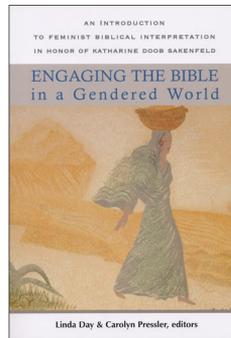


○ REVIEW OF LINDA DAY AND CAROLYN PRESSLER (EDS.), *ENGAGING THE BIBLE IN A GENDERED WORLD*

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Esther Fuchs reviews Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (eds.), *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*. Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. PB 260 pages ISBN 0-664-22910-7.



As the title suggests this is an introductory textbook to feminist interpretations of the Bible as well as a festschrift in honor of theologian Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. This combination is both salutary and regrettable. It is salutary because festschrifts for women colleagues are in themselves a feminist gesture of recognition and sisterhood. It is salutary also because a feminist introductory textbook to the Bible is something we, college professors of women in the Bible courses have been eager to see published for quite some time. But in their attempt to tailor the volume to what they present as Dr. Sakenfeld's interests the editors tend to narrow the general enterprise of feminist biblical interpretations to theology, and to Christian or more precisely Protestant approaches to what is almost unanimously referred to throughout the volume as the 'Old Testament'. In a volume focused on multicultural approaches to the Bible, the generalising title is discomfiting to say the least. The relatively brief chapters and the short lists of readings at the end of each chapter may perhaps serve the purposes of the lay reader who seeks to get a general idea of what the field is about, but for the serious student of feminism or biblical literature whose location is the academy, the volume may prove to be too confining and too repetitive.

The Christian theological orientation of the volume is articulated by the introduction which explicitly states that 'a significant number of the articles are shaped by an explicit faith perspective and are written from and for the Church' (xiv). The question is: how can this sort of volume also 'belong to the academy'? Is the University co-equal with the hegemonic religious tradition of the United States? The introduction offers some basic hermeneutic models, such as a hermeneutics of suspicion (for patriarchal texts) and a hermeneutics of retrieval (for liberating texts) though it fails to define some basic terms, such as 'patriarchy' or 'authority' which leads to an essentialist

rejection of ‘males’ who wrote and edited the Bible. Nor do they explain the use of or the need for the terms ‘Newer and Older Testament’ (xv). This introduction is followed by a theoretical and methodological overview by Kathleen M. O’Connor entitled ‘The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman’s Perspective’. Though she refers to ‘socioeconomic systems’ O’Connor draws parallels between the impoverished widow in 2 Kings 4 and North American feminist women in general without referring to the implications of class discrimination: ‘When modern feminist women began to analyze our common predicament, we realized that we, too, were excluded and demeaned simply because we were female’ (p. 5). I find O’Connor’s references to ‘feminist women’ throughout her essay rather disconcerting given her emphasis on postmodern and postcolonial discourses and their allegedly revolutionary effect on feminist hermeneutics.

The volume in general is divided into four sections: Perspectives, Texts, Issues and Intersections. The section on ‘Perspectives’, is by far the most original and promising section in the book. It includes culturally diverse situated responses to the biblical text and to feminist scholarship. Thus, the Latina, or *mujerista* approach emphasises the function of daily interaction, communication, and relationship and ties it to the ‘Eucharist’ as ‘the best example of the efficacy of word’ (p. 31). The chapter on ‘Womanist Biblical Interpretation’ criticises the exclusion of Black feminist voices from early feminist biblical scholarship. The chapter on ‘an Asian Woman’s Perspective’ reads the book of Ruth as a spiritual resource, but cautions against accepting the obedience and submissiveness of Ruth as a possible role model. The chapter ‘On Being a Woman in the First World’ offers a sympathetic reading of Sarah as a barren and sexually exploited woman. Despite the postcolonial perspective of this section there is no awareness in this chapter of the ‘ethnic’ difference between Sarah the Israelite and the Christian reader who reads her as her virtual double. A Christian reading of a Hebrew text requires at least a modicum of awareness of cultural difference and at least some serious treatment of a Jewish feminist response, especially when the explicit point of the entire section is to clarify cultural positions and locations. The final chapter on masculinities focuses on violence as a characteristic construction of masculinity and male inter-necine interrelations in the Creation-Fall stories of Genesis 2–4. This construction is juxtaposed with the desideratum of peace and friendship configured by the Jacob-Esau, and Joseph and his brothers’ reconciliation stories.

