

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Scriptural interpretation and the formation of a popular women's movement in Britain: The Bible Readings column of the *Women's Penny Paper*

By [Naomi Hetherington](#), University of Sheffield

<1>Biblical injunctions against women formed a significant barrier to support for women's rights for much of the nineteenth century. The submission of Eve and Paul's teachings about a wife's submission to her husband provided a divine sanction for the legal doctrine of coverture and were frequently cited by opponents of marriage reform and women's suffrage.<sup>(1)</sup> A significant minority of feminists were Freethinkers, who "saw religion as the primary cause of women's oppression" and denied the authority of the Bible (Schwartz 271). But, for most women, the case for women's rights was dependent on reconciling them with scripture. Ben Griffin has claimed that a popular women's movement could not have developed in Britain without new approaches to scripture and theology in the late-Victorian period (112). The spread of historical criticism and the rise of incarnational theology meant that other parts of the Bible could be viewed in the context of their time and discounted in favor of the teaching and example of Jesus (Griffin 115 – 122, 126 – 134). Esoteric methods of interpretation also circulated in the final decades of the century as the result of a "mystical revival" informed by Medieval and Renaissance Christian mysticism and a new interest in Eastern religious teachings (Owen 22). Such approaches appealed to many women, who could claim a privileged insight into the meaning of scripture denied by the churches. This article examines the interpretive tools employed by contributors to and in correspondence about the Bible Readings column of the *Women's Penny Paper* in order to show how scriptural interpretation was used to build popular support for women's rights in the late nineteenth century.

### Henrietta Müller and the *Women's Penny Paper*

<2>Founded and edited by the suffragist and social reformer Henrietta Müller, the *Women's Penny Paper* was "the most rigorous feminist paper" of the period (Doughan and Sanchez 13). Launched in October 1888, it proclaimed itself to be "The only Paper Conducted, Written, and Published by Women."<sup>(2)</sup> According to Michelle Tusan, the *Penny Paper* marked a new departure in women's advocacy journalism in Britain in moving from single-issue campaigning

to a broad-based program of reform (100 – 101). Registered at home and abroad, it reported on and played a significant role in the formation of a transatlantic and international women's movement. It ran weekly until December 1890 and then from January 1891 under the new name of the *Women's Herald*. In April 1892, Müller resigned and the new editor, Lady Henry Somerset, affiliated the paper with the Liberal Party. Under Müller's editorship, the paper pursued a "progressive" policy of political impartiality ("Our Policy"). At the price of a penny a week, it attracted a broad spectrum of predominantly middle-class women readers. Müller edited the paper under the name of Helena B. Temple so that her public profile should not "colour" its pages (Moleyns 916). In fact, her identity as editor was widely known (Tusan 113). Her networks and reputation as a prominent member of the women's movement may have helped garner support for the paper. Although exact figures are not known, it appears to have achieved a wide circulation since it was mentioned in regional and national papers and American women's papers recommended it to their subscribers (Tusan 117).

<3>Scriptural interpretation was integral to the original aims of the paper. Women's right and duty to interpret the Bible was written into Müller's editorial policy:

We believe that the Bible contains spiritual truth and that the time has come when women are bound to use their intelligence and their conscience for seeking in the spirit for interpretations of that truth, in seeking for *themselves* and offering to their fellow creatures that strength which is "hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes." ("Our Policy")[\(3\)](#)

Appealing to the thinking reader, Müller paradoxically attributed women's unique insight into the true meaning of scripture to their theological naivety. Encouraged to write devotional meditations on the Bible and to simplify theological commentaries on the Bible by male scholars for children and a general audience, women from within the Anglican church and most Dissenting congregations were prohibited from undertaking original Biblical exegesis (Kachur 4). Feminist historians and Biblical scholars have shown how nineteenth-century women circumvented these proscriptions by offering original interpretations of scripture in the guise of devotional commentaries or through non-traditional genres, such as novels, poetry and Bible biography (Groot and Taylor, *Recovering*; Groot and Taylor, *Women of War*; Kachur; Krueger; Styler; Taylor and Weir). According to Julie Melnyk, the periodical press was particularly important in facilitating women's Biblical exegesis because it "challenged the traditional power of the pulpit" (197). The "open" and serial form of the periodical also provided opportunities for comment in the correspondence column and through the submission of other forms of copy (Beetham 98).

