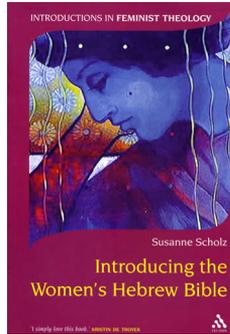


## ○ REVIEW OF SUSANNE SCHOLZ, *INTRODUCING THE WOMEN'S HEBREW BIBLE*

(LONDON: T&T CLARK, 2007)

*Michael Carden, University of Queensland*



This volume is the thirteenth in the series, *Introductions in Feminist Theology*, published through T & T Clark. Scholz sets out to introduce ‘some of the main issues, debates and accomplishments of feminist studies on the Hebrew Bible during the past four decades’ (8). The book is meant as an ‘appetizer inviting readers’ especially the next generation ‘to join the unfolding conversations in feminist biblical studies’ (9). The appetizer is tasty indeed although I was struck by one oversight which I will touch on towards the end of this review. Nevertheless, Scholz has produced a book that will not only be valuable in biblical and feminist studies but is a worthy resource for a broader readership, both scholarly and more generally, to learn more about this field. An economical 126 pages, Scholz explores her subject matter across five chapters. These are framed by a further short introduction, in which Scholz sets out her aims and intentions for the book together with her own personal account of how she came to be part of the feminist biblical studies project, and a 4–5 page conclusion in which she addresses concerns for the discipline both now and in the future. The book also contains a biblical reference index and an author index but not a subject index. Perhaps, too, given the book is in introduction mode the bibliography could have contained a suggested reading list for novices as well as simply the texts cited and referred to in the book.

While the book’s primary focus is the past four decades of feminist biblical studies, the first chapter, ‘From the “Woman’s Bible” to the “Women’s Bible”’ The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible,’ provides an overview that locates those decades within a broader history of women’s engagement with the biblical texts over the last millennium in the West. Thus the chapter opens with an account of women from the Medieval period to the 19<sup>th</sup> century which includes such figures as Hildegard von Bingen, Christine de Pizan, Lucretia Marinella, George Fox and Margaret Askew Fell Fox, and Sarah and Angelina Grimkè. Then follow sections on 19<sup>th</sup> century women’s voices from the United States and a critical account of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the *Woman’s Bible*. Scholz then provides an account of women’s voices in the early

and mid-20th century, not just from the United States but also Europe, especially Germany. The chapter then recounts the beginnings of second wave feminism, before surveying feminist biblical scholarship since the 1960s. She does so by exploring the various characteristics that mark feminist biblical engagement over the period.

The second chapter, 'A Career as a Feminist Biblical Scholar: Four Stories,' further illustrates that history with profiles of four scholars, Phyllis Trible, Athalya Brenner, Elsa Tamez and Marie-Theres Wacker. She has based these profiles on personal conversations – she knows all four 'in varying degrees' (34) especially Phyllis Trible who was Scholz's doctoral adviser. Trible, of course, is very much a pioneer in feminist Hebrew Bible studies and would have to figure prominently in such an account but the four together demonstrate the diversity and international cross-cultural nature of feminist biblical studies. Trible is from the United States and a Protestant Southern Baptist background in which Bible was a central part of her religious upbringing. Brenner, herself another major figure in the field, is Jewish, 'a native Israeli', born in 'then Palestine' and a 'non-believer' (43) for whom the Tanakh is a central cultural text. Tamez is a Latin American feminist Protestant and theologian who comes from a Mexican evangelical background and grew up facing discrimination and prejudice from the Catholic majority. Wacker is a German Catholic who came to biblical studies almost by accident as her first love was theology and languages, ancient and modern (her doctorate was on 1 Enoch).

Scholz then turns her attention to methodologies in the third chapter, 'Gendering the Hebrew Bible: Methodological Considerations'. She discusses the three main methods used by feminist biblical scholars – historical criticism, literary criticism, and cultural criticism – by first providing a brief description of each method and then illustrating with aspects of feminist biblical inquiry. Thus historical criticism is illustrated by work on reconstructing women's life in ancient Israelite society, as represented by the work of Carol Meyers and Sylvia Schroer. Literary criticism is represented by the analysis of representations of biblical mothers in the work of Sharon Pace Jeansonne, J Cheryl Exum, Esther Fuchs and Phyllis Trible. Cultural criticism is illustrated by the analysis of the way biblical genders are represented in culture, surveying the work of J Cheryl Exum (curiously introduced to the reader as if we had not met her before) on David and Bathsheba in film and Helen Leneman's analysis of the opera *Samson and Delilah*.

Chapter 4, 'Rape, Enslavement and Marriage: Sexual Violence in the Hebrew Bible,' explores a crucial issue in feminist work – rape and sexual violence against women – and the way feminist scholarship has exposed the sexual violence metaphors in texts of the Hebrew Bible, metaphors which had been overlooked or not even grasped by traditional androcentric interpretation. The first half of the chapter explores the stories of Zilpah and Bilhah in Genesis 29.31-30.24, 35.22. Scholz's analysis highlights the interplay of sexual violence, gender and class in these narratives, exposing the way androcentric approaches completely missed or were complicit in the violent dynamics of the narrative, through recounting the contributions of such scholars as Delores S. Williams, Esther Fuchs, Athalya Brenner, Sharon Pace Jeansonne and others. The second part of the chapter explores the pornoprophecies of the city as raped woman – Jerusalem in Isaiah 3.16-17, Jeremiah 13.22, 26, Ezekiel 16 and 23; Babylon in Isaiah 47.2-3, 10-15; Nineveh in Nahum 3.5-7. Again Scholz's discussion traces the work of various feminist scholars (Gracia Fay Ellwood, Mary E Shields, Renita Weems, Gerlinde Baumann). Scholz makes clear that if there has been any major paradigm shift in Hebrew Bible interpretation through the rise of contempor-

ary feminist interpretation then it is in this area of exposing and condemning sexual violence and rape in biblical narrative and metaphor.