The first section is not linked to the second section thematically, or methodologically, thus suggesting that a discussion of texts is not embedded or conditioned by the perspective of the reader. The linkage is provided by Dr. Sakenfeld’s interest in the book of Ruth. The section on ‘Texts’ includes discussions of the book of Ruth, in addition to the one already mentioned, with emphases on both Ruth and Naomi, and chapters on the Song of Songs and Job’s Wife. The chapter on Naomi, entitled ‘Seeing the Older Woman’ focuses on the Naomi as an older woman, and thus as a subject who suffers the double oppression of age and gender. The chapter compares Naomi’s pain and suffering to Job’s and argues that while suffering is treated seriously when dramatised as part of a male story, it does not command equal attention when attributed to female characters. Another noteworthy chapter is Linda Day’s ‘Wisdom and the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible’. Day highlights the various instances in which Wisdom is associated with femininity. Day highlights the roles of women as dispersers of practical advice, as courageous leaders who command authority, including Miriam, Deobrah, the wise woman of Tekoa and Judith. She suggests that we consider Eve as well as a seeker of Wisdom and proceeds to tie all these configurations with the abstract representation of Wisdom as feminine voice in Proverbs. This section deals

with literary constructions and introduces French feminist theory and artistic representation as aides in the process of theological interpretation. In this regard the section does not break new ground, though it shows how theological interpretations can make use of feminist literary approaches to the text.

The section on 'Issues' deals with problems that have surfaced in public debates mostly in the United States. One such issue deals with gender-inclusive language and various approaches to translating the Bible. Are modernising translations of language about God possible or desirable, or do they represent a deviation from the original intent of the text? The biblical tendency to refer to represent God in masculine terms and the resultant difficulty of women readers to envision themselves as sacred beings has been a topic of concern for feminist theologians. One approach is to use gender inclusive translations. Another suggests paying closer attention to the text that may suggest female metaphors for the deity, such as God as midwife in Psalm 22. Such close attention may reveal as well that the psalmist is a woman asking for divine intervention and protection against suffering and pain. A historical approach to the question of the male representation of God traces archeological inscriptions referring to Asherah the Canaanite Goddess as YHWH's consort. Another issue that is discussed in this section is the frequent depiction of male violence against women and the relative passivity or invisibility of God in such stories. Yet another issue is the use of the Bible as justification of the objection to gay marriage and other modern marital arrangement In 'The 'Biblical View' of Marriage', Carolyn Pressler highlights the heterogeneity of marital arrangements in the Bible, including polygamous marriage, and levirate marriage and Roman patriarchal marriage that required the submission of wives. Pressler argues that marriage in the Bible was often an economic transaction and had little to do with emotional commitments. She argues against the simplistic yet common tendency to refer to an idealised image of biblical marriage as a perfect model for modernity.

The final section, 'Intersections' deals with the relationship between feminist interpretation and the discipline of biblical theology, with lay readership and pedagogy and with male scholarship on women and feminism. Phyllis A. Bird's chapter on 'Feminist Interpretation and Biblical Theology' suggests that much of feminist biblical interpretation has been concerned with questions of identity, purpose and ethics which are central themes in biblical theology. She surveys briefly the academic theological study of the Bible in the last three decades and notes the relative absence of women from the field. She notes the work of Phyllis Trible who tried to suggest some outlines toward a feminist biblical theology but stresses the need for further work on this subject. Much as the emphasis on theology highlights the general orientation of the volume, and Professor Doob Sakenfeld's area of specialisation, I wonder why this section does not include some discussion about the relationship between feminist theology and academic feminism, including feminist literary criticism or feminist historical criticism. The introduction claims that 'this volume belongs to the academy' (xiv), but the heavy emphasis of theology suggests that this volume is better suited to beginning undergraduate courses in Christian seminaries, or Church based courses.

In sum, I find much of value in this volume, one of the few so far to offer an introductory text for teaching biblical feminist scholarship. I also think it laudable to celebrate the life work of a feminist theologian. Nevertheless, I was frustrated by the self-referential and somewhat narrow scope of the volume. Even the best essays do not reflect an awareness of the Hebrew Bible's cultural specificity and distinctness. Numerous essays do not attribute their arguments to non-Christian origins. Thus, several essays on dialogue and relationship do not mention

Martin Buber, references to Midrash do not offer any acknowledgement of its Jewish origins. Feminist scholars who have written from a postmodern critical perspective already in the early 1980s (e.g. Esther Fuchs) are not mentioned. The contribution of Tikva F. Kensky to biblical theology is barely a footnote, and my own deconstructive critique of the book of Ruth and biblical marriage is not mentioned. The chapters discussing biblical language could have noted Athalya Brenner's contribution to the topic. The lack of attribution and the inclusion of 'multi-cultural' approaches that are strictly Christian suggest a false pluralism that may very well articulate a missionary hegemonic vision rather than a postcolonial interest. Having said all this, I will include this volume in my recommended list of books for further reading in my course on Feminist Approaches to the Bible, though I will have to express some of my reservations in class.