides an example of such biblical theology. It is focused on the centrality of relationship, intimacy, and reciprocity, challenging Enlightenment individualism and subject-object bifurcation.

FEMINIST EXEGESIS has tended to focus attention on two aspects of the biblical text. In the first place, it is concerned with questions of method. How can the Bible be read in a way that empowers rather than disempowers women, breaking the androcentric stranglehold that has bound both the text and its interpreters? How might women, once excluded from the interpretative task, begin to participate from the basis of their own experience rather than patriarchal presuppositions? What theoretical framework might such a re-reading require?

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has given perhaps the most thorough response to these questions, developing a methodology arising from women's historical and political experience of marginalisation. The hermeneutical methodology she has developed is based on a revised historical criticism that endeavours to enter the text imaginatively and critically, making contact with women's hidden traditions. Employing a "hermeneutic of suspicion", Schüssler Fiorenza's model incorporates remembrance and re-actualisation of women's reclaimed history in the struggle to develop a community of equality and liberation.<sup>1</sup> This struggle has led, for her, to the breaking down of canonical boundaries

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1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 15-22.

and the widening of the canon to include other texts from the ancient world that contain resources for women's liberation.<sup>2</sup>

This hermeneutical model – whether or not it owes allegiance to the work of Schüssler Fiorenza – has three distinctive characteristics: its interest in the text as a literary and theological whole is generally secondary to its interest in the world behind the text, despite some rhetoric to the contrary; it regards women's experience as the ultimate norm for authority in interpreting the text, creating arguably an "alternative magisterium";<sup>3</sup> and it uses "suspicion" as a prime exegetical tool in order to expose and critique the patriarchal bias assumed to lie within the text.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, feminist exegesis has also been interested in the presence – or absence – of female characters and their mode of presentation within specific biblical texts. The argument here is that women in the Bible have been ignored or marginalised. A feminist re-reading examines various biblical documents in order to draw women from the shadows, exploring the roles they play (or don't play) and assessing their literary and theological function. Here the enemy is the unconscious androcentrism of both the text itself and its interpreters. Already perched precariously on the edges of the text, women have been pushed over the cliff by commentators from early christian times onwards. As ancestors of Israel, judges, prophets, disciples, missionaries and apostles, women are almost invisible; as part of the company of God's people they are virtually left out of the reckoning. Thus the task of feminist exegesis, in this view, is to bring to front stage the female characters of the text, to draw attention to their absence, and to examine the textual presuppositions that shape their characterisation.<sup>5</sup>

This work of retrieval for scholarship in general, and for feminist theology in particular, has been of immense importance. Yet a significant limitation is the lack of attention to biblical theology – in

2. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the scriptures: a feminist commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 2.1-14.

3. Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist theology/ Christian theology: in search of method* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 81.

4. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the purpose of the women's commentary *Searching the scriptures*, 2.4 is to "scrutinize and interrogate the scriptures to uncover their 'crimes' of silencing and marginalization" (hermeneutics of suspicion) and to "seek to bring to the fore and make audible again the subjugated voices and suppressed traditions that have left traces in ancient writings" (hermeneutics of remembrance). For a critique of suspicion as a feminist hermeneutical tool, see Dorothy A. Lee, "Reclaiming the sacred text: Christian feminism and spirituality", in Morny Joy and Penelope Magee (eds.), *Claiming our rites: studies in religion by Australian women scholars* (Sydney: The Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1994) 80-84; and, especially, Dorothy A. Lee, "Beyond suspicion? The fatherhood of God in the Fourth Gospel", *Pacifica* 8 (1995) 140-154.

