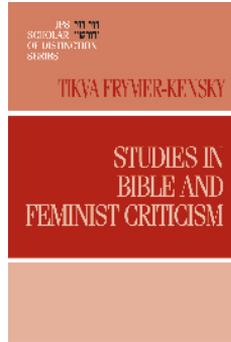


○ **REVIEW OF TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKY, *STUDIES IN BIBLE AND FEMINIST CRITICISM***
(PHILADELPHIA: JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY, 2006)

Judith E. McKinlay, Otago University



There is a poignancy in reviewing this book, knowing that Tikva Frymer-Kensky died in August last year, after having written in the introduction of her hopes for her next writing projects, and of her wishes that God might grant her fullness of years. Sadly that was not to be. Yet through many of the essays gathered here one can almost hear her voice. For this is the work of a woman scholar for whom the Torah did indeed fill her life with interest (p. xxiii), a woman whose passionate commitment to exploring biblical theology is evident on page after page, and who seeks to share this passion with others.

The essays cover her work from the late nineteen seventies through to 2005, and are grouped under three section headings: Comparative Culture, Feminist Perspectives and Theologies, each of which is further divided into two subsections. An introductory essay, written in 1982, on the Mesopotamian poem *Atrahasis* opens the collection. That the early Ancient Near Eastern literature remained a continuing interest is evident in the fourth chapter on 'The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for our Understanding of Genesis 1-9'. What links these two literary works is 'the issue of humanity and its role in the universe' (p. xviii) and this later essay reintroduces two of her major interests: the law and the biblical concept of pollution.

The following essay on the Biblical Echoes of Goddesses will be familiar to those who have read her 1992 publication, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*. What is the role of goddesses? They are essentially mediators, and so the question is raised: are the biblical women who 'keep cropping up as figures from the margins who know what should happen and who do whatever is necessary to make sure it happens' (p. 82) goddess echoes? Frymer-Kensky leaves the question open, but notes that 'the Bible is consistently bracketed and punctuated by the wise words of women'. There is an immediate connection here with her interest in feminist readings, which she discusses in chapters 11–18.

Between these two sections, however, are four of her explorations of Judaism and Christianity. Here the essay on the Image, written in 2000, indicates the breadth of her studies, as she draws

on Ancient Near Eastern, biblical, rabbinic, and early Christian texts, as well as the theological writings of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, to make the strong point that the concepts of the 'image of God' and 'imitation of God' 'present a sense of human nature, purpose and destiny that can provide common ground for mutual understanding and mission' (106). Her conclusion follows, that '[e]mbracing a joint religious humanism should enable us to continue to enrich each other in an increasingly open and mutually inclusive way'. Her writing is clear and persuasive; this is not scholarship for scholarship's sake, but a desire to share her learning in a way that makes a difference to our understanding. So her most recent essay, written in 2005, is a strong plea for learning to live without war. It opens so engagingly: 'Covenant is in the air again!' And it is '[a] richer, more varied and more complex idea in the Hebrew Bible than in later Judaism or Christianity' (p. 133). One is immediately drawn into this rediscovery. And, indeed, the survey of the biblical treatment illustrates this, as she urges us to recognise God's self 'in a universality composed of particularities'. The practical task is learning to live without war.

The first section on Feminist Perspectives, spanning work written from 1989–1997, reminded me of the feminist conversations that were buzzing at this time: the concern to highlight the positive portrayals of women, the need to read 'with nonpatriarchal eyes' (p. 167), recognising that the Bible 'does not treat all humans as equal'. The discussion on feminine God-talk, included in a later section and placed as chapter 27, took me back to many conversations, particularly in the late 1980s. The influence of scholars such as Carol Meyers, Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was acknowledged in the first essay, written in 1994, as Tikva Frymer-Kensky noted the increasing appreciation among feminist scholars of the 'intricacies, ambiguities, and multiple meanings of biblical texts' (p. 176). Her question of whether women were better served by polytheism, which set out 'a symbolic straightjacket of what a female and a male can be' or by monotheism, which, while not *necessarily* (her italics) limiting women's roles, 'was clearly used for patriarchal purposes' remains a teasing one. She leaves this unanswered and goes on to pose another: 'can the Bible be the inspiration for a truly liberated monotheism, free of patriarchy and all other forms of oppression?' The answer here, she suggests, is up to us.

