

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Women of War, Women of Woe: Joshua and Judges through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters.* Edited by Marion Ann Taylor and Christiana de Groot. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. ISBN: 9780802873026. Pp. x + 278. \$35.00 (USD).

*What follows is a compilation of two review panels for this volume. The first, held at CETA's annual conference during the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in May 2016 at the University of Calgary, included panelists Lissa M. Wray Beal, Rachel Krohn, and Matthew Forrest Lowe, with responses by the co-editors; the second, held at a "Recovering Female Interpreters of the Bible" session of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in November 2016 in San Antonio, included panelists Beal (whose papers are merged here), Danna Nolan Fewell, and Joy A. Schroeder, with the co-editors again responding in turn. The panel papers have been edited to avoid unnecessary repetition (summaries of the book's contents, for example), while each of the co-editors offers a combined response to the two panels.*

### **Lissa M. Wray Beal, Providence Theological Seminary**

I am pleased to respond to this latest contribution by Drs. Taylor and de Groot to the ongoing work of recovering women biblical interpreters.<sup>1</sup> I had the privilege of attending Taylor's first class on recovering women biblical interpreters, at Wycliffe College in the early 2000's. I well remember two emotions that repeatedly surfaced for many in that class: first, surprise at the number of women through history involved in interpretation yet shut out of the academy; and second, anger that they had been so long neglected, and thus further silenced. Several years and anthologies later, I add another emotion: thankfulness that through the recovery work of Taylor, de Groot and others, my interpretive foremothers speak once again—and that to a broad and receptive audience.

I shall marshal my response to this present volume in two directions. First, a

<sup>1</sup> See the early co-edited work by Christiana de Groot and Marion Ann Taylor, *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible* (SBL Symposium Series 38; Atlanta: SBL, 2007); see also *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis*, edited by Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006) and *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide*, edited by Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

few words about this particular project of recovering women's voices in *Women of War* and second, some hermeneutical questions broached by this project.

The volume centres around eight women depicted in Joshua and Judges, highlighting a variety of women interpreters on each biblical character. Each excerpt also includes a biographical note for the interpreter. The editorial skill of Taylor and de Groot is evident: the selections range widely and include several genres. Interpreters represent many Christian denominations as well as Jewish and post-Christian voices, from various social backgrounds. Not only is this a thoughtfully compiled cross-section of writers, but the editors provide an overall introduction to the volume and summative introductions for the offerings for each biblical character. In addition, the editors provide study questions at the end of each chapter. These work well toward uncovering the different interpretive questions, contexts, and approaches of these interpreters in comparison to our own. These additions are one of the volume's strengths and display compassion and genuine interest in the interpreters as people, as well as their work. The editorial sections make one aware that interpretation is *placed* and flows out of the writers' life experience, gifts, and social convictions, while preparing the reader to interact respectfully and thoughtfully with the material.

Taylor and de Groot's work reveals that certain interpretive and contextual interests coalesced around certain biblical women—that is, a biblical character often attracted particular readings. A good example of this surfaces when comparing the chapters on Jael and Deborah.

Within the diversity of women interpreting the narrative of Jael, much of the focus throughout the selections is on the issue of violence. A similar diversity is found among the interpreters excerpted for Deborah. For this biblical woman the focus primarily is the Woman Question. The different approaches to the two biblical women are heightened through the placement of the Jael chapter immediately after the Deborah chapter (granted, this is a given as the volume follows the biblical narrative order). The different foci when comparing the treatment of Deborah and Jael by nineteenth-century women are clear, but each of their stories also addresses issues of violence, and questions regarding the role and status of women. For instance, Deborah could be charged with inciting violence and even celebrating it in song! The reason for the focus on violence for Jael, without concomitant attention given to the violence associated with Deborah, is rarely explored by the nineteenth-century interpreters of Deborah. The distinction in foci is a fact the editors make clear amid the introductory comments to the Deborah excerpts: "The issue of war was occasionally engaged, often indirectly. The more important issue for them was Deborah's transgression of expected gender roles, which invited reflection on appropriate spheres of women and men" (76).

What were the reasons behind the nineteenth-century interpreters' selective

focus of interpretation? Was Deborah not charged with violence because of her Israelite status? Or were the social issues surrounding the Women Question simply too readily addressed by the Deborah story so that other pressing issues were not widely taken up by her interpreters? These more far-ranging questions are not dealt with at length by the editors, nor are they the volume's purpose. But the editors' introductory comments do often point to the particular interpretive concerns coalesced around each biblical woman.