<4> Engaging readers in the collective interpretation of scripture through the Bible Readings column, the *Penny Paper* constructed what Joshua King has called an "imagined spiritual community" (172). Indebted to Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities fostered by print culture in the nineteenth century, the term highlights the role of print media in creating new forms of collective religious identity that eluded "any single religious institution's boundaries" (King 7). The *Penny Paper* gave column space to Christian reform organizations such as the British Women's Temperance Association and the Young Women's Christian Association and reported on women's preaching; but it also regularly discussed spiritualist and

occult teachings. In July 1890, it announced a lecture series on Theosophy in the new premises of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society, the foremost esoteric society in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century (“Theosophy in Relation”). Based on the teachings of the Russian occultist Helena Blavatsky, Theosophy sought to synthesize Eastern and Western religious doctrines into an ancient wisdom tradition based on a dual-sexed divine principle. The foundational text of Theosophy, Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) explains how the division between the male and female principles underpins cosmic development, the individual soul passing through male and female bodies till it reaches a higher spiritual plane of existence. As Joy Dixon has shown, Blavatsky’s teachings appealed to many feminists, for whom they “offered new possibilities for rethinking relationships between the sexes” (154).

<5>Müller joined the London branch of the Theosophical Society in June 1891. On resigning her editorship of the *Woman’s Herald*, she became an international ambassador for the movement. Speaking at the Theosophical Congress at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in September 1893, she maintained that Theosophy was the one religion which “did justice to women” (Müller “Theosophy and Women” 168). In contrast to Blavatsky, who condemned Christianity for its patriarchal attitudes, Müller was one of a growing number of women for whom Theosophy provided an opportunity to rehabilitate Christian teaching. She advocated a form of “Christian Theosophy” rooted in the Bible and the person of Jesus (Müller “Theosophy as Found” 31). In her paper on “Theosophy and Women,” given at the Theosophical Congress, she claimed that Christianity had sowed the “seed” for the “emancipation of women” to reach fruition through the emergence of the Theosophical movement (169). She referred to Christ’s encounter with the woman of Samaria to whom he disclosed “not merely the simple, practical, ethical Christian teaching, but the deepest mysteries of the Christian religion” (Müller “Theosophy and Women” 170). By these, Müller meant Theosophical doctrines. Introducing the session on “Theosophy as Found in the Hebrew Books and in the New Testament of the Christians,” Müller drew on Kabbalistic authorities to explain the esoteric meaning of the Bible in addition to Blavatsky’s teachings (32). The reclaiming of the Kabbalah in Western esoteric tradition was, in part, a response to Blavatsky, who devalued Jewish and Christian writings in contrast to Eastern wisdom (Pasi 161 – 162). Located within a common wisdom tradition, the Kabbalah was used to recover an authentic scripture that was claimed to have been concealed by subsequent editors and translators. By tracing these arguments back to the Bible Readings, it is possible to see their role in developing Müller’s thinking. Perhaps more significant is the role which esotericism played in providing an ecumenical framework through which to engage the paper’s readership in different methods of scriptural interpretation.

### **The Bible Readings column**

<6>Launched in the opening number of the paper, the Bible Readings column was addressed to the “many women in England and in America” who are restrained from developing their faculties more fully “by the fear [...] that the Bible forbids ‘women’s rights’” (“Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]). It was intended to demonstrate that “this impression arises from a mistaken interpretation” of Biblical teachings (“Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]). Acknowledging women’s limited access to a male stale tradition of Biblical scholarship, the Bible Readings were “not offered as coming from learned commentators – of whom there appear to be more than enough – they are the plain and simple thoughts” arising from a mutual conviction in the goodness of the

Bible and the liberty of women (“Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]). Inviting all women readers to contribute to the column, the editor was particularly keen to hear from those who with a knowledge of Biblical languages, who were “therefore able to study the Bible in the original” (Editorial note to “Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]). It may be because few women possessed this kind of philological training that she did not receive enough contributions to sustain a weekly column. Six more instalments appeared between November 1888 and October 1889, including a two-part reading by the editor of the column. The column recommenced in July 1890 with a further numbered series of seven readings over three months. These appear to be by a single hand, probably the editor of the column since they develop some of the ideas put forward in her earlier readings. It is impossible to trace most of the contributors to the column as all but one of the readings are unsigned, but it is likely that the editor was Müller, herself, given her particular and ongoing interest in scriptural interpretation. A year before launching the *Penny Paper*, she had given a lecture on “Women and the Bible” at Westminster Town Hall to a women-only audience (Crawford 430). Moreover, the editor’s choice of scriptural passages and interpretative approaches resemble those taken by Müller in her later Theosophical writings.

