

WOMEN ALSO JOURNEYED WITH HIM: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE BIBLE

by J Caron, A da Silva, O Genest, M Girard, M Gourgues, EJ Lacelle, J Lavoie,
A Myre, J Racine

Minnesota: The Liturgical Press
2000
p. xi + 179
ISBN 081465892
Price \$24,95

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This book consists of essays that were presented on the occasion of the Fifty-first Congress of the Catholic Association of Biblical Studies in Canada (ACÉBAC). It includes a foreword by Jean-Pierre Prévost and the rest of the book is divided into 9 chapters, containing contributions by 9 well-known feminist scholars.

In a very stimulating contribution, Elisabeth Lacell succeeds in the first chapter of the book to present in a nutshell the feminist theological studies of the last quarter century. The three phases that she discusses is deconstruction, reconstruction, and building anew. She furthermore points out the importance of women's studies and also highlights the significant contexts from which they arose (scientific, socio-cultural and ecclesial). Lacelle delivers important contributions towards the interpretation of alternative Christological readings. Here she gives special attention to Post-Christian readings, Christological constructionist readings and Christological reconstructionists readings.

In chapter 2, Olivette Genest deals with feminist theories in the interpretation of the Bible. Genest introduces her topic by showing the vitality of feminist readings of the Bible. She uses the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, published in 1993, as a point of departure for organizing methods of research and unveiling prejudices towards feminist study of the Bible (p. 26). The main objective of this document is the historical reconstruction of the position of women in the early church (p. 27). Genest succeeds in her objectives as she spells it out on page 28 namely to situate existing feminist readings, to accurately describe their true aims and finally, to evaluate the contribution of feminist theories in the interpretation of the Bible.

Another illuminating contribution is by Aldina da Silva dealing with the condition of women in Mesopotamian and biblical literature in chapter 3. Da Silva gives attention to literature on the three steps of marriage in the first century. These three phases are betrothal, the entrance of the woman into her husband's house and finally, childbirth. In each case, she examines both Mesopotamian and biblical texts. In these texts the woman is placed under the submission of either her father or husband and she is seen as but a sexual object. Da Silva helps the reader "to see the similarities and dissimilarities in women's love life as it is depicted in the Mesopotamian and biblical vocabularies" (p. 52).

Jean-Jacques Lavoie continues in chapter 4 with a presentation of the woman in the Song of Songs. He starts his study by showing the prominent place she has in the book. He also emphasizes singular images of women portrayed in Songs, for example the fact that women are here liberated from rules like childbearing in order to be accepted. Finally Lavoie raises the question of authorship. He suggests, against tradition along with authors

like Goitein and Herbert, that the author of this book was a female. He then also explains the controversy of Songs' view towards women in contrast with the rest of the Bible's more patriarchal views in the light of the hypothesis that the author was indeed female.

The next contribution is by André Myre on the New Testament in *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Myre looks at feminist readings of the New Testament by making use of the book *The Women's Bible Commentary* by Newsom and Ringe (eds.). In this commentary the idea was to get a reading of the Biblical text from different women's perspectives. Here it is, however, limited to the readings of women scholars of the United States. Myre divided his presentation into four parts, namely: the Synoptics and Acts, the Pauline Literature, the Johannine Literature and Other writings. He concludes his contribution by some useful reflections. Myre succeeds in giving a brief summary on every book examined in the Commentary and gives the reader a good overall view on the most prominent feminist readings of the New Testament. The conflict of interpretation in this study raises many questions and the study leads men to revisit their methods of reading and interpreting the Bible.

Jean Francois Racine presents three approaches to the position of women in the Q Document: Hal Taussig, Luise Schottroff and Amy-Jill Levine. Taussig starts with a twofold hypothesis, namely that Sophia could be the mother-goddess of Jesus and secondly that there were women present among the disciples of the Jesus movement. Racine argues that Taussig's analogy with Cynic women could even weaken the argument instead of having the opposite effect (p. 105). Racine also mentions on p. 106 "...nothing indicates that the rejection of Sophia alludes more specifically to the rejection of the women who were part of the movement". Racine concludes that Taussig does not succeed in his objective to describe the origins of Christianity as a community of equal disciples (p. 106). Luise Schottroff also has a twofold objective, firstly to show participation of women in the Q community and secondly to show that the Q document seeks to include women in its readership (p. 107). Racine makes it clear that Schottroff succeeds in these objectives. Amy-Jill Levine holds that there are several redactional strata reflecting different social situations (p. 111). Racine highlights two of these strata in her work, Q1, which consists of instructions given to marginal people and Q2, which consists of women and conflicts. These contributions help the reader to get a better understanding of the position of women in the first century.

Michel Gourgues makes her valuable contribution towards the question: "Who is Misogynist: Paul or certain Corinthians?" Her contribution is an exegesis on 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36. Gourgues presents a variety of interpretations as well as critique to some of them in this difficult paragraph. Interpolation is possible, though unlikely. Interpretation as being only relevant to married women is also unlikely. What Gourgues suggest is the "Corinthian slogan" solution, namely that vs. 34-35 is a restrictive position that was current in the Corinthian community, but that Paul rejects this view in 14:36. Gourgues make a powerful statement that should deserve attention.

In chapter 8, Marc Girard continues to present a structuralist study of Ephesians 5:21-33 with the topic of love as subjection, the Christian ideal for husbands and wives. He makes use of the method of structuralist criticism in order to find the most realistic interpretation of this widely debated part of Scripture. Apart from the detailed structuralist exegesis, Girard continues with a contextual, theological and Moral Hermeneutic. Here the author helps the reader to see the text in its socio-historical context. He works through a fascinating process of exegesis and brings the reader to a place of understanding the text better.

In the final chapter of the book, Gérald Caron presents a study on the authority of the Bible challenged by feminist hermeneutics. Many today question the authority of the Bible for a society like ours, therefore the authority of the Bible has become a pressing and timely

question in biblical hermeneutics (p. 153). Caron divides her study into four main parts, namely the problem statement, the place of women's experience in the debate, a suggestion for a new model of authority and some final remarks. Maybe one shortcoming on her presentation is her negligence to discuss theories that is radically different from her own views. Even though her discussion is not a lengthy one, a brief insert on other opinions would have been insightful. *"I shall also overlook any fundamentalist approach and to a certain point any evangelical approach which tends to refuse the idea or the mere suggestion that the Bible may present any problem or which considers its patriarchal and andocentric character an integral part of revelation"*. She concludes with *"Francis Schüssler Fiorenza is right when she says one cannot truly separate the question of the authority of scripture from the still energetically debated question of the meaning of the text... The discussion goes on."* Even though she's willing to let go of the authority of the Bible (or parts of it) for the 21st century on the basis of historical and cultural considerations and in the further light of women's experiences, she realizes the importance of first trying to understand what the text intended to say. She rightly states that the discussion had only just begun.

This collection of Canadian voices is a timely contribution. Prévost (p. xi) rightly points out the relevance and importance of such a publication at a time like this when he writes: *"...note that the first complete day of the congress where these studies were presented coincided with the promulgation of the text in which John-Paul II declared that the discussion of women's ordination was closed from Rome's viewpoint. The question was not on the agenda of the congress"*. The authors of this particular book succeed to give a balanced presentation on feminist readings of the Bible. The book also presents a rich reference for anyone who would like a more indebt study of feminist readings of the Bible. It is heartily recommended to a wide audience as it provides stimulating reading to anybody with a keen interest in a feminist perspective on the Bible.