5. See Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The women's Bible commentary* (London: SCM, 1992) p. xviii, whose editorial policy is to include "portions of the Bible that deal explicitly with female characters and symbols but also sections that bear on the condition of women more generally".

particular the theological diversity inherent in the biblical text – and a tendency to foreclose on the canon as a fruitful resource for women’s theology. Here I understand “biblical theology” to be the study of the various theologies found within Scripture.<sup>6</sup> Feminist work on the Gospel of John, for example, has tended to concentrate on the female characters of the Gospel, a trend initiated by Raymond Brown. The Fourth Gospel is arguably the most sympathetic of all the Gospels in its portrayal of women.<sup>7</sup> This is the Gospel in which key narrative moments are dependent on female discipleship. Women are present at the beginning and end of Jesus’ ministry as faithful disciples (the mother of Jesus, 2:1-11 and 19:25-27, the latter including Mary Magdalene and two others<sup>8</sup>); they act in “apostolic” ways (the Samaritan woman 4:1-42, Mary Magdalene 20:1-18); they make confession of their faith in word and deed (Martha and Mary of Bethany, 11:27-39, 12:1-8); they are exemplary in their openness to seek and find, no matter how painful the search (Samaritan woman, 4:1-42, Magdalene, 20:1-18).<sup>9</sup>

This kind of investigation is of great value in challenging the androcentrism and narrowness of “malestream” interpretation. Nevertheless, study of female characterisation is not the only or even the most reliable guide to a text’s meaning.<sup>10</sup> It does not automatically follow that a

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6. To speak of “biblical theology” risks entangling us in definitions. Are we referring more narrowly to the theology contained in Scripture or more broadly to a theology that arises from, and moves beyond Scripture? The problem is complicated by the biblical theology movement associated particularly with neo-orthodoxy and Karl Barth which understood the term in a specific sense. In this article I understand biblical theology to refer to the various theologies found within Scripture which are to be valued for their diversity, whatever schema we may find to hold them together. Further on this, see James Barr, “Biblical theology” in *The interpreter’s dictionary of the Bible, supplementary volume* (Nashville; Abingdon, 1962) 104-11.

7. See Adele Reinhartz, “The Gospel of John” in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the scriptures*, 2. 594, who describes John from one perspective as “proto-feminist”.

8. Assuming that 19:25 lists four, rather than three women: the mother of Jesus, the sister of Jesus’ mother (who surely cannot also be called Mary), Mary the wife (mother?) of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

9. Raymond E. Brown, “Roles of women in the Fourth Gospel”, App. II in *The community of the beloved disciple: the life, loves, and hates of an individual church in New Testament times* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 183-98. See Sandra M. Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the role of women in the contemporary church” *Biblical theology bulletin* 12 (1982) 35-45; Karin Turid Seim, “Roles of women in the Gospel of John” in L. Hartman and B. Olsson (eds.) *Aspects on the Johannine literature* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1987) 16-19; Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (JSNTS 71; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1992) 174-240. See also: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of christian origins* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1983, 1994) 323-33; Gail R. O’Day, “John” in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *Women’s Bible commentary*, 294-302; Reinhartz, “John”, 2.561-600; and Sjeff van Tilborg, *Imaginative love in John* (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 167-208.

10. To argue for a revival of biblical theology for feminist exegesis is related to issues of reader response. Even if it can be demonstrated that the implied reader, as an objective component of the text, is conceived in masculine terms, the question of gender remains open. The oft-quoted statement that the Bible was written “by men, for men” is simplistic in this regard. If the *actual* reader (female as well as male) plays a role in the unfolding of

literary text that gives scant or dubious attention to women has no positive contribution to make to feminist theological discourse. Clearly the two aspects are connected, since to sever completely the link between the characters in a text and the symbolic universe in which they are embedded – to drive a wedge between form and content – would lead to a kind of literary docetism. Yet analysis of female characters is not the only gateway into the text; meaning cannot be made to hang on one literary dimension. As Adele Reinhartz has pointed out, more is at stake than the presentation of women characters, whether they are portrayed in positive or negative terms:

the feminist reading of scripture goes far beyond the words about and images of women.... Rather, it seeks to expose the question of liberation not only from the perspective of women qua women but from the point of view of the marginalized, whether defined in terms of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical capability, or in any other way.<sup>11</sup>

Ancient texts – particularly biblical ones – are susceptible to a “surplus of meaning” that cannot be too hastily foreclosed. A focus on biblical theology can open the text to its manifold meanings, even where women and women’s concerns are not at the forefront of the text’s intentions.<sup>12</sup>

If we understand tradition as the dynamic interchange between past and present, then feminist biblical theology is vital for the creative passing on of tradition. Hermeneutics is not about immediacy. Feminist theology has the difficult task of bringing together in critical yet creative ways the ancient past and women’s present – a past that is radically different from, yet not necessarily and not even in all respects, antipathetic to feminist struggle. This is the task of theology for which biblical theology is a major resource. We need now more than ever to re-read the past in a theological rather than narrowly gendered fashion if we are to find, like the lost coin, a rich vein of meaning for women’s and men’s lives.