<7>The opening reading is intended to prove that the Bible sanctions women’s participation in public life through a direct appeal to Jesus’ teaching (“Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]). The passage is taken from Jesus’ lesson to the disciples about the woman who anointed him with precious ointment at the Last Supper in preparation for burial: “Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman has done, be told for a memorial of her” (“Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]).<sup>(4)</sup> From this is deduced the principle that “public mention of a woman was to be regarded as right and honorable, and part of the reward for her good deeds” (“Bible Readings. The Woman of Samaria. Part 1”). The reading is used as a springboard from which to assert the equality of men and women. The editor directed readers to “[s]earch through every word that Christ ever spoke [...]. It is not possible to find one word that hints at the subjection of women” (“Bible Readings” [Oct 1888]). The boldness of this claim is apparent from the first response to the column. In a letter to the editor, (Mrs) L.B. cited a string of verses from other parts of Bible in support of the subordination of women. She conceded that women may conduct meetings and enter professions such as medicine and education where “home and family circumstances allow,” but expressed her dismay that “a Woman’s Paper should present women on an *equality* with men while the Bible so plainly teaches to the contrary” ((Mrs) L.B.). She felt strongly enough on the subject to request that her letter be inserted “into an early issue of the paper” ((Mrs) L.B.).

<8>The letter’s appearance in the third issue is consistent with Müller’s policy of free and open discussion set out in the opening number (“Our Policy”). Nevertheless, she appended a note making clear the extent to which (Mrs) L.B.’s opinions depart from the official line of the paper:

We are glad to insert our correspondent’s letter, as we believe that it expresses the feeling that we are anxious to dispel – namely, that in a certain sense, the Bible forbids women’s rights. We believe this feeling is founded upon a misinterpretation of the Bible which, having tradition and authority to back it, may be difficult to remove, but the truth can only be obtained by free discussion of opposite opinions. (Editorial note to (Mrs) L.B.)

In this way, Müller was able to use (Mrs) L.B.'s letter to provoke debate about Biblical teaching on women amongst the paper's readers. Correspondents were quick to challenge (Mrs) L.B.'s interpretation of particular verses from scripture and to point out that none of the passages which she had selected were actually spoken by Jesus. One correspondent questioned the relevance of apostolic teaching to contemporary ideas about women's rights and duties since these "doctrines were preached to other women than those of the nineteenth century" (A Wife). Signing herself "A Wife But Not in Subjection," she pitted herself against (Mrs) L.B. in support of the editor of the Bible Readings column:

It only shows the necessity of women reading the Bible by the light of their own intelligence; that a woman should select as Mrs B. [sic] has done, all those verses which she has been *taught* to apply to herself, in order to prove that all women are commanded by the Bible to be subservient to men, shows how little she must have read, marked, learnt *for herself* (A Wife).

<9>Acknowledging the "many expressions of approval" for and "series of interesting letters" in response to the column, the editor followed up her claims about Jesus' treatment of women with a reading of his encounter with the woman of Samaria ("Bible Readings: The Woman of Samaria Part 1"). Appearing in two parts in March 1889, it argues that Jesus denied "the intellectual inferiority of woman" since he assumed that the Samaritan woman could understand the "difficult Truths of Religion" ("Bible Readings: The Woman of Samaria Part 1"). The editor claimed not to be able to grasp the "vast and deep meanings in these verses" or to be able to explain them to others; but in maintaining that this unnamed woman possesses "a peculiar prominence in Christian history" and "bears a significance but little unexpected hitherto," she gestured towards the esoteric interpretation of the story which Müller was to develop five years later in her paper to the Theosophical Congress ("Bible Readings: The Woman of Samaria Part 1"). The story is used here to show how the teaching and example of Christ is given to women to enable them to claim their "personal liberties" ("Bible Readings: The Woman of Samaria Part 2"). Invoking the Orientalist trope of the secluded Eastern woman, the author took Jesus' willingness to talk publicly to a woman as a model of how barriers to women's liberty might be broken down:

not by noisy aggressive words, [...] nor by vituperation against the men who impose disabilities on women, in all lands – but simply by taking the law into our own hands, the law, that is, of God, by putting quietly and strongly on one side, in our daily lives, those customs which restrict our liberties. ("Bible Readings: The Woman of Samaria Part 1")

