

Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature

Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*. Translated by Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012. 1030 pp. \$80.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780802860972.

The idea for this volume of seventy-six essays (each approximately fifteen to twenty pages long) began in 1995, shortly after the appearance of the first edition of *The Women's Bible Commentary*. One of the criticisms of that work was the use of the definite article in the title. Many scholars regarded it as one commentary among many. In response, the definite article was dropped from the title for the second edition. Like later editions of *Women's Bible Commentary*, this compendium does not purport to be a definitive collection. Instead, it serves "to document and advance the pluriform range of the women-specific engagement with the Bible" (xii). The editors achieve this goal. In fact, like *Women's Bible Commentary*, this volume — a translation from the German first published in 1998 and in a second edition in 1999 — is primary source material for those interested in the history of biblical interpretation. In contrast to the predominately North American perspective of *Women's Bible Commentary*, the fifty-nine contributors are scholars currently working or who have worked or were educated in Europe, most in Germany. Scholarship owes a debt of gratitude to the seven translators who undertook the massive task of translating this lengthy tome.

All of the contributors share the view that "Christian anti-Judaism, Western colonialism, and all forms of racism have to be opposed at the same time misogyny is" (xiii). They also all share an interest in what the biblical and extrabiblical books tell us about the day-to-day existence of women within their historical contexts. In addition, they seek practical application of these texts by looking for "traces or suggestions of a freedom they may find in the here and now" (xxiv).

Overall, there are three major strengths of this work. First, it includes not only Protestant biblical books, but also the seven other books included in the Roman Catholic canon (1 and 2 Maccabees, Baruch, Judith, Tobit, Sirach, and Wisdom), as well as the Greek expansions of the books of Daniel and Esther. It also includes seven examples of early Christian literature (the Acts of Thecla; the Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca; the Gospel of Mary; the Gospel of Thomas; the Shepherd of Hermas; the Gospel of Peter; and the Protevangelium [or Infancy Narrative] of James) and four intertestamental works (4 Ezra, Joseph and Aseneth, the Testament of Job, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs). Some of these texts have never been the focus of feminist interpretation so *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* shines new light on and raises awareness of them. Given the lack of an accessible, complete German translation of the Gospel of Mary, the authors of this essay provide one in addition to their commentary.

Second, the editors illustrate the diverse variety of methods used by feminist scholars, including those focusing on the historical context, the literary text, and/or the reader. One example of historical-critical scholarship is found in the essay on Nahum by Gerlinde Baumann. Monika Fander's essay on Mark demonstrates a focus on the literary text. The range of contributors focusing on the reader is quite broad, including Maria Kassel who adopts a depth psychology approach. She briefly explains her method and then demonstrates how it might provide insight into understanding the book of Jonah, noting that "...women not only undergo transformation by journeying through the underworld — as do men! — but at the same time they themselves are *part of the transformative power*" (418). Caroline Vander Stichele adopts a "feminist cultural criticism" approach in her essay on 2 Corinthians, reading the book with a critical awareness of her own cultural context.

Third, while sometimes challenging to read due in part to being a compendium and a translation, the commentary for each individual canonical and extracanonical book is thought provoking. The authors offer fresh insight on familiar

biblical books and extracanonical works. For example, in her essay on Ruth, Ina Johanne Petermann notes that “...the feminist relevance of the book of Ruth remains strangely in suspense — woman thinks, man provides, but God’s at the wheel” (130). With regard to the less familiar Shepherd of Hermas, contributor Ulrike Auga observes that as she reads it, “the ambiguity of the text entices me into making ever-new subjective and risk-laden decisions that alter me and enable the world to be changed” (970). Each of these observations is simple at first glance, but is more profound upon further reflection.

Feminist Biblical Interpretation will be of interest not only to biblical scholars focusing on particular biblical books or traditions, but also to those interested in the history of interpretation, theology, gender studies, and cultural studies. The compendium can serve as a reference work, but it should also be viewed as an important addition to a general collection. Readers will turn to it again and again, not only to read essays on specific biblical books, but also to get an overview of feminist biblical interpretation.

The work is not to be read in isolation. Rather, its essays invite group discussion in order to continue the dialogue initiated when the essays were published together into one volume. Within this single volume, it is interesting to note the influences of some of the scholars on others (e.g., Bettina Elthrop studied with Luise Schottroff). As noted above, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* does not pretend to represent the fuller spectrum feminist voices. In fact, the book invites the reader to find her or his own voice among the many represented in this volume. After reading this book, additional volumes from other world perspectives would be welcome.

Any shortcomings of this book are due mostly to its genre. It is a compendium — a condensed representation — of feminist biblical interpretation. Some of the essays may leave the reader wanting more. In that case, there are brief, helpful bibliographies after each essay. These bibliographies do not rehearse “traditional exegesis” or introductory knowledge about the biblical and extrabiblical books. Instead, they include works with a feminist focus. The major weakness of the work is that it lacks an introductory or concluding essay that serves as a synthesis of the diversity of methods represented within it. The reader is left to make connections between the commentators and their methodologies, an exercise that can be difficult without some guidance. While the volume contains many valuable contributions, giving an overview of feminist biblical interpretation would shed additional light on the essays individually and collectively.

Overall, this work is highly recommended. It should be part of every theological library to complement works such as *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 2 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1993-94), and possibly *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*, by Alice Laffy (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

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