Elsewhere, the work of Taylor and de Groot shows that the Victorian context could lead to certain biblical characters being underrepresented in interpretation. The power of the Victorian context is particularly true for stories of sexual violence. Given Victorian mores regarding sex (one imagines Victorian mamas quickly passing over such texts with a hushed and embarrassed blush), it is not surprising that the chapter on the Levite's concubine held the fewest entries (only three, from two interpreters; Delilah surpasses her with five). In their introduction to this chapter, Taylor and de Groot helpfully cite (but do not include an extended excerpt from) Sarah Trimmer. Trimmer's comments illustrate an apparently typical treatment: the event is related in one paragraph, without referencing the rape (245). Other interpreters are noted as voicing disapproval of the act; this is the case with one of the included excerpts from Mary Cornwallis. She notes the concubine was "abused . . . to death," "an atrocious act" (247). Her disgust and outrage is apparent, but she does not name the act of rape.

In contrast to this reticent outrage, the two entries by Josephine Butler are explicit in describing the concubine's fate. Of note is Butler's context: as a woman working against the Contagious Diseases Act and its unfair treatment of prostitutes while not likewise penalizing men, her writing shows great compassion for the lives of these women. She clearly reads the tragedy of the Levite's concubine as a call for Victorian Christians (and women, in particular) to exercise compassion towards abused "Levite's concubines," that is, Victorian prostitutes:

Christian people! there is a weak and prostrate figure lying at our door; to this door she turns for help, though it be but in her dying fall; her hands are upon the threshold. . . . What if the Judge should come and find us scarcely risen from our torpor, our door scarcely opened, our morning salutation scarcely uttered to the victim whose voice is stilled in death—should come and should require of us an account of our protectorship, and show to us such mercy as we have shown to her? (250–51)

Butler's explicit retelling of the story, and her evident compassion are noted by Taylor and de Groot as "fresh and prophetic" (249). While some may have been shocked by her explicit treatment of sexual violence in the biblical text, Butler's

work is strong evidence that social action could be fueled by a particular reading of a text—and that reading was itself informed by the interpreter's context.

This openness to highlight the unique aspects of the interpretive foci, and the willingness to direct the reader to question the contextual realities behind these interpretive decisions, is one of the volume's strengths. Even more, this commitment to engage nineteenth-century interpreters through their own writings has the potential to raise questions that might only be answered through further engagement with the interpreters' original works.

I was surprised by a *lacuna* in the offerings: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—those persistent daughters of Zelophehad (after appearing twice in Numbers, they surface again in Joshua 17)—do not appear in the volume. These women are definitely both women of war *and* woe: of war because their story is part of Israel's warfare in the land; of woe because their request is apparently spurred by, and then constrained by patriarchal interests. Since the volume includes "female figures in Joshua and Judges" (4), I wondered at their absence. The law promulgated by their predicament is mentioned briefly in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's offering on Achsah (69) and hinted at in other comments on the same figure, in the context of arguing for the rights of nineteenth-century women to hold property, even after marriage.

Given a growing voice in the nineteenth century on behalf of women's right to property ownership, Achsah's narrative is particularly supportive: although married, she receives and holds property. On one hand, the narrative of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah could be viewed as supportive of such a goal, for through their persistence they gain a right to land. But on the other hand, the daughters of Zelophehad receive land within two strictly patriarchal concerns: (1) the continuity of their father's name within Israel; and (2) the recognition of patrilineal land inheritance. These realities make this narrative much less amenable to promoting the right of women to property ownership. It may be that for this reason, the daughters of Zelophehad are not engaged by nineteenth-century women interpreters. If this is so, then nineteenth-century women interpreters were shrewd enough—or constrained enough by their interpretive goals—to overlook those narratives that did not readily promote those predetermined goals.

Perhaps it is that no women wrote on these daughters, so no excerpts could be included. I wondered that their absence was not remarked upon (perhaps in the volume's introduction). Taylor and de Groot have great expertise in the issues and interests of the nineteenth century and their suppositions as to the daughters' absence in the literature would have been instructive.

This leads me to some of the hermeneutical issues this volume raises. Repeatedly, it reveals the truth that interpretation always comes out of a context. The prevalence of the Women Question in the face of the cult of domesticity, the reti-

cence regarding sexual violence, the fight for women's property rights—these are issues and stances that are not those of North American, white, privileged readers today. Being confronted by this difference serves as a reminder that we, too, interpret from our locations: in time, in gender, in society, even in interpretive history. Engaging this volume can lead us to more readily see and own our own interpretive context, assessing its strengths, biases, and weaknesses.