<10>In contrast to the editor's focus on the teaching and example of Jesus, other contributors to the column claimed that the status of women elsewhere in the scriptures had been suppressed by their compilers and translators. The first reader to contribute to the column quoted at length from Laurence Oliphant's *Scientific Religion* (1888) to illuminate an "obscure" passage from Paul's epistle to the Corinthians commonly taken to refer to the doctrine of a wife's submission to her husband ("Bible Readings" [Nov 1888]).<sup>(5)</sup> A literary celebrity, politician and mystic, Oliphant was repeatedly cited by readers as a scholarly authority on the Bible. A disciple of the spiritualist Thomas Lake Harris, Oliphant had been a member of Harris' Brotherhood of the New Life, a utopian Christian community founded on Swedenborgian teachings about the correspondence

between male and female elements in the Godhead and nineteenth-century Spiritualist ideas about affinity (Chajes 499). These ideas form the basis of *Scientific Religion*, from which the Bible Reading is taken. According to Oliphant, the translators of the Authorized Version had distorted the original meaning of Paul's teaching. Properly understood, the passage reveals Paul's "dim consciousness" of the equality of the feminine and masculine elements "in God, and therefore in all His created beings" ("Bible Readings" [Nov 1888]).<sup>(6)</sup> As the author noted, Oliphant did not support the emancipation of women, but she was able to cite the conclusion he drew from his examination of Paul about their spiritual subordination for her own political purposes: "There can be no better illustration of the pride and ignorance with which man, even to our own day, insists upon woman's subjection to him [...]. Had the translators been women, the explanation would have been different" ("Bible Readings" [Nov 1888]).

<11>The translation of the Bible was a contentious issue in the late 1880s with the publication of the Revised Version. As Ben Griffin has argued, it alerted the public to the possibility of errors in the Authorized Version and called into question the feasibility "of establishing an agreed text of the Bible from the various surviving fragments" (115). But it also offered many women, who were not able to read the Bible in the original, the opportunity to compare this new translation with the Authorized Version. One contributor to the Bible Readings column placed the two versions of Psalm 68 side by side in order to expose the omission of women's role in spreading the word of the Lord from the Authorized Version.<sup>(7)</sup> She concluded that this could not be "anything other than a deliberate falsification of the Bible by those who translated it in the time of James I. [...] Prejudice against women can lead [...] "pious" persons to falsify the Bible itself rather than confess that women have been chosen to teach and preach it" ("Bible Readings" [Dec 1888]). Demanding to know how many "male translators and modifiers have *read in* their prejudice or their untruth" during "the 1,900 years that the Bible has been The Book of the Christian Religion," another contributor called on women to restore "the Integrity and Truth of the Bible": "We want women to be the interpreters and translators, the expounders and teachers and preachers of the Bible; we want them in Sunday schools, in Chapels, in Churches, fulfilling the duties to which Christ Jesus, – if not the Christian Churches – is calling them" ("Bible Readings. Phil 4.3").

<12>Preaching was "one of the most authoritative and meaningful aspects of Protestant practice" (Walker 94). However, women's right to preach was widely contested throughout the nineteenth century on account of Paul's prohibition of women's teaching and speaking in church.<sup>(8)</sup> In November 1888, the *Penny Paper* published a detailed review of *Woman in the Pulpit* (1888), by Frances Willard, a Methodist lay preacher and President of the World Women's Christian Temperance Union, which made a case for women preachers by arguing for the fallibility of Paul's writings ("Woman in the Pulpit"). The paper also reported on Bible classes for women and girls organized by the British Women's Temperance Association ("British Women's Temperance Association"). However, there was a clear difference between the instruction offered in these classes and the overtly political aims of the Bible Readings column. Interviewing Hannah Whitall Smith, the National Superintendent of the Bible Reading Work for the World's Women's Christian Temperance Union, in August 1889, the paper's reporter commented that "Mrs Smith always deduces practical truths from her expositions of the Bible. Did she take up its theoretical teaching, with what effect would she be able to show that it does not – honestly interpreted – inculcate the subjection of women!" ("Interview"). From an American Quaker