Her sharpest critique is reserved for the Moses saga. She notes Moses' disregard for Zipporah and his sons in Exod 18:6-8, 'Moses has his eyes fixed on the world of men and God' (p. 202), but it is Moses' words in Exod 19:15 that she highlights as the most problematic. Six times the subheading, Do Not Go Near a Woman! beams out from these pages to make the point: '[a]t this moment, the women reenter bondage' (p. 203). She is at pains to point out that the narrator is making it very clear that Moses does not speak for God, that this is a statement indicating Moses' own 'male-centred blindness to women'. Nor does she leave it here but takes this one step further, acknowledging that the narrator is also the voice of Torah, to be heard alongside Moses and the laws. The implications follow. This voice of Torah, mediated through the narrator of Exod. 19, 'is the voice that can empower women to speak in the name of God's will' (p. 206).

Many of the same themes reappear in the third section on Biblical Theologies. So the 'do not go near a woman' issue reappears in the chapter 'Revelation Revealed: The Doubt of Torah', but as one item among others of texts that reveal a doubt about their divine authority or truth claims, and indicate that 'there were distinct voices in Israel that did not automatically accept the God-given nature of statements declared to be from God' (p. 287). The leadership of Moses is the subject of the next chapter, where the thesis presented is that the exile generation became so dependent on Moses, that he became, in effect, their idol. The discussion of contemporary

cults that treat their leaders as ‘semi-divine characters’ sets the scene. What happened at Sinai was a direct result; it was not so much the golden calf that was the idol as Moses! The remedy? The threefold institution of the law, the priesthood, and the Tabernacle. As the changes were not immediately apparent another institution was introduced, as recounted in Num. 11, that of the prophesying elders. It is this dispersion of Moses’ authority that leads to the challenge of Miriam and Aaron in the next chapter of the book of Numbers, which requires God to intervene to reinforce Moses’ authority, but not to reverse the changes themselves. The case is well argued; the issues of leadership are indeed complex. Here the argument rests on a coherent synchronic reading of the narrative. Yet the next chapter on the bible’s view of the end of the world shows Frymer-Kensky very well aware of the bible’s polysemy and indeterminacy on such matters, aware that one narrative does not say everything that is to be said, and that some basic questions are never fully answered. In 2000 the issue of ecology returned her to the *Atrahasis* epic with its hierarchy of gods-humans-earth, where the earth is to nourish the people, as the people nourish the gods. She contrasts that with Genesis 1-11 and other biblical texts that talk of the responsibility of humans for the land and their effect upon it for good or ill.

There is a poignant ring to the chapter written in 1997 on ‘Constructing a Theology of Healing’, but the most personal chapter is the final one, dating from 1991, on ‘Woman Jews’, where Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes openly of what it means to her to be a Jewish woman, and of the changes that Jewish women are making within the tradition. As a feminist in the tradition of Conservative Judaism, which has, at least to some extent, adapted *halakah* according to a more gender inclusive understanding, Frymer-Kensky has several chapters discussing the relationship of women and *halakah*.

Her final sentence, that ‘[i]ndeed, with all the difficulties and turmoil, it is an exciting time to be a Jew’, is a fitting conclusion to a book that throughout conveys the voice of a passionate and faithful scholar. Two concluding poems convey this in a different key.

As I read these essays I had the sense of being in the presence of a wise woman, who was using her wide-ranging learnings and scholarship to convey a passion both for her subject and her faith. She wrote in 1994, in chapter 11, that ‘feminist studies cannot remain isolated from the political implications of their research, nor from their impact on people’s lives’ (p. 162). The political implications of her readings continue to confront us in these clear and accessible biblical explorations. Endnotes follow each chapter, but I missed an index, particularly of the biblical and rabbinic texts.

She wrote in her conclusion to one essay, ‘revelation and sacrality do not lie in any particular word, but in the very process of sifting and negotiating and wrestling’, a process that she declares is ‘the process of the Torah’ (p. 379). I warmed to that, and grieved again that Tikva Frymer-Kensky was no longer here to continue her sifting and wrestling. We are the poorer for this loss.