
Reviewed by David J. Zucker, Aurora, Colorado, USA

This newest version of *Women’s Bible Commentary* attests that an excellent resource can be revised, updated, and improved. This work is the latest iteration of the insightful, scholarly, and readable first edition published in 1992, and then expanded some years later. It has more articles, and at over six hundred fifty pages, is about fifty percent larger than the original work that Newsom and Ringe edited. Like its predecessor volumes, this third edition features some of the most prominent feminine names in biblical research, Jewish as well as Christian.

This present commentary features articles dealing with each of the books of the Jewish Scriptures (TaNaKh), the Christian Scriptures (New Testament), as well as those works known as the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books, the most familiar to Jewish audiences being the books of First and Second Maccabees. Since the primary audience for this book is the Christian community, the order of the books for the Jewish Scriptures follows the Protestant tradition of the Torah followed by the historical books (Joshua, Chronicles, Esther), then the Wisdom/Poetry section (Job, Psalms, Song of Songs), followed by the Prophets (Isaiah, Malachi). In addition, the editors commissioned thirteen special articles that “sketch the interpretation of significant female figures from the Bible.” Amongst these special articles are, “Eve and Her Interpreters,” “Sarah, Hagar, and Their Interpreters,” “Miriam and Her Interpreters,” and Jephtha’s Daughter and Her Interpreters.” In terms of the Christian Scriptures, there are articles on “Mary and Her Interpreters,” and “Mary Magdalene and Her Interpreters.” Other articles of special note include “When Women Interpret the Bible,” “Women as Biblical Interpreters Before the Twentieth Century,” “Women’s Religious Life in Ancient Israel,” “Beyond the Canon,” and “The Religious Lives of Women in the Early Church.” There also are special articles in the Apocrypha section.

In the Introduction to this third edition the editors remark on the profound ways that feminist biblical criticism has changed in the past two decades. “Issues that were just beginning to be explored…the hermeneutical significance of sexual identity, analysis of masculinity, and postcolonial positioning” are now part of feminist criticism. Further, there has been an explosion of feminist biblical critics – women as well as men – that presented other dilemmas. The editors
agonized over whether to limit this to women writers (and that answer was ‘yes’), which articles to include from previous volumes, and which younger women working in the field to ask to write new articles. Happily, the authors of previous chapters not included here “not only accepted but cheered [the editors] initiative to include the work of younger scholars.” Those authors who reappear from earlier volumes revised their previous work, in some cases significantly.

The focus of this work continues to give voice to North American feminist scholarship, while recognizing that there are other voices in other lands. Most of the chapters are but a half-dozen pages in length, others that are of particular interest in terms of feminist studies, ten to twenty. Chapters addressing each of the biblical books, as well as those devoted to the literature of the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical writings, feature three sections: Introduction, Content, and Bibliography. The newest additional articles, which address the reception history of such women as those mentioned above (Eve, Sarah, Hagar but also Rahab, Deborah, Jael, Delilah, Jezebel, Job’s wife, Judith and Susannah) have merely the article and a Bibliography. The relevant reception history might include observations on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim responses to these women, as well as how they are depicted in the arts.

In her perceptive chapter, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” Sharon H. Ringe explains that what “sets the Women’s Bible Commentary apart from others is its authors’ acknowledged commitment to read the biblical texts through the varied lenses of women’s experiences in ancient and modern religious and cultural contexts.” She also addresses the fact that – for women no less then men – “the Bible bears a variety of kinds of religious authority: guide for conduct, rule of faith, inerrant source of truth (factual and/or moral), and revelation of God.” Yet at the same time, for many, but not all within “these communities, the authority of the Bible is explicit, as well as implicit, but often ambiguous and finally ambivalent, especially for women.” She notes, “women reading the Bible have found themselves on alien and even hostile turf.” Ringe explains that both “the silence of women and their silencing – the contempt in which they are held and the violence with which they are treated – in the Bible mirror the realities of many women’s lives. For them, the Bible is experienced as giving a divine stamp of approval to their suffering.”

Ringe also highlights the fact that readers are often influenced by centuries of interpretation that are nearly indistinguishable from the text itself. Specifically she mentions household codes in the Christian Scriptures, which mandate the submission of women (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1
etc.). She also notes a history of interpretation among Christians that “often contrasted the worst from among the varied teachings concerned with women in later rabbinic writings with the best of the values and practices related to women attributed to Jesus.”

Finally, she addresses “the problem of language and gender…[the] so-called generic use of words like ‘man,’ ‘brother,’ and ‘mankind,’… [which] obscures or even negates the participation of women,” as well as the problematic use of the male pronouns referring to God (he, him) and how to convey the idea that “God is beyond human categories of gender.” For interested readers, there is a substantial bibliography concluding this chapter.

This book will appeal to scholars and to lay readers alike. It is exciting, vibrant, and consistently well written. The bibliographies provide direction for further study. This is a “should-have” for any and all interested in current Women’s Bible Commentary.