

Book Reviews

Women's Bible Commentary, 3rd edition

Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds.
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 679 pp.

The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections

by Dana Evan Kaplan

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press, 2013), 382 pp.

The last three to four decades have seen a flourishing of women's scholarship in the area of biblical studies. There are more women biblical scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Further, their books and articles are readily accessible to an interested readership. What is now available is an updated, revised, and expanded edition of the one-volume *Women's Bible Commentary* that was originally published in 1992. This superb work, at over six hundred fifty pages, contains some of the finest contemporary thinking by many of the leading lights of women biblical scholars in North America. In a quiet nod to the authors of the Septuagint, here some seventy women scholars have come together to offer their insights into the books of the Jewish Bible, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament. Yet there is more! In addition to those books themselves, which, by the way, follow the order found in Protestant bibles with Apocrypha, there are additional special articles dedicated to many connected subjects. For the Jewish Bible there 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 New Testament, 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: "Introduction to the Apocrypha," "Judith and Her Interpreters,"

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and “Susannah and Her Interpreters.” Since the Christian Orthodox tradition also recognizes the canonicity of 3 Maccabees, and Psalm 151, there also are articles on those books, as well as an article on 4 Maccabees.

Two of the current editors, Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe had edited the original 1992 version of this work. In the Introduction to that book, which they also include in this volume, they wrote: Women scholars have raised new questions. They “have posed . . . new ways of reading that . . . have challenged the very way biblical studies are done. [Feminist biblical studies take] many different directions . . . Some commentators have attempted to reach ‘behind the text’ to recover knowledge about the actual conditions of women’s lives in the biblical period . . . Still others have tried to discover the extent to which even the biblical writings that pertain to women are shaped by the concerns and perspectives of men and yet how it can still be possible at times to discover the presence of women and their own points of view between the lines.” Yet, in the mere two decades between the publication of the first edition and this third version, there have been profound changes in feminist biblical criticism. A new introduction explains, “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. The editors agonized over several issues: whether to limit this volume 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.

One of the salient features of this volume is that while many chapters are but a half-dozen pages in length, others that are of particular interest in terms of feminist studies, are longer, some ten to twenty pages. 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

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above (Eve, Sarah, Hagar . . . but also Rahab, Deborah, Jael, Delilah, Jezebel, Job's wife) have merely some comments 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, along with illustrations.

One of the editors, Sharon H. Ringe, in the chapter, "When Women Interpret the Bible," explains what makes this such a special work. The contributors made a "commitment to read the biblical texts through the varied lenses of women's experiences in ancient and modern religious and cultural contexts." Ringe further points out that women face a particular challenge. For all readers, irrespective of gender, 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." Women read and experience the Bible differently from men. Ringe explains, "women reading the Bible have found themselves on alien and even hostile turf." Indeed, 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." She also points out "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." This exciting and vibrant volume, which has a place in our own as well as synagogue or community libraries, will appeal to rabbis and laity alike. By providing brief bibliographies, the authors offer direction for further study.

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Without doubt, the Judaism of 2035 or 2065 will look a lot different than it does in 2015. The Judaism of today is radically different than it was in 1935 or 1965. As that is true of Judaism as whole, the same can be said about American Judaism, and more specifically American Reform Judaism. In this thoughtful volume, which

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features an Index, a Timeline of Significant Events, and a Glossary, our colleague Dana Evan Kaplan provides for the reader a portrayal of Reform Judaism in North America half way through the second decade of the 21st century. While focusing on the present, in this, his fourth book on American Judaism, he offers historical context why Reform Judaism is where it is and what it is. Many of Kaplan's examples focus on the past thirty or forty years as he explains important decisions made by the leadership of the Union of Reform Judaism (formerly the Union of American Hebrew Congregations), as they steered through the turbulent post-World War Two years, a time that saw serious upheavals in American demographics and social thought. Yet this is more than just a socio-religious history of Reform Judaism, for he consciously weaves in the stories of many present-day examples of laity and rabbis who are the living faces of Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism, as Kaplan notes, prides itself on flexibility, but this too has its downsides: not all religious identities fit. He writes, "the Reform movement will need to take a clear look at where those boundaries should be drawn" (p. 9). Yet Reform Judaism has no accepted methodology for predetermining how to evaluate any particular issue. One of its great challenges is "how to present Jewish religious belief in the absence of a consensus over what we believe" (p. 3).