#### ABIDING IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

My specific concern in this paper is with the Johannine concept of *abiding*: an example of biblical theology that, in my view, has much to offer feminist theology. An examination of a theological concept such

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meaning – if interpretation is a dialogue created by the fusion of two horizons – then the issue of gendered reading becomes, from a feminist viewpoint at least, much less problematical. Women readers are not bound to read as men.

11. Reinhartz, “John”, 2. 594-95.

12. See, for example, the extension of the “prophetic-liberating” strand of biblical theology to the particularities of contemporary women’s experience, in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: toward a feminist theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 22-33.

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as this may enable women and men to read the text, not just through female characterisation, but also through the lens of biblical theology. The word “abide” (*menein*) is scattered throughout John’s Gospel, occurring some forty times, with a significant number of instances clustered in the Farewell Discourse (see also the Johannine epistles).<sup>13</sup> “Abiding” is an important theological term in the Fourth Gospel, often occurring in the formulaic expression *menein en*, but it is also used in the colloquial sense of “stay” or “remain”;<sup>14</sup> in some instances it is difficult to determine whether the ordinary or the extraordinary meaning is required.<sup>15</sup> In its theological sense *menein* overlaps with other Johannine conceptions such as unity, oneness, love and indwelling.<sup>16</sup>

The verb *menein* first appears in the opening chapter of the Gospel. In the context of the witness of John the Baptist who testifies to Jesus’ identity and sets in motion the gathering of the first disciples, *menein* is used to describe both the Spirit’s presence with Jesus (1:32-33) and the meaning of discipleship (1:38-39). Departing from the Synoptic tradition, John sees discipleship primarily in terms of witnessing and abiding (see Mark 1:16-20 and parallels). While the ordinary meaning seems uppermost, the verb *menein* is carefully and theologically nuanced in the light of later usage.<sup>17</sup> The first two disciples ask Jesus where he “stays” (abides), the same verb used of the Spirit’s descent in the vision of John the Baptist (1:32-33); the disciples then “stay” (abide) in the place where Jesus “stays” (abides); his abiding place is linked both to the Spirit who “stays” (abides) on him and to the disciples with whom he will abide for ever through the Spirit-Paraclete (see 14:17).

As the Gospel narrative progresses, the meaning of abiding unfolds.

In terms that recall the gathering of the first disciples where the two disciples abide with Jesus, Jesus “stays” (abides) with the Samaritan villagers for two days (4:40). Though effectively Gentiles (4:9), they too

13. On the OT background of the term, see F. Hauck, *mevwn*, *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 574, and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 1.510-11; also Jürgen Heise, *Bleiben: Menein in den Johanneischen Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1967) 22-28. Both the sense of God (God’s word, dominion, covenant, counsel) abiding for ever (for example, LXX [*menein*] Ps 9:8; 111:3, 9; Isa 40:8; Wisd 7:27) and God’s indwelling in Zion (for example, LXX Ezek 43:7; Zech 2:11; Joel 4:17; Sir 24:4) are relevant for John’s heightened usage of *mevnein* and its synonyms.

14. Further on the two broad meanings, see Heise, *Bleiben*, 47-103.

15. Heise, *Bleiben*, 44, identifies thirteen such uses – for example, Jesus “staying” in one geographical place or another (2:12, 7:9, 10:40, 11:6, 11:54, 14:25). The issue of whether or not the beloved disciple will remain (abide) until Jesus comes may also have theological overtones but most probably the ordinary meaning is sufficient (21:22-23).

16. On the semantic problems of locating concepts in single words, unconnected to context, see James Barr, *The semantics of biblical language* (Oxford: University Press, 1961), esp. 206-62.

17. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978) 181, notes (on 1:38): “Nothing is more important than to know where Jesus abides and may be found”; see also Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 100.

enter a relationship of "abiding" with Jesus, though this time in his abiding with them.<sup>18</sup> Abiding moreover has sacramental overtones: the "Son of Man" both gives and is the food that "abides to eternal life" in contrast to mortal food that perishes (6:27); the eucharist is a dramatic symbol of the reciprocal abiding between Jesus and the disciples (6:56). True discipleship means abiding in Jesus' word (8:31; see 1 John 2:14, 24), moving beyond a superficial faith that sees the outer "signs" but fails to perceive their inner, symbolic meaning. Abiding means dwelling not in darkness but in light (12:46; see also 1 John 2:10). Abiding is about the realisation of discipleship as a present reality, yet also with a future dimension, articulated in the substantive *moné* at 14:2. Abiding is dependent on the indwelling of the father and Jesus who will together make an "abiding place" within the heart of the believer (*monén*, 14:23).

As an image of discipleship, abiding is most explicitly enunciated in the "extended metaphor" of the vine and the branches (15:1-17).<sup>19</sup> Here the language of abiding multiplies,<sup>20</sup> converging on the core symbolism of the vine which, it now appears, underlies the theological usage of the word in earlier chapters of the Gospel.<sup>21</sup> Disciples are dependent on Jesus as the source of life just as branches "abide in" (*mevnein ejn*) the vine in order to bear fruit (15:1-8); with pruning/cleansing, the fruit produced by abiding is love, a love predicated on radical friendship between Jesus and his disciples (15:9-17).<sup>22</sup> Although the vine image expresses primarily the relationship between disciples and Jesus, it is extended to include inter-communion: the friendship and love between disciples, and the union within the community of faith. Abiding in this

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18. Barrett, *St. John*, 243.

19. On the structure of the Farewell Discourse and particularly the literary classification of John 15:1-17, see Fernando F. Segovia, *The farewell of the Word: the Johannine call to abide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 123-35. Segovia's classification avoids the more precise Synoptic notion of parable and the vague "mashal", allowing at the same time for allegorical elements. In terms of composition history, Segovia argues that this section is the last part of the Farewell Discourse to be included and that it reflects a later context (closer to the Johannine Epistles) in which members of the Johannine community are vulnerable to apostasy (326-28). Against this, it could be argued that the metaphor is integral to the Gospel's use of *mevnein* and thus already in the "background" of the text from the first.

20. The verb is used fifteen times, comprising just over a third of the instances in the Gospel.

21. Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, 157-8, points out the parallel between Sophia and Jesus in John 15:1-17. Sophia, who "abides" within herself (*mevnousa ejn aujth'*, Wis 7:27), is at one with God and enters into God's friends, transforming their lives. Further on Sophia in John's Gospel, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God. A biblical basis for non-androcentric Christology", *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985) 284-289, and *She Who Is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 96-9.

22. See Sandra M. Schneiders, "The foot washing (John 13:1-20): an experiment in hermeneutics", *Ex auditu* 1 (1985) 140-43, for a feminist reading of these verses in the light of the footwashing. On John's language for friendship, see van Tilborg, *Imaginative love*, 110-68, esp. 148-54.

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sense is not passive or static. The vine is a powerful image of fecundity and life, the joyful flourishing of human beings in community:

Individuals in the community will prosper only insofar as they recognize themselves as members of an organic unit. No individual is a free agent, but is one branch of an encircling and intertwining vine whose fruitfulness depends on abiding with Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

The pruning of the branches by the vinedresser is a metaphor of the interplay between suffering and growth, both of which are necessary for the community to thrive. Without adherence to the vine, without pruning and sculpting by the vinedresser, the branches wither and die; they die of isolation and neglect and their only use is as firewood. Thus in the mutual abiding formula – where the imagery of the vine begins to break down<sup>24</sup> – true disciples are those who abide in Jesus as the source of life and in whom Jesus himself reciprocally abides (see also 1 John 3:24; 4:13, 15-16).

