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This extraordinary volume is a “must have” for people who wish to broaden their understanding of the Torah, irrespective of the reader’s gender. This work is the first ever-comprehensive commentary of the Torah written entirely by women. Without being strident or polemical, it quietly underscores for its audience that women approach and comprehend the world in a different way than do their male counterparts. While women have long understood this fact, it still comes as a surprise to many men. This Women’s Commentary opens a completely new way of seeing the Torah (Torah in all of its definitions, specifically, and broadly). It is a work long overdue, for up to this point, “commentaries by learned men spoke on behalf of [women], even when they did not represent the insights of women” (xxxii). The Torah: A Women’s Commentary features divisions according to the fifty-four part traditional cycle of Sidrah readings. As a male, I consult this work weekly, engaging with Torah through new and different eyes, bringing to me an enriched awareness of this sacred text.

The work’s wide applicability for all people explains why it received the National Jewish Book Award’s Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year award in 2008.

In selecting contributors, three concepts guided the editors: “contemporary, Jewish, and women.” Over a hundred distinguished women authors are represented: women academics, women rabbis, women cantors, women educators, and women poets. They cover “the full spectrum of the Jewish community… Reform… Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist scholars as well as unaffiliated and secular.” These authors live in “North America, South America, Europe, and Israel” (xxxii). A particular strength of this volume is that it invites women to express their particular perspectives irrespective of their place on the religious/secular spectrum. Their very diversity highlights the fact that there is no one commonly held women’s perspective or perception. Indeed, following the initial introduction to each Sidrah there is a further segment termed “Another View” (see below).

The translation of The Torah: A Women’s Commentary incorporates a rendition of the book of Genesis freshly achieved in the 1990s by the late Chaim Stern. For the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, David E. S. Stein served as the revising translator, working from the gender-sensitive New Jewish Publication Society translation The Contemporary Torah— where Stein
served as Revising Editor, along with a team of Consulting Editors, Adele Berlin, Ellen Frankel, and Carol L. Meyers. Like in *The Contemporary Torah* God’s name appears as the four-letter name found in the Hebrew text, יד הוהי ויהי.

The translations in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* are termed ‘‘gender accurate’ translation[s], not a ‘gender neutral’ . . . version. In other words, it does not render all grammatically masculine language in gender-inclusive terms but instead attempts to convey what was meant in a given context” (xxxiv).

Each section (*Sidrah*) is considered in five different ways. The main focus is The *Central Commentary*, written by a biblical scholar. There is an introduction and a brief outline of the particular division. Then comes a running commentary on the text placed at the bottom of the page. Topics include the Hebrew text and/or the English translation that accompanies it. Often the central commentaries provide the cultural context of the passage. The plain sense meaning of the Torah text is the thrust of these comments. On occasions, authors may offer parallels with the contemporary world.

*Another View*, as mentioned above, follows the Central Commentary. Here a different biblical scholar takes up a particular aspect of the Torah section. She might support or challenge statements that appeared in the Central Commentary.

*Post-biblical Interpretations* follows next. In this section, teachings come from the world of rabbinic literature (the Talmud and many collections of Midrash).

*Contemporary Reflection*, the fourth section presents the views of women scholars, rabbis, cantors, or educators. The focus is a modern-day worldview.

*Voices* serves as the final area for each Torah portion. In this section, there are new and creative responses to the *Sidrah*. Oftentimes the selections are poetic verse.

Five thoughtful essays by leading scholars serve as an Introduction to *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. The first is Women and the Interpretation of the Torah. It is authored by the editors Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss. This is followed by Carol Meyers’ Women in Ancient Israel – An Overview. Women and Post-biblical Commentary is considered by Judith R. Baskin. Women and Contemporary Revelation is authored by Ellen Umansky. Finally, Sue Levi Elwell presents an essay on The Poetry of Torah and the Torah of Poetry.

These essays are enlightening and insightful. Among salient facts presented are that in biblical times, women had a variety of economic, educational, managerial, and religious roles. In terms of household life, “the relationship between a woman and her husband was one of interdependence and complementarity in most household functions” (xliii).

The essay Women and Post-biblical Commentary defines Rabbinic Literature, and then addresses Women in Rabbinic Writing. “The shapers and expositors of rabbinic Judaism were men, and the ideal human society that they imagined was decidedly oriented towards men” (I).
This essay notes that “a number of rabbinic writings address issues involving women” but that regretfully, with “few exceptions, female voices are not heard in rabbinic literature” (I). While “the majority of exegetical teachings about women’s intellectual capacities and public roles tend to be negative, different points of view have also been preserved” (lii). Finally, “The Poetry of Torah and the Torah of Poetry” considers Poetry and the Oral Tradition. It invites readers to engage with the Challenges and Pleasures of Poetry. Within this context, the author addresses Poetry and Women’s Experience. *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* offers the insights, wisdom, and vision of scores of women “Jewish thinkers, rabbis, cantors, educators, and other Jewish interpreters…[These women] respond to the Torah through a personal or a professional lens in order to articulate an ongoing encounter with God” (lii). Readers benefit from both feminine and feminist perspectives. The flowering of Jewish women as students and scholars of Judaism in the closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening decade of the twenty-first, is an ongoing blessing. The number of authors featured and their respective credentials is testament and testimony of how Jewish women have enriched Jewish life and biblical studies.

**Note:**
[For study guides for each *Sidrah* as discussed in this book, see http://tinyurl.com/TAWC-guides/]