Additionally, reading a collection of women's voices is a reminder that there may not be something as identifiable as an interpretive "woman's voice." This is a conclusion the editors draw in their introduction, in which they state that "we have found that women often read with a distinctive female lens, but not exclusively. Other factors, including class, nationality, culture, literary genre, and audience, influence a woman's interpretive process" (4). Certainly, many of the interpreters looked at these biblical women through questions that touched on women's lives—but one wonders if there were not men addressing the same issues. Likewise, methodology was not a gendered "given," as these women interpreters utilized many of the same methods that were current amongst their male counterparts. I think the hermeneutical point this volume makes in this regard is that *all* interpret from a location—whether the nineteenth-century male academy or the many venues of women's interpretation. All were interpreters; all can instruct; all should be part of our ongoing interpretive discourse. None should be relegated to a gendered subset as somehow a less-valid interpretive effort.

As another contribution to bringing women interpreters out of the shadows, this volume presses that hermeneutical (and political?) point home. Indeed, Taylor and de Groot argue that anthologies such as theirs allow "forgotten majority voices to speak again" (4). This is, perhaps, a logical extension of the Reformation principle: that Scripture can and should be read, heard, and digested by all listeners—not just the academied elite. These women in all their varied life experiences and contexts; their varied interpretive methods and textual engagements are a reminder that the text has lived and interacted with real people in real lives, bringing real comfort, direction, and correction.

Finally, this volume affirms the necessity of engaging interpretive history towards discerning the meaning of the text, undercutting the false dichotomy between what a text meant and what it means (2). The nineteenth-century women this volume showcases lived in a time of interpretive paradigm shift: from pre-modern, largely figural reading to historical-critical reading. In that shift, they had available to them a variety of interpretive methods. They applied them within the matrix of their own context to answer pressing questions. I think their context is in some ways not too different from ours: we too live in a time of interpretive paradigm shift, now from the hegemony of historical-critical interpretation towards, well, many interpretive models. One of those is the reengagement of pre-

modern interpretation and the attendant call to interact with, and learn from, the interpreters of the past. This is a reclamation of a hermeneutic of humility; of listening and learning in community.

I hope, then, to learn from these interpretive foremothers: to learn to use various interpretive tools, selecting those that seem best suited to engaging the text; to learn from their commitment to the task and their appreciation of its import; to learn to share my findings with the broader community, including the learned and the unlearned. I hope to learn these things well from my foremothers. Thank you, Drs. Taylor and de Groot, for seeing their value, and sharing them with us.

### **Rachel Krohn, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto**

In their edited volume, Taylor and de Groot make a significant contribution to the ongoing project of recovering “missing female voices in the history of biblical interpretation” (ix). The contributions include examples of “traditional” biblical commentary but also “nontraditional interpretive genres, including poetry, catechetical writing, drama, historical fiction, devotional essay, published notes, and female biography” (9). The diverse selection of biblical stories is matched only by the diverse interpretation of these stories. While all the interpreters are British and American, they represent a wide range of views on the roles of women and biblical texts in public life.

By way of response, I would like to discuss two of the strengths of the volume. First, I will discuss the way in which *Women of War* underscores the socially conditioned nature of all biblical interpretation. I will then turn our attention to the way in which this work highlights the fact that biblical interpretation is not limited to the work of the academic elite in their ivory towers nor the spiritually “elect” persons secluded in their cloisters, but rather, biblical interpretation is available to anyone who has access to texts and the opportunity to reflect on them. In this way, *Women of War* demonstrates that the various *contexts* in which biblical interpretation takes place produces the diverse *application* of these same texts.

For me, one of the highlights of this collection is the chapter on Deborah, which illustrates clearly the socially conditioned nature of all biblical interpretation. I expected that some interpreters would use the story of Deborah to argue for the moral equality or even superiority of women,<sup>2</sup> while others would see Deborah-

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2 Interpreters in this volume that understood Deborah’s leadership as evidence of the equality of women in ancient Israel include Grace Aguilar, Barbara Kellison, Julia McNair Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Clara B. Neyman.