The image of abiding as love and union among disciples is also found, though in a different form, at the foot of the cross where the beloved disciple takes the mother of Jesus into his own home (19:25-27). Though couched in different language – the language of familial intimacy and union – abiding, in the sense of homecoming, becomes a profound symbol of life and community arising from the death of Jesus. This image coheres with that of the vine: suffering and dying are a kind of “pruning” that bring about life and growth. Thus the discipleship of abiding relates also to the reality of the cross.

Not only disciples but also Jesus himself shares in the mutuality of abiding. Jesus’ place in the divine household as “son” is an abiding one (8:35); his death does not negate this abiding, but on the contrary confirms it through the exaltation and glorification of the cross (12:36). Both the Spirit and the father abide in him (14:10, 17; see 1:23-33); and he himself abides with disciples because God abides in him (15:9-10). The unity he shares with the father is the ground of this abiding which is a relation of “mutual or reciprocal immanence” (see 3:35; 6:57; 10:30, 38b; 14:9-11, 20; 17:20-23).<sup>25</sup> The works of Jesus are themselves the concrete manifestation of an indwelling that is not static but dynamic, expressing the shared life of father and son (see 5:17-30).<sup>26</sup> In this sense, abiding has a vertical dimension which is theologically prior to the horizontal dimension, though the two are ultimately inseparable. The mutual abiding of father and son is the source, archetype and pattern

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23. O’Day, “John”, 303.

24. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to John* (London: Burns and Oates, 1982) 3.99.

25. C.H. Dodd, *The interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 187; see also Brown, *John*, 1.511.

26. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 194.

for the abiding of the community.<sup>27</sup> This divine abiding creates a centripetal force that draws human beings out of isolation into community. What disciples are drawn into is a pre-existing union and communion within the divine. Disciples are to abide within the love which both undergirds and encircles the world (3:16; see 1 Jn 3:17; 4:12), an abiding that, as we have seen, is dependent wholly on Jesus (14:1-11).

The peculiar form of this reciprocity is expressed in Jesus' great prayer, in terms that are synonymous with the language of abiding. Disciples are gathered into the "I in you and you in me" of Jesus' affinity with God, so that it now embraces disciples in the same exchange of love: "I in them" and "they in us" and "I in them and you in me" (17:23; see 6:56, 15:5). Indeed Jesus himself is the icon of both dimensions of abiding, the divine and the human, since in his own flesh he is the abiding place of God among people (1:14), the one who establishes an I-Thou union of persons, the embodiment of divine indwelling.<sup>28</sup>

John also uses *menein* in an ironical sense where it expresses the opposite of discipleship as abiding. God's anger abides on those who reject the son and choose death over life (3:36). God's word fails to abide with the religious authorities in Jerusalem (5:38) in contrast to disciples (see 8:31, 15:7) and, by implication, God's judgement remains on them. The sin of the Pharisees abides (9:41) because of their illusion of sight – because they believe they alone have access to the light and persecute those who challenge them. The seed that will not submit to "death and burial" is unable to bear fruit; it abides alone, solitary and infertile (12:24). Whereas abiding means openness to light and life, non-abiding means closure against the light; in the image of the vine, the failure to abide means disconnection and death (15:6). To reject true abiding is thus to condemn oneself to isolation and disconnection: everything that is the opposite of life, affiliation, community. This is nothing but the rejection of the Logos who, having come to "his own" home (1:11) is tragically rejected by "his own" people. Those who reject life find instead an ironical "abiding": an acute sense of separation, a solitary descent into darkness, a languishing in sin and death (see 1 John 3:14-15).

This raises the question of whether abiding, in John's Gospel, also creates opposition. In literary terms, the central text for abiding, the image of the vine (15:1-17), is immediately followed by the hatred of the

27. The dominant androcentric imagery of father-son in the Fourth Gospel presents obvious difficulties for feminist theology. On the strengths and limitations of John's use of the father symbol, see Lee, "Beyond suspicion", 145-53.

28. Jan Gray, "Jesus and women – the Johannine community responds", unpublished paper, 6-11, links the language of abiding with the Johannine metaphor of birth (1:13, 18, 3:3-9, 16:21), identifying womb imagery in the notion of indwelling.

