

In Memoriam Dr Phyllis Tribble

(October 25th 1932- October 19th 2025)

It is with sadness and great respect for a long and fulfilled life that we have learned of the death of Old Testament scholar Dr Phyllis Tribble. Anyone who studied theology in the 1970s and 1980s and was interested in biblical feminist topics could not ignore the books of Phyllis Tribble. With '*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*' (1978; first German edition 1993: *Gott und Sexualität im Alten Testament*) and '*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*' (1984; German edition: *Mein Gott, warum hast du mich vergessen! Frauenschicksale im Alten Testament*, 1990), she presented fundamental texts that inspired readers to interpret the entire Bible using this hermeneutic approach. She was thus one of the leading exegetes who found and named misogyny and patriarchy in the Bible and worked to overcome them.



Phyllis Tribble's career is widely known. She was born in Richmond, Virginia, and earned a combined Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University in 1963, specialising in biblical theology. She initially taught at Wake Forest University and Andover Newton Theological Seminary. From 1979 to 1998, she taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York, becoming the fourth woman to hold a full professorship and the first to be awarded the Baldwin Professorship of Sacred Literature (1981). After that (from 1998 to 2002), she established the Wake Forest University Divinity School as a professor of biblical literature and later as dean. In 1994, she was president of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). The Phyllis Tribble Lecture Series (2003-2013) was organised in her honour, which she helped to design and to which the university invited feminist theologians. On the tenth anniversary, she published the contributions together with B. Diane Lipsett in the volume '*Faith and Feminism. Ecumenical Essays*', Westminster John Knox Press 2014. In 2006, together with Letty Russell she edited the book '*Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*'. Many international invitations and other publications could be mentioned here, such as her numerous contributions to the series edited by Athalya Brenner: '*A Feminist Companion to the Bible*'. She remained loyal to Union Hebrew College in New York, where she lived until her death, as a visiting professor.

The following are personal words of remembrance:

Ulrike Bechmann

I, Ulrike Bechmann, would like to add my personal encounter to the official data. Considering the time in which she studied, the unusual and challenging achievement of her feminist approach to the Bible, which identified and critically addressed the violence and sexism of many biblical texts, becomes clear. What is taken for granted today, almost 45 years later, was exciting, new, daring and contested at the time. She initiated a breakthrough in feminist Bible reading that could not be reversed. I got to know her personally during private visits to Germany and Austria and met her several times in different places, and we spent some time together. She was open to people and culture, to new encounters, art-loving and interested in everything. And always with an eye for women. We quickly got into conversation about feminist biblical hermeneutics, the necessity of this approach, and she was incorruptible and clear in her analyses. I met her in New York and she invited me to the tenth anniversary of the Phyllis Tribble Lectures at Wake Forest. It was an unforgettable event of international female

theologians with Elsa Tamez, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Hisako Kinukawa and myself. She thus brought a brilliant conclusion to these ten years of feminist theology at Wake Forest, which honoured her life's work.

Marie-Theres Wacker

For me, Marie-Theres Wacker, who encountered feminist theology in the 1980s, Phyllis Tribble's writings were also eye-opening. I have read her interpretation of the paradise story in Genesis 2-3 over and over again and, to this day, I continue to discover ideas in it that set me on new paths and help me progress. Her consistent approach to understanding Genesis 2-3 as a continuous narrative showed me, who had learned to approach biblical texts with a source-critical probe, how fruitful a narrative-analytical approach can be (which she herself would not have called that, but which is, in a sense, preformed in her approach). Her inclusion of rabbinic exegesis also inspired and challenged me to engage with Jewish exegesis. I am deeply grateful to Phyllis Tribble for her inspiration!

Silvia Schroer

In 1987, Gütersloher Verlagshaus published the translation of 'Texts of Terror' (Fortress Press 1984) under the title 'Mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen!' (My God, why have you forsaken me!). The German edition, with a foreword by Helen Schüngel-Straumann, established this classic work of early feminist exegesis in the German-speaking world and inspired many female theologians, as well as women interested in the Bible in ecumenical church circles. Its great success prompted Gütersloher Verlag to publish the older book (Fortress Press 1978) 'God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality' 15 years later. The introduction I wrote in 1993 for 'God and Sexuality in the Old Testament' shows how fundamental Phyllis Tribble's biblical exegesis was for feminist exegesis and how many topics we then pursued for years were based on her discoveries. Phyllis was a passionate scholar; she loved these biblical texts and she suffered because of them. She searched tirelessly for female voices and images of God in the biblical heritage and rejoiced, as she wrote in her 1978 afterword, like the woman in Luke's parable who finds her lost tenth drachma (Luke 15:8) and celebrates her great joy with her friends.

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Find here a video interview with Phyllis Tribble by Susanne Scholz, recorded ca 2009:

<https://susanne-scholz.com/feminist-theologians-live/>