family, Smith was the “extremely successful” author of numerous Christian self-help books including Biblical commentaries (Allen 228). These were devotional works which did not explicitly challenge conventional gender ideology despite Smith’s public support of women’s suffrage. They illustrate the constraints imposed on women by a popular religious publishing market, which encouraged them to engage in “practical divinity”, but not to originate their own doctrinal ideas or engage in controversial arguments (Styler 67).

<13>By contrast, the suffragist and theological scholar Sara Hennell took up the question of the Bible’s position on women’s rights in her published writings and was keen to share her knowledge with the paper’s readers. Writing in response to the Bible Readings column in December 1888, Hennell agreed that it was of “the utmost importance to women to understand how their case is treated in the Bible,” but argued that they must first settle “with themselves” in what light to regard its teaching (Hennell “View”). Responsible for introducing George Eliot to the writings of Strauss and Feuerbach, Hennell was well acquainted with the latest developments in German philosophy and Higher Criticism. She rejected the divine inspiration of the Bible, understanding it to be “the invaluable expounder of historical progress” and dividing it into “fragments of separate books in different styles” of different dates and authorships (Hennell “View”). The letter concludes that those parts of the Bible teaching the subordination of women reflected primitive stages in religious thinking. Müller added an editorial note expressing her pleasure at receiving such an erudite letter from “Miss Hennell, the friend of George Eliot, and talented author of *Present Religion*,” but distancing her paper from its more radical implications: “It is one of the instances of original thought of women about the Bible, and however much we may differ from them we always give them a welcome” (Editorial note to Hennell “View”). *Present Religion* (1865-1887) reformulates relations between the sexes through an evolutionary account of religious progress. It was reviewed in the paper in June 1889. When Hennell wrote in to complain that the reviewer had not done her work justice, she proposed a series of articles explaining the book’s key ideas which appeared in subsequent issues of the paper (Hennell, “Miss Hennell’s ‘Present Religion’”).<sup>(9)</sup>

<14>Whilst few readers had Hennell’s command of Biblical scholarship, she was not the only one to reconfigure sexual relations on the basis of scripture. In October 1889, the Bible Readings column included a reading of Genesis 3 which transformed the traditional Christian account of the “fall” and punishment of Eve by submitting to her husband into an argument for woman’s right to control her maternal instinct. Signed S.E.G., the reading was by Susan Elizabeth Gay, a Christian spiritualist, who had already published several works arguing for the spiritual power and sexual equality of women through a radical interpretation of Swedenborgian teaching. Reviewed favorably in the *Penny Paper*, *The Spirit of the New Testament* (1885) interprets the life of Jesus as an allegory of the soul and its part in the evolution of the human race. His birth from a virgin, herself immaculately conceived, foretells an end to physical marriage and childbirth as humanity progresses to a higher spiritual plane ([Gay] *The Spirit* 503). Gay’s contribution to the Bible Readings column interprets the fall of Adam and Eve as the soul’s prior descent into a material and sexed existence. Physical marriage is held to be a “perverted relationship” because it compels “the subordination of one human being to another” ([Gay] “The Fall”). Gay claimed that humanity would not be able to pursue an upward course until woman is freed from all personal claims in relation to marriage, and her “right to be, or to refuse to be a mother, at all times respected” (“The Fall”). Women were called on to “seek deliverance from

laws which educate the world in a false ideal of marriage, and which sanction the deepest wrongs under the plea that it is a religious institution” ([Gay] “The Fall”). The notion of enforced maternity was brought to public attention in the 1890s through campaigns for legislative change by the Women’s Emancipation Union (Wright 385). Its prior discussion in the Bible Readings column highlights the importance of scriptural interpretation as a vehicle for raising this difficult issue to a broad audience.