ah as exceptional, and thus, not an example to be followed.<sup>3</sup> These expectations were not disappointed. However, what surprised me was the persistent defense of Deborah's femininity, a concern present in many of the nineteenth-century interpreter's writings of the volume. As a twenty-first-century biblical scholar, it has never occurred to me to defend Deborah's femininity when interpreting Judges 4–5, but this was top of mind for many nineteenth-century women. Clara Balfour argues that Deborah was “a peculiarly feminine character”<sup>4</sup> and speaks out against the masculinization of women leaders. Balfour argues that the belief that fulfillment of public office requires a “sacrifice of womanly qualities . . . is a mere vulgar error” (87), reasoning, “Had Deborah been a fierce, stern, masculine woman, she would have aroused no enthusiasm . . . she would have been a sort of second-rate man” (88). Julia McNair Wright argues along a similar line: “The high position of Deborah, as a judge of her people, did not militate against her true womanliness, or her domestic life” (95).

In defending Deborah's femininity, many of the interpreters felt compelled to defend Deborah's excellence in the domestic sphere in spite of her holding public office. Paralleling Wright's comment above that Deborah's judgeship “did not militate against” her womanliness or domesticity, Grace Aguilar notes, “The history of Deborah in no way infers that she was neglectful of her conjugal and domestic duties” (83). Elizabeth Baxter argues that “No prophetic gift, no calling of the Spirit of God into active and public service can excuse a woman for unfaithfulness in family and domestic matters. The being a worker together with God can never excuse her from being a helpmeet to her husband; but the two things can go blessedly together where the public call is really from God” (110).

These interpreters' comments regarding Deborah's femininity and domestic excellence draws attention to the extent to which our social and cultural location influences our biblical interpretation. While the cult of domesticity clearly colored these nineteenth-century female interpreters, it would not cross my mind to discuss Deborah's femininity, or to defend her ability to keep her tent in order as she juggled public and private responsibilities. Whereas femininity may have been deemed a virtue in nineteenth-century Britain and America, its importance and definition are under negotiation in twenty-first-century Western society. To include a consideration of Deborah's femininity in an interpretation of Judges 4–5

3 Elizabeth Baxter makes the argument that Deborah was exceptional: “It is not the usual order of God to put woman in the place of authority: ‘Adam was first formed, then Eve.’ (1 Tim. ii.13.) Deborah was an exception. The children of Israel had sinned grievously against the Lord, and apparently there was no man that could serve His purpose as judge over Israel” (107). This is not at all the view of Julia McNair Wright: “There were men enough in Israel to judge the people and exhort Barak; there were warriors, priests, legists, and the princes of Judah; but God called this woman to stand in the breach, to destroy Jabin, free the tribes, and judge them” (97).

4 The phrase “peculiarly feminine” arises in Balfour's reading several times (87, 89, 90).

would be considered decidedly odd today, at least in the contexts in which I do biblical interpretation!

Attending to the various contexts in which biblical interpretation takes place is another great strength of this volume. The contextual aspect of interpretation particularly struck me in the discussions of Manoah's wife and the Levite's concubine. As Taylor and de Groot note in their introduction to this chapter, most of the interpreters included in this volume "expected the biblical stories to speak into their lives" (204), and as so often happens in biblical interpretation, the interpreter's lives also spoke into the biblical stories. For example, Aguilar used Manoah's extemporaneous prayer as an example to buttress her argument against Christian apologists. Aguilar argued against the Christian argument that the Israelites could not approach God directly, and therefore needed Christ as their mediator, writing, "the Israelites needed no *mediator* whatever, be he man or angel, to bring up their prayers before God, and obtain His gracious reply" (207; italics original). This is hardly an emphasis in Judges 13, but Aguilar's historical context and the purpose of her work led her to use the text this way. Similarly, the verses in which Manoah's wife is told to abstain from alcohol to ensure that Samson was a Nazirite even in utero became a platform for Mary Elizabeth Beck to advocate complete abstinence from alcohol for contemporary Christians. The interpreter M.G. used the very same passage to exhort mothers to faithfulness in their task of raising their children as disciples of Christ. All three women were reading the same text but provided diverse interpretations because of their historical context and audience.

It seemed to me that the interpreters of Judges 13 highlighted elements that were present, but not *dominant* within the biblical story itself. I would not go so far as to say that they were "bad" interpretations, but I would say that they were highly contextual interpretations, and on those grounds, seemed somewhat suspect to my twenty-first-century academic mind. However, Josephine Butler's pieces in the closing chapter of the book were profoundly inspirational to me and are (in my opinion) brilliant examples of contextual interpretation of lasting value.