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“world” (*kosmos*, 15:18-16:4a).<sup>29</sup> In these verses we encounter the other face of abiding, or rather the consequences of true abiding. Images of friendship, union, love are now replaced by the language of hatred, rejection and persecution.<sup>30</sup> The community which abides within the divine love is the same community which is hated by the “world” and which suffers precisely because of its identity – its belonging to the light.<sup>31</sup> The “world” opposes the community which abides; it is hostile to everything for which believers stand. Yet the community’s sense of abiding is not crushed by such hostility. On the contrary, persecution intensifies the symbolic perception of belonging and abode. For John, the solidarity of believers, while in one way cutting across the boundaries of community (16:2), in another way is strengthened: the believing community experiences the same rejection as do Jesus and his father. From this perspective, opposition is arguably a catalyst for abiding: for the Johannine writer, it creates ironically the very parameters in which love and intimacy thrive.<sup>32</sup>

To sum up: abiding is a quality of the divine realm, an aspect of eternal life that in John’s Gospel is offered to human beings. As a divine quality, abiding expresses the intimacy and reciprocity which, for John, lie at the heart of the universe. The relationship between God and Jesus, father and son, is the symbol and archetype of abiding. Discipleship is not a self-generating relationship with God or with others, but rather entry into a divine, pre-existing relationship through the Spirit-Paraclete. To be a disciple means to be in union with Jesus, and through Jesus with God – a union that is reciprocal and oriented towards community: the antithesis of separation and seclusion. Abiding is not grounded in external achievement or action, but derives energy from an interior source, a wellspring, an indwelling that is intimate and personal. The symbolism of the vine signifies growth and fecundity, mutuality and homecoming, friendship and self-giving. Yet abiding, as a force for life, does not bypass suffering and death: the vinedresser prunes, the world pours scorn, the seed “dies”, the son creates community with his dying breath.

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29. See Segovia, *Farewell of the Word*, 179-212.

30. Barrett captures the nuanced sense of “the world” in the Fourth Gospel, commenting on Jesus’ prayer at 17:9: “John, having stated (3.16) the love of God for the *kosmos*”, does not withdraw from that position in favour of a narrow affection for the pious.... But to pray for the *kosmos* would be almost an absurdity, since the only hope for the *kosmos* is precisely that it should cease to be the *kosmos*.”

31. From a socio-historical perspective, this issue relates also to the sectarian nature of the Johannine community. For a consensus view on this, see D. Rensberger, *Overcoming the world: politics and community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1988) 15-36.

32. This is in fact the pattern of the narrative of the man born blind in John 9 – opposition and hostility ironically lead the man to faith.

Having outlined in brief something of the significance of *mevnein* in the Gospel of John, we turn finally to the issue of why the Johannine concept of abiding is significant for feminist theology.

#### A FEMINIST THEOLOGY OF ABIDING

In an essay entitled "The fecundity of the caress", French feminist Luce Irigaray speaks of the way in which woman in relationship to man is reduced to the status of object, thus "remaining passive within the field of activity of a subject who wills himself to be the sole master of desire".<sup>33</sup> Irigaray sees this objectification in the distinction between woman as beloved and woman as female lover, in which the woman in relation to the man is "Necessarily an object, not a subject with a relation like his, to time".<sup>34</sup> Conceived as the beloved, woman is reduced to "animality, perversity or a kind of pseudo-childhood" where her subjectivity is diminished.<sup>35</sup>

Irigaray here is offering a feminist critique of the distortion of subject-object relations fostered by the Enlightenment preoccupation with strict objectivity; as a consequence of which women have been exploited and marginalised in the masculine "voyage toward an autistic transcendence".<sup>36</sup> This has been accompanied by a gender dualism and hierarchy in which masculinity has been polarised from femininity, exalting independence, autonomy and detachment above intimacy and attachment. Feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller sees this hierarchical duality in terms of masculine separation and distance against feminine subjectivity and connection, affecting perception not just of women but also nature:

the division between objective fact and subjective feeling is sustained by the association of objectivity with power and masculinity, and its remove from the world of women and love. In turn, the disjunction of male from female is sustained by the association of masculinity with power and objectivity, and its disjunction from subjectivity and love.<sup>37</sup>

This cultural paradigm of subject-object lies at the heart of what Western feminism identifies as patriarchal: the "severance of subject

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33. Luce Irigaray, "The fecundity of the caress: a reading of Levinas, *Totality and infinity*", in *An ethics of sexual difference* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993) 206.