### Reintroducing the Bible Readings column

<15>The Bible Readings column broke off after Gay’s reading. When it was reintroduced nine months later, its focus shifted from demonstrating the Bible’s support for women’s rights in different areas of private and public life to establishing an underlying scriptural basis for sexual equality. The editor set out to recover the feminine attributes and names for God beginning with the opening chapter of Genesis. Her account of the divine names and attributes is taken from *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (1887), a partial English translation of Christian Knorr von Rosenrath’s *Kabbalah Denudata* (1684) by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and one of the most significant texts in the revival of a Kabbalistic tradition within Western esotericism at the end of the nineteenth century (Pasi 162). Mathers was one of the founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the foremost Magical Order in Britain in the late-Victorian period (Owen 43). He had been a follower of the visionary Anna Kingsford and a member of the Hermetic Society, which she set up in 1884 with her disciple Edward Maitland to teach an esoteric version of Christianity based on Western mystery traditions (Owen 46). *The Kabbalah Unveiled* was dedicated to Kingsford and Maitland. Mathers’ introduction draws on their ideas of divine androgyny rooted in Kabbalistic and Swedenborgian teaching (Owen 110). It explains that “of the persons and attributes of God [...] *some are male and some female*” and claims that “the translators of the Bible have carefully crowded out of existence and smothered up every reference to the fact that the Deity is both masculine and feminine” (Mathers 21). Informing readers of this “complete and systematic suppression of the feminine side of the deity,” the author of the Bible Readings column advised those “who are not afraid of a difficult subject to study carefully the meanings of the name Elohim [the Hebrew name for God in the opening chapter of Genesis] as given in various authors” (“Bible Readings II”).

<16>It is clear that at least some readers of the column acted on its teachings. The following week, Müller published a letter of “encouragement” from R.M.S., who wanted to let “the authoress of ‘Bible readings’” know “how useful” her column had proved when she was visited by “a young clergyman of the Church of England,” who had come up with all the conventional arguments for the inferiority of women. She had advised him to “study the subject” and read up on the derivations of Hebrew terms: “Owing to all the knowledge I have gained out of your paper [...] I was able to reply to him, and to silence him. [...] I hardly know how to express all I feel about the *Women’s Penny Paper*” (R.M.S.). However, her enthusiasm was not shared by all those who followed the Bible Readings column. In the same issue, the author claimed to have received “several letters” questioning the motivation and authority behind her claims about the course that men have taken as compilers and translators of the Bible (“Bible Readings III”). These letters are not printed in the paper’s correspondence column. Their omission is striking given Müller’s earlier encouragement of debate between readers about the interpretation of scripture. It shows how the purpose of the Bible Readings had shifted from women’s collective



exposition of scripture to the individual study of an esoteric wisdom tradition. It also suggests an anxiety about how acceptable such teachings were to many of the paper's readers. Offering to make her sources known privately to any readers who requested them, the editor reserved the right to carry her research into "any of the records of religions" ("Bible Readings III"). However, she maintained that what was most important for women in the West was to "make a reverent study of the Bible from the point of view of the liberation of woman" ("Bible Readings III"). She reiterated the advice given in the opening number of the column to select only "the *words spoken by Christ Himself*," adding that "[o]ur pages are open to any of our readers who follow this course" ("Bible Readings III").

<17>The Bible Readings column was reintroduced in the context of an increasing rift between readers concerning women's allegiance to Christianity and their role and status in the churches. Some correspondents maintained that there was no difficulty in reconciling women's freedom with Christianity and pointed to the historical context for Paul's teaching that women should submit to their husbands and keep their heads covered in church (Gerald; Payne; Snoad; Watson). However, others questioned whether women should continue to support churches which relied on their unpaid labor and financial aid whilst refusing to allow them leadership positions (Arling; Clarke). One correspondent, Elizabeth Beard, went so far as to argue that the equality of the sexes would only come about when women had "effected their emancipation from [...] priestly dogmatism." Familiar with historical scholarship on the New Testament, she questioned the plausibility of giving precedence to Jesus' teaching on women over Paul's since "the Gospels were not written till long after the dates assigned to the earlier Epistles" (Beard). In an editorial leader on "Woman and Christianity," Müller professed some sympathy with Beard's view, which she feared may be held by a significant number of women: "We cannot wonder that many should feel as she does – for consider how the churches treat women. No one shows more contempt for women than do some clergymen of the church of England." Nevertheless, she reassured readers of Beard's error in mistaking the "true teaching of Christ" with "the errors of the mere human church and its very fallible priests" ("Woman and Christianity").