In her final chapter, 'Ruth, Jezebel, and Rahab as "Other" Women: Integrating Postcolonial Perspectives,' Scholz addresses the recent emergence of feminist postcolonial approaches to the Hebrew Bible. She starts by tracing the rise of postcolonial theory and its impact in biblical studies in general before summarizing a variety of postcolonial feminist strategies. One such strategy is correlating biblical women with postcolonial socio-political contexts. The work of Judith McKinley, Athalya Brenner and Laura E. Donaldson on the book of Ruth and Yani Yoo's comparison of the fate of Korean 'comfort women' in WW2 to that of the concubine and other women subjected to pack rape in Judges 19-21 serve as examples of this approach. Another strategy is to acknowledge and align with the reading strategies of ordinary women in the 'Two-Third World'. Musa W. Dube's reading of Ruth deploying a popular Botswanian divination method is one example Scholz recounts. In contrast, Dora Mbuwayesango aligns herself with traditional precolonial Shona religion to expose how missionaries co-opted such traditional religious terminology to translate the biblical texts thus subsuming Shona religion into the biblical religious world. Such subsuming masked the often radically different meanings of the two terminologies. Mbuwayesango rightly calls this a colonizing pattern in biblical translation and calls for new Bible translations that restore a clear distinction between 'the traditions, stories, and terminologies of the Bible and Shona peoples' (115). That way both Bible and traditional religion can be decolonized. A further strategy relates to the notion of hybridity, an important concept in postcolonial hermeneutics. Scholz explores the work of McKinley on Jezebel and Dube's readings of the Exodus and Rahab as illustrations.

This book does well in capturing something of the diversity and plurality in feminist biblical studies and clearly Scholz intends this to be a representative sampling only, rather than attempting to comprehensively account for everyone who has contributed to feminist biblical interpretation. Any such work would still be replete with omissions and Scholz's book is meant rather to be an invitation, particularly to new generations, to engage in and continue the discussions. Nevertheless, I was struck by the lack of any mention of lesbian/queer feminist perspectives. This omission is thrown into stark relief when Scholz touches on homosexuality and the Bible, even citing the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 (73-4). She further observes that the internet is 'replete' with websites that are part of contemporary struggles over 'sexuality, biblical authority and religious fervor'. Indeed, as in postcolonial contexts, negotiating sexuality and biblical meaning is an important site in which 'ordinary readers have much to contribute' (111), in this case ordinary LGBT readers. Furthermore, lesbian and queer women scholars are participants in feminist biblical discussions. Genesis 19 is a text, too, that has received a lot of feminist attention together with the parallel text Judges 19-21. The mention of Genesis 19 could have served to highlight the overlap between feminist and LGBT concerns (as well as contrasts) and led into an acknowledgement of the contribution of lesbian and queer women to feminist biblical interpretation.

The overlap of feminist and LGBT/Q concerns in biblical interpretation is also significant for the issues that Scholz raises in her Conclusion. It is clear that one of her concerns in writing this book is that she fears 'that much of the feminist work in biblical studies and in other fields may be forgotten again' (10). She raises concerns about the challenge to 'feminist biblical research' from 'male scholars of the Christian Right' as well as the demands of specialization leading to a

lack of conversation between ‘researchers of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament’ (124) (to which I would add the Greek Bible and Pseudepigrapha – the Hebrew Bible is but one facet of the broad spectrum of Christian Old Testaments). A more important concern is the lack of course offerings in many ‘colleges, universities and seminaries’ (124). At my university, the course in feminist biblical studies was dropped several years ago and there are now virtually no courses in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. New Testament studies barely hangs on. (Courses in LGBT studies have likewise disappeared and feminist and gender studies have seriously declined.) In part this fact is related to the other concern that Scholz identifies, the need to raise the consciousness of students who don’t ‘see a problem with women’s status in society anymore, or to be more precise, with Western women’s status’, who insist ‘that women are not discriminated against and consider sexism a problem of the past’ (125). This situation is compounded by the fact that Germany and much of Europe (and certainly Australia) are now ‘post-biblical’ countries (2). Lack of consciousness is compounded by biblical illiteracy. In Australia there is the further factor of the commercialization and corporatization of higher education and the decline in the humanities. In a post-biblical society, biblical studies is going the way of LGBT/Q and feminist studies. Several years ago the Chronicle of Higher Education combined the separate jobs categories of Women’s Studies and Lesbian and Gay Studies into one. I have also noticed a decline over the years in the number of biblical studies positions listed outside conservative religious institutions. In that sense both feminist and LGBT/Q studies have been the canary in the mineshaft. The irony is that bible, gender and sexuality remain highly contested political sites in the world today, not just in the West. The tragedy is that feminist (and to a certain extent LGBT/Q) scholarship contributed significantly to the dismantling of a range of dominant, restrictive (historical critical) paradigms in biblical studies. The result is that there has never been a more exciting time for doing biblical studies. With the rise of manufactured religious conflict and clash of civilization discourses, bogus wars on terror, Left Behind fantasies and Da Vinci Code/Holy Blood/Grail sustained cultural illiteracy, never has biblical studies – critical, pluralist, multi-faith and secular, postcolonial, feminist, LGBT/Q – been more necessary.