34. Irigaray, "Fecundity", 194.

35. Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas", in M. Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 187.

36. Irigaray, "Fecundity", 210.

37. Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on gender and science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 8.

from object", the illusion of a neutral and disconnected objectivity,<sup>38</sup> the objectification and thus domination of some human beings by others, and the implied hierarchical scale of values. In general theological terms, this disjunction inscribes the need for redemption from sin and evil. For feminist theology, redemption is relational and thus emancipatory, establishing renewed relations within the created world, and between Creator and creation. Relationship and mutuality are central to the feminist vision of salvation.

Viewed from this perspective, the Johannine portrait of abiding as the paradigm of redemption is of particular relevance. First and foremost, abiding dissolves the subject-object relation between human and divine. This dissolution begins within the divine realm which, as we have seen, is the archetype of all relations. Abiding is an expression of the divine life revealed in the Johannine Jesus who lives in profound union with God, the source of all being. God's nature is thus revealed in the Fourth Gospel as relational and immanent.<sup>39</sup> The implicitly trinitarian shape of revelation is not self-sufficient and isolating, but the source and heart of intimacy. Into this abiding, human beings are drawn not as objects but subjects. The mutuality of the language of abiding is important here. The divine is not presented in this Gospel as paternalistic and condescending; rather, the love of God for the world is vulnerable and self-giving (1:11-12, 3:16), calling disciples not into slavish or even childish obedience and servitude but intimate friendship (15:15). Through indwelling, human beings come to relate to God as subject to subject; indeed they find authentic subjectivity in the encounter which, for John, lies at the heart of redemption. The divine "I am" stands in personal relation to human becoming, so that human beings find in themselves a subjective "I am",<sup>40</sup> a sense of selfhood that is itself the gift of an incarnate God. Abiding defines the divine-human relationship as one of immanence: subject to subject, face-to-face, I-Thou, redeeming the world from the terror of objectification, the fear of alterity, the dread of intimacy.

In the second place, by dissolving the subject-object relation between divine and human, John's theological understanding of abiding extends also to the inter-relationship between human beings. Abiding in the love of God is never an abiding in isolation. Separation and autonomy are challenged and ultimately overcome in this vision of communion.

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38. Keller, *Gender and science*, 117. Keller makes a valuable distinction between authentic objectivity, which implies our connectedness to the world of objects, and "objectivist epistemology, in which truth is measured by its distance from the subjective" (p. 87).

39. For a development of this notion within trinitarian terms drawn from Eastern rather than Western christian tradition, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for us: the Trinity and christian life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

40. John S. Dunne, *The homing Spirit: a pilgrimage of the mind, of the heart, of the soul* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 83-91.

Being drawn into friendship with God, human beings also become friends to one another; they too meet as subject to subject. To abide in love with others is to live together in a community that works to overcome alienation and isolation, individualism and hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> It is mutual rather than condescending, co-operative rather than competitive, non-hierarchical rather than status-ridden. If abiding means kinship with God, it means simultaneous kinship with others who share similar yearnings, even though some may be sheep “not of this fold” (10:16) – and even though they are compelled to live as a persecuted minority in an objectivist world. In today’s context, abiding also implies kinship with a bruised and battered creation. Abiding thus has the potential to overcome alienation and objectification, revealing itself as “the way out from the fall”,<sup>42</sup> the way out of isolation into union and empathy with other created beings.