<18>The Bible Readings took a similar line, arguing for the primacy of the believer's relationship with the word of God in terms familiar to Protestant readers: "do not ask your clergyman and your minister to stand between you and God's word. Nobody can interpret its meaning to you, and for you, as well as you yourself can, if you have Faith" ("Bible Readings No. VI"). This advice struck a chord with some readers, who absorbed the central message of the Bible Readings about the feminine attributes of the deity even if they did not pursue its occult teachings. In September 1890, Müller published a poem on "Womanhood" by Urda Mallin, which the author informed her was "the result of reading some of the Bible Readings in the *Women's Penny Paper* one Saturday, and listening the next day to a sermon relating to women preached in a spirit utterly contrary to the Bible Readings." Mallin's poem is addressed to the "Great Womanhood of God" in whose "fair image" women are made and in whose name they "arm" themselves to fight for future generations of women (Mallin). It ends with an intercession to a maternal sovereign to come to their present aid to realize their full capabilities as women:

Help us now, we pray Thee, In this our sorest need; Royal Mother, send us True Womanhood indeed. (Mallin)

Mallin's poem is typical of poetry published in the paper in combining "technical conventionality" with "political commitment" (Gray 139 – 140). Elizabeth Gray has shown how a substantial number of these poems use "biblical authority to argue for a specific case for women's rights" (148). Taking inspiration from the Bible Readings column, Mallin created a spiritual vocabulary for women's struggle.

## Conclusion

<19>Recruiting and inspiring support for women's rights, the Bible Readings column constructed a sense of community through the collective interpretation of scripture. Contributors and correspondents argued for women's participation in public life, including women's preaching, and for the reconfiguration of relations between men and women including women's right to consent to maternity on the basis of Biblical teaching. The column provided a forum in which to experiment with different tools and methods of scriptural interpretation. Published women exegetes of the Bible also disseminated their knowledge and understanding to the paper's readership. Christian esoteric teachings created an ecumenical framework through which to engage readers in a range of interpretive approaches including historical criticism, comparing existing translations of Bible passages and the privileging of the teaching and example of Jesus over Paul's teachings. The editor's increasing interest in esoteric forms of interpretation alienated some churchgoing readers. These methods appealed to other readers for whom they offered a privileged insight into the true meaning of scripture denied by the churches. Their responses to the column provide glimpses into women's everyday encounters with scriptural arguments against women's rights and the role of new tools and methods of scriptural interpretation in building a popular women's movement in the late nineteenth century.

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## Notes

(1)See Genesis 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35; Ephesians 5: 22 – 24; 1 Timothy 2:12 –14 AKJV. "Coverture" refers to the legal status of married women which placed them "under the authority and protection" of their husband (OED).<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)The *Penny Paper* was initially printed by the Women's Printing Society, which Müller had helped to found in 1876. However, she was forced to stop using its services due to increased costs, and, in March 1890, the word "Printed" was dropped from the masthead ("Correspondence – Our Paper"). It is also important to note that the paper included a small number of letters by men and they occasionally contributed to other sections of the paper. See Tusan 113.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3)The reference is to Matthew 11:25/Luke 10:21 AKJV.<sup>(^)</sup>

(4)The reference is to Matthew 26.13 AKJV: “Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.”(△)

(5)The passage is 1 Corinthians 11:10 AKJV: “For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.” The notes to the AKJV take this verse to mean: “A covering, in sign that she is under the power of her husband.”(△)

(6)The quotation is from Oliphant 356.(△)

(7)The passage is Psalm 68:11: “The Lord gave the word, great was the company of those that published it” AKJV; “The Lord giveth the word: the women that publish the tidings are a great host” RV.(△)

(8)See 1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35 AKJV; 1 Timothy 2:12 – 14 AKJV.(△)

(9)This series appeared in the paper as Hennell “The Doctrine of Sexhood in ‘Present Religion.’”; “‘Present Religion,’ II. Sex in Mind”; “‘Present Religion,’ III. Individualism”; “‘Present Religion,’ IV Relationism.”(△)

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