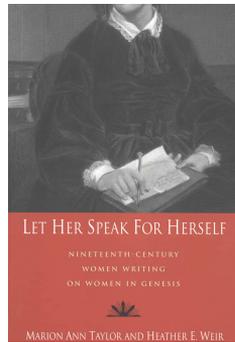


○ **REVIEW OF MARION ANN TAYLOR AND HEATHER E. WEIR, *LET HER SPEAK FOR HERSELF: NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN WRITING ON WOMEN IN GENESIS***

(WACO: BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006)

R. Christopher Heard, Pepperdine University



Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir have produced a remarkable volume in *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis*. Albeit cumbersome, the title perfectly communicates the book's contents: excerpts (sometimes quite substantial) of nineteenth-century women's commentary on the female characters in the book of Genesis. By assembling this collection, Taylor and Weir provide readers with a window into nineteenth-century women's perspectives not only on the Bible, but also on biblical criticism and nineteenth-century social issues.

Taylor and Weir organise their book around specific characters in the book of Genesis: Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel (treated together), and (together in the final part) Lot's wife and daughters, Dinah, Tamar, and Potiphar's wife. Within each part of the book devoted to a biblical character, Taylor and Weir present the aforementioned excerpts treating these characters in roughly chronological order. Several women contribute (so to speak) to multiple parts of the book; for example, readers will encounter several excerpts from Sarah Trimmer's *A Help to the Unlearned in the Study of the Holy Scriptures* (1805), Sarah (Ewing) Hall's *Conversations on the Bible* (1818), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Women in Sacred History* (1873), Julia Wedgwood's *The Message of Israel in the Light of Modern Criticism* (1894), and *The Woman's Bible* (1895), featuring contributions from several authors. It is worth noting that when Taylor and Weir write of 'nineteenth-century women,' they really mean nineteenth-century American and British women; only North Atlantic Anglophones are represented in this thick volume.

The structure of *Let Her Speak for Herself* thus focuses readers' attention primarily on the women in Genesis, rather than the individual writers excerpted. The easiest way to approach the volume, then, is as a snapshot of how erudite nineteenth-century North Atlantic women viewed

Eve, Sarah, and the other characters treated. With a little collation of the excerpts, readers may also profitably use the volume as a starting point for exploring how Trimmer, Hall, Stowe, Wedgwood, and other included writers approached the study of biblical characters. Readers who wish to trace the writings of any individual author may use the table of contents, which lists authors within the divisions dedicated to biblical characters, or the index, where individual authors' excerpts are helpfully grouped together (although it would have been even more helpful had there been a separate index *just* collating the individual writers' works).

The volume's organisation does have one notable drawback: separating the featured authors' comments on individual biblical characters into disparate parts of *Let Her Speak for Herself* may seem to imply that certain writers were more prolific than the bibliography actually suggests.

Each part of the larger book opens with a brief introduction by Taylor and Weir, and closes with a conclusion offered by the editors. These introductions and conclusions tend more toward summary and thematic collation than extensive analysis. Taylor's and Weir's introduction to the volume provides an invaluable service to readers who have not previously given sustained attention to the writings of nineteenth-century North Atlantic women, including a brief guide for reading the selections. The editors offer a more substantial analysis in the volume's conclusion.

The individual excerpts that form the bulk and substance of the book exhibit such scope and variety that it is difficult to do them justice in a brief review. The bland gentleness of Lucy Barton's 'letter' about Eve, from her *Bible Letters for Children* (1831), contrasts sharply with Hannah Mather Crocker's social consciousness (expressed in *Observations on the Real Rights of Women*, 1818), and both of these differ considerably from the critical acumen on display in Julia Wedgwood's *The Message of Israel in the Light of Modern Criticism* (1894). Some common themes do emerge, though – as is fully to be expected in an anthology collecting excerpts from just over four dozen authors – the writers do not all share the same perspectives on the frequently-recurring issues. Taylor and Weir draw special attention to the nineteenth-century American and British ideals of the 'true woman,' the 'cult of domesticity,' and advocacy for gender equality.

Taylor and Weir deserve particular praise for presenting readers not just with the writings of well-known nineteenth-century writers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Harriet Beecher Stowe, but also with numerous less-famous women. Taylor and Weir have done considerable 'spadework' for their readers, who should respond with gratitude. Similar works reaching beyond the Anglophone world would make excellent companions to the present volume.

Anyone interested in nineteenth-century North Atlantic female writers, the female characters in the book of Genesis, the history of the Anglo-American reception and interpretation of the book of Genesis, or similar matters will benefit from reading this book. It is not necessarily the sort of book that one will 'enjoy' reading cover-to-cover, but if approached for the anthology that it is, it will generously repay readers' investments. However, readers more interested in synthesis and analysis than in primary texts should approach this volume fully aware that it functions mainly as an anthology and only secondarily as an analysis of the materials excerpted therein.