There are eight chapters in this work, each about thirty-to-forty pages in length. Kaplan immediately engages the reader as he begins his opening chapter titled *In Search of a Reform Jewish Theology*. He relates the story of a woman who moved from a lifetime in Conservative Judaism to become an active member in her congregation because "Reform theology allowed for ritual flexibility that greatly enriched her personal religious experience" (p. 19). This then leads into a discussion about a history of Judaism and more specifically Reform Judaism. A *Brief History of the American Reform Movement* follows, with a major focus on the post-WWII years. He recalls the names and writes about the achievements of Maurice Eisendrath at the UAHC, Nelson Glueck at HUC-JIR, and Joe Glaser at the CCAR. A major section of this chapter discusses the years at the UAHC and the leadership offered by Alexander Schindler. He also covers the tenures of Alfred Gottschalk and David Ellenson at HUC-JIR, and Eric Yoffie at UAHC/URJ and then includes Rick Jacobs' recent election to that post. *To Observe or Not to Observe*, the chapter that follows looks at how Reform Judaism, and in particular American

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Reform Judaism has struggled with such issues as kashrut, Shabbat observance, and marriage and divorce.

Unquestionably the past two decades have seen, as Kaplan titles his next chapter, a New Reform Revolution in Worship and Practice. He recalls the CCAR's 1999 adoption of the "Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism," showing how the seeds of this document were sown more than twenty-five years earlier in the landmark publications of the early 1970s, Leonard Fein's *Reform is a Verb*, and Theodore Lenn's *Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism*. Kaplan notes his regret that in the process, that while "the freedom to explore alternative religious beliefs was liberating" it also undermined "the theological consistency necessary for coherency" and that this "legacy of the sixties" continues to "haunt us" and ultimately holds back Reform Judaism from what it could become (p. 138). He takes note of the new Reform prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*, and while he sees it as a creative effort, he also criticizes it for its lack of a "sound Jewish theology" (p. 157).

In the chapter A New Reform Revolution in Values and Ethics, Kaplan covers a lot of ground including women's ordination, comments on the issues of ethical behavior, and Social Justice as understood and practiced by Reform Judaism, Zionism and Israel (where he briefly details the increasing involvement of Reform Judaism with and in Israel), inclusivity for women, and sexual equality, as well as a commitment to environmental responsibility. The chapter Who Is a (Reform) Jew, discusses the struggles Reform Jews and Reform congregations have with the realities of increased mixed marriages and synagogue participation. He addresses the conflicting goals of encouraging non-Jewish spouses to raise their children as active Jews in synagogue life, and yet how to avoid the introduction of non-Jewish ideas and practices which threaten the religious integrity of this institution. Next he writes about On the Boundaries of Reform, addressing Messianic Judaism, Jubus (Jewish Buddhists), and Judaism with a Humanistic Perspective. He concludes with the statement that while "American Jews embrace a variety of spiritual approaches that they find religiously meaningful" that this inevitability brings with it a "blurring of boundaries and a violation of traditional norms" so that "Reform Judaism will need to cultivate a sophisticated 'discourse of disagreement' in order to meet this challenge" (p. 269). Seeking the Spiritual, chapter eight, highlights additional challenges for contemporary Judaism.

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The world of cyberspace is colliding with traditional institutions. Descriptions about PunkTorah, the Virtual Congregational Experience (i.e. the CyberSanctuary), Second Life, what Kaplan defines as Creative Expressions of Spirituality through Art, Music, and Dance, Storahtelling, as well as Gonzo Judaism, Adventure Religion, and Wilderness Judaism are addressed here.

One of the strengths of this volume is that it concentrates more on description than prescription. Nonetheless, Kaplan is clear that the Reform movement faces enormous challenges in the coming years, and that it “will need to develop new and convincing justifications for maintaining the Jewish people as a separate ethno-religious group in an era where boundaries and borders of all kinds are fading, if not disappearing (p. 313). In his view, this will necessitate creating a Judaism that will focus not on “loyalty to community” but how to “engage the individual in a search for existential meaning” (p. 315). Kaplan argues for a direction away from the “current focus on pluralism” and instead to build to a “committed core” by refocusing on ethical monotheism, “the idea that there is one and only one God, and that God demands ethical behavior” (p. 316). In short, Kaplan argues that Reform Judaism cannot be the limitless Big Tent that makes room for all ideas. As he states slightly earlier, “every religious movement has to have some set of boundaries, delineating what is acceptable and what is not” (p. 267).

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