Butler was a fierce campaigner for women's rights in education, law, and employment, who fought the discrimination and dehumanization of prostitutes in Britain (248–49). In her interpretation of the story of the Levite's concubine, Butler explicitly links the biblical story with the plight of contemporary prostitutes, pleading, "At this close of the year 1898, let me, once more, O! Christian people, implore you to look back over the history of the world, and to realize this tragedy has been repeated all through the centuries; that the story I have cited is the story of the egotism of man and the sacrifice of womanhood to that egotism, invoking a curse which is to this day hanging like a dark and threatening cloud over the nations of the earth" (254). To my mind, this is biblical interpretation at its best. It

takes both the ancient biblical text and the contemporary human situation seriously, and, in bringing them together, calls for action. By highlighting the socially conditioned and contextual aspects of all biblical interpretation, *Women of War* reminds us that the questions we bring to biblical texts play a decisive factor in the answers we find there. However, it also reminds us that these texts have inspired faithful people throughout the ages to fight for a more just and equitable world. This collection of remarkable writings has inspired me to once again take stock of what it is I believe I am doing every time I set about the work of biblical interpretation, and for that, I thank Professors Taylor and de Groot for this remarkable volume.

### **Matthew Forrest Lowe, Independent Scholar, Hagersville, ON**

Echoing my co-panelists in expressing thanks to Taylor and de Groot for their book (and their willingness to respond to this panel), I will begin by following Lissa Wray Beal's example in drawing attention to the introductions and study questions as evidence of the editors' careful work—for the individual voices of the gathered interpreters remain distinctive throughout. The number of different nineteenth-century female interpreters found for each biblical character ranges from as few as two (for the Levite's concubine) to as many as twelve (on Jael; no surprise there!). After readers have heard from the commentators included in each chapter, they're presented with compelling study questions, which strengthen the book's value as a textbook, as well as for personal study.<sup>5</sup> Each interpreter is introduced in detail (where possible) the first time she appears, and more sparingly later on, with references pointing us back to her earlier appearances. This, like the study questions, helps to bring a sense of harmony, if not unity, to the chorus.

Before commenting further on the book's content, I'd like to substantiate the editors' insistence on the necessity of reclaiming women's voices as interpreters of Scripture. My evidence takes the form of another book from Eerdmans, released less than four months before *Women of War*: Stephen and Martin Westerholm's *Reading Sacred Scripture*, a critical review of twelve of the most significant voices in the history of biblical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> With all due respect to the Westerholms, it wasn't especially surprising that all twelve voices were male. Rather, the sad surprise is that one of the few women even *mentioned* is Gunilla Westerholm (Stephen's wife, Martin's mother), quoted in the preface for her equivalent of *bon appétit*—a hospitable invitation, yes, but one that left me won-

5 I found the study questions on Achsah (73–74) especially noteworthy, asking readers to demonstrate strong compare/contrast skills and applied thinking for today's world in response to the biblical and historical texts.

6 Stephen and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

dering what role, if any, women were expected to play in this task of interpreting the great interpreters.

Having received the Westerholms' book for review just weeks before *Women of War*, I was even more appreciative of the latter's strengths than I might otherwise have been. These strengths include Marion and Christiana's unapologetic, thoroughgoing emphasis on "gendered exegesis"; their admittedly "broad" definition of "what constitutes biblical interpretation in this collection"; and their inclusion of nontraditional, sometimes even culturally transgressive, interpretive genres (8–10). Another strength is their gentle sense of humour, as when they note how Sarah Ewing Hall, who presents a "sanitized" Rahab for family Bible studies, may be expecting "moving day in nineteenth-century Philadelphia" when she describes Rahab's family being "conducted with . . . all their moveable property to the suburbs" of the Hebrew camp (20–22, 24). But the editors are largely and wisely content *to let their interpreters speak for themselves, and to let their readers do their own interpreting*—surely two of the goals of the book! Thus we are free to find treasures like Sarah Hale's conclusions that the Bible "glosses over no characters," such that "it is not incumbent on us to defend all the life" of an individual like Rahab (32); or the balance that Grace Aguilar seeks, as she interprets Deborah's story, between established gender roles on the one hand, and on the other, a diatribe against "those who would thus cramp the power of the Lord, in denying to any one of His creatures the power of addressing and comprehending Him."<sup>7</sup> And at still other moments, Marion and Christiana point out a political issue the first time it arises, then allow readers to discern it for themselves afterward. For example, they note English colonialism as an influence on one interpreter's work (71) but make no remark on Sarah Hall's comment that women "have even governed empires with ability" (119)—a comment that must have seemed rather prescient at Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne, only twenty years later.<sup>8</sup>

The only drawback I see in Taylor and de Groot's nuanced and unassuming work as editors is that we as readers are sometimes left curious about *their* opinions on some of the very questions they raise. I can see how they might not want to voice these too strongly within the pages of the book, but I would close by

7 *Women of War*, 84; the larger argument that Aguilar makes here, invoking the use (and shameful repression) of God-given talents and near-prophetic gifts, is all the more remarkable coming from a Jewish interpreter who believes that "the prophetic spirit is removed from Israel" (83).

