
Reviewed by Dan W. Clanton, Jr.

In this seemingly slender volume, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein provides one of the most interesting and captivating marriages between a feminist outlook and the traditional resources of Jewish women. The result is a book that is accessible enough to be used in introductory college courses but also stimulating and practical enough to be used by interested laypeople, Goldstein’s target audience (see pp. 19 and 27).

Goldstein’s preliminary section sets up the parameters and definitions for her discussion admirably. She notes she is writing a text that is characterized by a “feminist view,” and that is “woman-centered,” but also notes that her book should be seen as both a feminist and a “Jewish commentary” (23-24). Of three main feminist responses to religious traditions—rejectionist, inventive, and revisionist—she groups herself in the third category. What that means in practical terms is that Goldstein believes “with all its problems, the Torah is still, at its core, a powerful and even liberating document; that within the Torah there is evidence of women valued for their personhood, women as spiritual individuals and women as central players in Jewish history; that the Torah is not first and foremost about women as secondary, oppressed subcitizens.” (30) Inherent in this stance is her position, evident throughout the book, that she and other revisionists “use the system to critique the system,” (31) i.e., “We want to bring down the fortress of patriarchal ownership of the Torah with the tools of the Torah itself.” (32) In this regard, Goldstein’s revisionist stance is close to that of Elizabeth Schüessler Fiorenza and Asma Barlas in Christianity and Islam, respectively.

The book is divided into three main sections. Part One examines women in the Torah via retellings and commentary on the stories of Eve and Lilith; Leah and Rachel; women in Exodus; and the daughters of Tzelophehad. Goldstein begins by noting the ambiguous position of women in the Torah, situated between “persons” and “property” (37); between “powerful” and “subject” to male authority; between “powerless” and “daring, charismatic, strong and capable.” (38) She claims that “our foremothers existed and were controlled within the structures of their day, and this control affected their ability to ultimately transform those structures. On the other hand, our foremothers achieved success in their attempt to transform people and bond them to one another.” (42) Thus, Goldstein sees “our foremothers as powerful in their own context, though not in mine.” (43)

Her discussion of Genesis 1-3 is especially useful, as it highlights the potential of the first creation story in Genesis 1.1-2.4a as a feminist text. God, she argues, is both male and female in this story, as is *adam*. The story is ripe with “inherent equality” and the lack of
any defined hierarchy (48). All this changes in the second creation story with the narrator’s description of Eve as being “taken from” man. She writes, “Here we see the first source of woman’s otherness. If woman is taken from an already created man, then woman as a ‘class’ is a part of, dependent upon, and perceived as fundamentally connected to man. The theological justification for women’s sociological subordination now becomes textual. Thus, in this version of humanity’s creation, the ‘proper’ hierarchy of male and female is also created.” (49) This story, that is, obscures “the lesson of the first story of original equality.” (52) Her preference for the portrait of equality in the first story is clear: “Men and women are intended by the Torah to be as they first were, beings created together and equally in the Divine image.” (57) She concludes by noting that gender and the division of labor resulting from that category is a social construct not present in Genesis 1.1-2.4a, and as such, the first story can be seen as a paradigm for male/female relations.

After examining the story of Leah and Rachel as a “realistic picture of the life of sisters” (60), Goldstein discusses the women of Exodus. She reads the characters of Shifra and Puah as representing a sort of “female ‘underground railroad.’” (72) Similarly, she finds in Yocheved, Miriam, and Pharaoh’s daughter “collaborators, women acting as a countercultural force, against Pharaoh’s oppression, negating it any way they can.” (80) Finally, she sees Tzipporah as “the first female mohel.” (82) Goldstein concludes this section by reading Numbers 27 and its story of Tzelophehad’s daughters as an example of the ambiguous status of women in the Torah. First, the daughters are divinely granted the right to inherit land from their sonless father. However, in Numbers 36, Moses limits that right to daughters who marry within their father’s clan. Goldstein sees these women as “a kind of early prototype of the Jewish feminist today who critiques Judaism first for herself, then for other women, and then remains in it to see its faults corrected.” (88)