Thirdly, the notion of abiding has its roots in stillness and contemplation rather than external achievement and activism; co-operative “being” rather than competitive “doing”. John emphasises the relational rather than work-oriented aspects of discipleship. To be a disciple has more to do with being than acting. Yet the dichotomy is ultimately false for the writer of John’s Gospel. Abiding is not passive and static. On the contrary, the imagery of the vine is, as we have seen, fertile and creative. To grow and bear fruit in love is essential to abiding. This means that external activity finds its source in the intimacy of contemplation, in the well of water springing up to eternal life (4:14).<sup>43</sup>

From this it follows that the development of an authentic sense of self is an integral aspect of abiding. Women have learned to be self-denying and to sacrifice identity and selfhood for the sake of others.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, they do not necessarily possess a strong interior awareness of dwelling place or homecoming. Deprived of these by patriarchal enculturation, their self-esteem is impoverished and weak. The irony is that the one who nurtures man’s existence through the maternal role, either literally or metaphorically, has no nourishment for herself; in the words of Irigaray: “Woman, who enveloped man before

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41. O’Day, “John”, 303.

42. Irigaray, “Questions”, 186.

43. The priority of relationship is seen in the narrative of the foot washing, where the first – and usually neglected – interpretation (13:6-11), preceding the ethical imperative to serve (13:12-17), is that of partnership in the death of Jesus.

44. On the issue of women’s sin, see Valerie Saiving, “The human situation: a feminine view”, reprinted in C. P. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit rising: a feminist reader in religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) 25-42; see also *Sex, sin and grace: women’s experience and the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980). For an important feminist theological challenge to this gendered understanding of sin, see Angela West, *Deadly innocence: feminism and the mythology of sin* (London: Cassell, 1995).

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birth, until he could live outside her, finds herself encircled by a language, by place that she cannot conceive of, and from which she cannot escape."<sup>45</sup> In this sense, selfhood is not antithetical to the notion of abiding; nurturing a sense of self does not necessarily imply individualism and privatism. On the contrary, a relational understanding of abiding requires a strong and mutual sense of identity. Such selfhood, on the one hand, facilitates authentic relationship with others; on the other hand, it represents an "abiding in the self" (see Wis 7:27), an interior friendship and mysticism that are very different from egoism.

The reality of abiding is the liberation, therefore, not only from isolation but equally, in the other direction, from involuntary and inauthentic self-denial. Abiding makes possible the selfhood necessary for companionship and reciprocity. By overcoming the subject-object relation between men and women, abiding provides the freedom for women (and men) to become themselves, undoing the effects of patriarchal kenosis. To abide in this sense means to move through suffering, to accept the reality that life and fecundity come through pain and death, through pruning and the pierced side (7:38, 19:34). In the struggle between giving and withholding, self-loving and self-bestowing, women find within themselves a divine enclosure that does not imprison, an envelope opening onto the world,<sup>46</sup> an abiding place that sets them free for others. Keller speaks of this as a "dynamic autonomy" that, being distinct from either dependence or neutral distance, thus

reflects a sense of self...as both differentiated from and related to others, and a sense of others as subjects with whom one shares enough to allow for a recognition of their independent interest and feelings – in short for a recognition of them as other subjects.<sup>47</sup>

Abiding is not an individualistic concept but is profoundly personal. The union it offers requires a growing sense of selfhood, a deepening awareness of one's true abode in communion with, and relation to, other created beings. Such abiding is costly and demanding, as the image of the vine illustrates. The divine abode as mutual indwelling is located in the challenging interplay between selfhood and community, singularity and welcome, "self-possessing and...self-giving".<sup>48</sup>

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45. For this image, see Irigaray, "The envelope: a reading of Spinoza, *Ethics*", in *Ethics of sexual difference*, 83-94.

46. Irigaray, "Envelope", 94.

47. Keller, *Gender and science*, 99.

48. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 62.

## CONCLUSION

Women's participation in, or exclusion from, the biblical text is not the only issue for feminist theology. Just as important is the theology of the New Testament and its ability to open a horizon on women's concerns. The Johannine understanding of abiding is an example of this kind of feminist biblical theology. It presents a challenge to Enlightenment polarities, offering, in place of a rationalistic and objectivist view of the world, an icon of wholeness and intimacy. This hope of an abiding place where women can belong as subjects in communion with men – and in harmony with creation – is integral to the challenge of feminism and feminist theology. The Johannine understanding of abiding thus coincides with feminist concerns, creating an alternative vision of freedom, selfhood and community.