8 Hall's *Conversations on the Bible* was originally published in 1818, with a 4<sup>th</sup> edition released in 1827, while Victoria's reign began in 1837. One further strength of *Women of War* is the inclusion of Josephine Butler's hermeneutical protest against the injustices of human trafficking. See Lissa Wray Beal and Rachel Krohn's portions of this panel for more detailed engagements with Butler; it should be noted that Joy Schroeder also commented favourably on Butler's fierce compassion, though her remarks overlapped sufficiently with those from Beal and Krohn that, for brevity's sake, it was not necessary to include them in these proceedings.

asking them to respond to any of the following three questions—not as hostile challenges, but as invitations to speak further, in ways that might supplement what they have already assembled in the book itself. (1) With reference to their remarks about their selected interpreters’ struggle to discern whether the “differences” observed in these biblical characters’ behaviour were to be read as exceptions to the norm, or “generative or prophetic” (13), how do Taylor and de Groot frame responses to this question in their own lives? As they put it in one of their excellent study questions: Do the commentators’ findings “ring true? Can we find insights and lessons” in these stories “for our own place and time” (73)? (2) Are there instances where they find themselves following their commentators’ hermeneutical leads, perhaps in seeking “intertextual dialogue,” as they note (20)? Is there an implicit project in biblical theology—or simultaneously biblical and historical theology, perhaps—here in their scholarship that also finds applications in other aspects of their lives? (3) Having noted for us how stories like that of Rahab tended to reveal commentators’ “theology of war either explicitly or implicitly,”<sup>9</sup> have Taylor and de Groot found that their encounters with these commentators (and the “women of war” on whom they comment) have changed their own theologies, concerning war, for instance?

### **Danna Nolan Fewell, Drew University**

This illuminating anthology is a result of a happy discovery: a formerly planned general volume of nineteenth-century women’s writings on biblical women could not contain all the eligible writings and writers! It turns out that there were hundreds of women in the nineteenth century publishing works on the Bible, and on biblical women in particular. One might say this was a mining operation that hit a virtual “mother lode” (!)—for many of us, a load of foremothers we did not know we had. By necessity, the original survey project had to be segmented, and what we are reviewing today is but a portion that focuses on the female characters in Joshua and Judges.

I use the term “female characters” loosely, of course, because, for the majority of the writers represented in this collection, the women of the Bible were far more than literary characters: they were historical women who, though dead and gone, still had something profound to say through their speech and behavior to women of the nineteenth century. This is illustrated most profoundly by the title of Edith Dewhurst’s 1890 volume, *“They Being Dead, Yet Speak”*: *Outlines for Mothers’ Meetings and Women’s Bible Classes*. Consequently, when we read these nine-

9 19; cf. 117, remarking on Hall’s addition to the command to love our enemies, “that this law applies insofar as it coincides with our own safety—an interesting addendum that allows Christians to support just-war theory,” followed by Hall’s own un-ironic assessment, “It is a peculiar glory of our amiable religion that it has abolished unnecessary violence” (118); or Elizabeth Jane Whately’s skilled use of the nations-as-God’s-retributive-instruments argument, 142.

teenth-century women, we acquiesce to a telescopic experience: we are listening to voices of the past who were, in turn, listening to voices of the even more distant past. Today, we, like these nineteenth-century writers, are, in the words of philosopher of literature Robert Pogue Harrison, “choosing our ancestors,” recognizing that those chosen ancestors who speak to us from “the dominion of the dead” obligate us to attend to, to respect their moral visions, whether we necessarily agree with them or not.<sup>10</sup>