If Part One is focused on Jewish texts; Part Two is focused on Jewish bodies, specifically the bodily fluids of blood and water. Goldstein defines the importance of blood early in her discussion: “In the Torah, blood functions in both the symbolic realm and utilitarian, daily arena. Symbolically, our ancestors believed it was the container of the soul and the life-force of every living creature, while on a practical level they used it as the necessary tool in major sacrificial rites.” (96) This emphasis on blood is focused on the issues of the niddah and menstruation itself. Regarding the former, she notes that, “In the eyes of the Torah, sexual fluids need to be controlled in the same way that sexuality needs to be controlled” (101) because “since we are created in God’s image, the human body reflects the divinity within us, and the genitals the maximal symbol of our creative partnership with God.” (103) In her discussion of menstruation, Goldstein offers an innovative understanding of what she calls “a time of power.” (107) She sees this time in light of the connection between covenant and circumcision, and notes, “menstrual blood is women’s covenantal blood, just as brit milah, circumcision, is men’s” because “blood seals covenant.” (113) Following this intriguing correlation, she discusses the need for a complementary rite of passage for women akin to the bris. After this discussion of blood, Goldstein concludes Part Two with a consideration of water in the Torah, and an
interesting discussion of the mikveh. She feels that the mikveh can serve what she terms a salvaging goal in an attempt to reclaim Judaism’s view of a “positive physicality.” (131)

Part Three focuses on more divine matters in that Goldstein discusses the divine feminine in the Torah and the possibilities surrounding using that symbology, as well as less gender-specific divine language, in ritual. To do so, she explores the issue of paganism, both as it is portrayed in the Tanakh and what it might have looked like historically. One of the few problems in this section of the book is Goldstein’s frequent use of “matriarchy” to describe the social organization(s) that later became Hebrew and then Israeliite. It is unclear whether or not these societies were matriarchal or simply matrilineral, and more recent work, such as Cynthia Eller’s monograph *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future*, has cast aspersions on the former hypothesis. In addition to this terminological problem, she makes the claim that, “In seeing the move in the Torah from matriarchy to patriarchy, we also see the Torah’s shift away from the accompanying symbols and systems of matriarchy, which included worship of a goddess.” (150) However, her section on paganism seems to contradict this claim in that she concludes that the references in the Tanakh demonstrate that Jewish peoples in the past “seem as unsatisfied with the one-sided maleness of God as we are.” (153) Surely a more moderate proposal, such as in Raphael Patai’s book *The Hebrew Goddess*, would make more sense. She does, however, make an interesting suggestion regarding paganism, viz. that Rosh Chodesh serves as a successful reappropriation of paganism by Jewish feminists because it is filtered through Jewish tradition. (162)

Goldstein concludes Part Three with two important issues: the goddess and god-language. In her examination of the former, she focuses specifically on the Shekhinah and its development as a concept through both the Rabbinic and Kabbalistic periods. She concludes that, far from a wholesale adoption of what many would consider to be “pagan” symbols, a more refined symbiosis is called for. This symbiosis “involves merging the old goddess imagery, the new ways of thinking about God, and the Kabbalistic notions of the Shekhinah with a rejection of stereotypical femininity; together with a staunch monotheism, and engagement with Rabbinic theologies and images of the Divine, and a respect for the ways in which all out early ancestors related to God.” (170) Following this, Goldstein wraps up this section with an examination of god-language, in which she implies that her solution to this thorny problem is neither to substitute female language in place of the traditional male imagery, nor to use gender-neutral language. Rather, she wants to draw upon the dual characterization of the deity in texts like Genesis 1, and alternate our use of gendered language in an effort to be more representative of both the Torah and the experience of Jews in the pews.

In sum, this is a welcome text in the areas of Judaism, Jewish feminism, and biblical studies. The autobiographical nature of text makes it more engaging than most academic treatises on these subjects, and to her credit, Goldstein stays true to her stated intention and audience. Read according to her goals and intended audience, this book is both theologically and practically useful. There are minor critiques one could make, such as
the lack of engagement with more work on the history of Israelite religion as well as a nagging concern regarding her assumptions of biological essentialism, but these would be churlish criticisms. Rabbi Goldstein has provided an excellent resource for both students and advanced laypeople, and the community is richer for it.

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