Some of these ancestors’ names we recognize: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, abolitionist, suffragist, and editor of and contributor to *The Woman’s Bible*; Grace Aguilar, novelist, Jewish historian, and author of the popular mid-nineteenth-century publication *The Women of Israel*; abolitionist and novelist Harriett Beecher Stowe; and poet and hymnist Cecil Francis (Fanny) Alexander. Some names are unfamiliar, because little is known about their bearers. Yet other names, occluded by pseudonyms, escape us completely. In between there are several names that we will all now know and lives we will want to investigate further, thanks to this thoughtful and well-researched volume. Across the board, these women authors were remarkably lucid, even rhetorically compelling, writers, close readers of the Bible, aware of and conversant with biblical scholarship (especially issues of translation), engaged in the social and political issues of their day, and pedagogically astute. For seemingly behind every entry is the impetus to teach, especially women and children. But what we have here is not the watered-down catechetical lessons that we often see in religious curricula today; rather, we see most often textual scrutiny that asks hard questions and applies the resulting meanings to difficult personal and social issues. These women may have all been genteel, ladylike, and reluctant to trade their domestic roles for fulltime public service, but they were relatively fearless in tackling some of the most disturbing passages in the Bible, especially those where the lives, identities, and futures of women and children were at stake.

In this volume, the more well-known female figures in Joshua and Judges become magnets for discussing the social and national violence pervasive in both the biblical accounts and the nineteenth-century landscape. Many of the commentators, touched personally by war, wrestle with when or whether violence is justified; some see in the biblical text rationales for protesting war; some see the violent story world placing constraints on human (and to some extent divine) moral agency; some see war as the outcome of human sin and hubris. Some question the divine directive to eradicate the Canaanites; others seem unperturbed by the idea of divine wrath executing a death sentence for disobedient idolators. As Leigh Norval calmly explains to her young readers in 1889, “Now and then when people

10 Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

get so corrupt that even the little children are trained in wickedness, God uses some means to destroy them” (45). The children of Jericho, by her logic, must have been so indoctrinated in iniquity they must have been beyond all hope. Hence, we should not feel too sorry for Jericho or question God’s rough justice. If we had been the children targeted in Norval’s lesson, I suspect we would have been eyeing the walls around us, grateful to be coached in good God-fearing piety than to be “trained in wickedness”!

In addition to providing a framework for confronting the theme of warfare, the women of Joshua and Judges beckoned these nineteenth-century thinkers to other kinds of moral reflections, many of which landed firmly one way or another in the camp of situation ethics. Rahab, Jael, and Delilah raise the question of deception. Is lying ever justified? In what kinds of situations might trickery be acceptable? Does Rahab’s saving of the spies cancel out her deception of her own people? Some commentators insist on Rahab’s conversion to the worship of the one true God, and conclude that separating herself from wickedness, whatever form that takes, is to be celebrated. Stanton, however, entertains the possibility of a more pragmatic Rahab: “From the text and what we know of humanity in general,” she writes, “it is difficult to decide Rahab’s real motive, whether to serve the Lord by helping Joshua to take the land of Canaan, or to save her own life and that of her kinsmen. It is interesting to see that in all national emergencies, leading men are quite willing to avail themselves of the craft and cunning of women” (53). Here, it seems to me, we are but a few steps away from a more complicated, even quasi-postcolonial reading of Rahab, who could be hedging her bets and playing both sides against the middle.

Jael, of course, is a trickier trickster due to what was seen as the cold-blooded assassination of Sisera. To justify the murder of a sleeping guest and to understand why she might be called “the most blessed of women,” these commentators leaned heavily on the end of Deborah’s song, where Sisera’s mother condones the rapes of Israelite girls. They conclude that Sisera was not simply an enemy of Israel, but one known for sexual assault. Eliza Stansbury Steele even goes so far as to retell Jael’s story with elaborate embellishment, assigning Jael’s motives as the protection of her own daughter, the moral being that women will and should use any means at their disposal to defend and save their children. But whether Jael is seen as a courageous patriot, a desperate opportunist, or a ruthless assassin, nineteenth-century writers also had typology in their interpretive arsenal. Sisera has many faces—sin, Satan, demon drink, those who seek happiness in the things of this world—and readers are admonished in light of Jael’s story to make no truces with Satan and “to nail their Siseras” to the ground, whatever those Siseras may be.

Jael, as does Delilah and Deborah, invokes the question of gender and the basic

natures of men and women. Jael's violence renders her "manly" while her cunning is stereotypically feminine. Delilah, the quintessential "bad girl" of the Bible, takes advantage of male weakness and betrays God's commissioned leader, a cause for censure. On the other hand, Samson's foibles were as easily recognized in the nineteenth century as they are today, and his less-than-stellar behavior complicated assessments of Delilah. Even when seen to be a villain, Delilah seems to inspire grudging admiration. Harriet Beecher Stowe, even while denouncing the infamous *femme fatale*, exclaims:

Delilah! Not the frail sinner falling through too much love; not the weak, downtrodden woman, the prey of man's superior force; but the terrible creature, artful and powerful, who triumphs over man, and uses man's passions for her own ends. . . . [T]he strength of Delilah lies in her hardness of heart. . . . [S]he who cannot love is guarded at all points; *her* hand never trembles, and no soft, fond weakness dims her eye so that she cannot see the exact spot where to strike. Delilah has her wants, —she wants money, she wants power, —and men are her instruments; she will make them her slaves to do her pleasure. (238; italics original)

I can imagine some of Stowe's own readers cheering Delilah on: "You go, girl!"

Deborah, of course, attracts questions regarding leadership roles for women in society. Most of these nineteenth-century writers are much more comfortable admonishing their female readers to "influence" their husbands than encouraging them to replace men in the public square. In the readings of Judges 4–5, much stress is put upon the narrator's identification of Deborah as a wife—the wife of Lappidoth—and Deborah's self-description as "a mother in Israel." A judge, prophet, and military leader she might be, but she is first and foremost a wife and mother. Moreover, Barak's hesitancy to go into battle without her results in the conclusion that, while Deborah was clearly an exception to the gender rule in terms of public office, women must rise to the occasion when their men fail to be manly enough.

Other female figures create openings to discuss additional social issues: Achsah's request to Caleb for water rights in Judges 1 broaches the question of whether women should be allowed to own property, and Caleb's offering of his daughter as a military prize sparks a debate about whether women *are* property. Samson's mother's adherence to Nazirite rules becomes the occasion to decry "demon drink" and bolster arguments both for temperance and prenatal care. Jephthah's daughter raises the question of the rights of women and children over their own bodies—an issue especially timely as we continue to witness in the United

States the violence against black bodies and as we contemplate what is about to happen to *Roe v. Wade* with the next appointments to the Supreme Court.

Throughout these readings there is a persistent wrestling with women's identity, the welfare of children and vulnerable women, the double standards and different expectations for men and women in private and social spheres. While there seems to be an overarching desire to find straightforward instructions, lessons, and morals from Scripture, most of these biblical interpreters acknowledge and replicate for their own readers more complicated textual meanings, and seem to recognize, even in the choices of their own genres, the multivocality and elasticity of the biblical texts. By couching their excursions in dialogues between adults and children, by recasting the stories in poetic form or more elaborate prose midrash, by shaping texts into sermons, and by co-opting the discourse of the mostly male academic world, they demonstrate repeatedly that there is more to think about in these biblical texts than first might meet the eye. The strategies of allowing children's questions to drive the storytelling and of shifting the perspectives from which the stories might be told, amplify voices that are rarely if ever heard. While the resulting dialogues might be somewhat scripted and stilted, the gesture of presenting biblical teaching in such a form underscores how questions are critical for healthy personal development and even how children (as I learned from many conversations with my own daughter as she was growing up)<sup>11</sup> can offer deep insights that bring adults up short.

The creative use of genre by these nineteenth-century writers is a precursor to much of the writing on the Bible done by contemporary women. Female biblical scholars and religious writers seem, more often than male scholars and writers, to be drawn to more imaginative presentations of biblical interpretation. I suspect that this is not only a response to an aesthetic impulse, but an attempt ultimately to reach, to move, a broader audience. For many of us, it has never been enough to converse simply with the academy. There is a wider world hungry for meaning, thirsty for resources to guide ethical and theological reflection; and this wider world makes demands on us. Like these nineteenth-century women writers, we are aware, perhaps now more than ever, of the ways in which the Bible can be used to shape the world for good and ill. Is it now not up to us, as they no doubt felt it was up to them, to ensure that the Bible, with all its dangers and liberative possibilities, is used for good?

I end with a couple of additional thoughts. First, I commend the co-editors for embodying the spirits of these nineteenth-century interpreters in their presentation. By juxtaposing these various voices with their differing viewpoints, by carefully framing and contextualizing each commentator, and by posing reflective

11 See Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).

questions at the end of each section, they dramatize the pedagogical impulses that drive much of our collective work. They target an audience that includes the academy but reaches far beyond. They expose and interrogate issues that continue to be critical for women and children, families and communities, across today's cultures. They show us that the most pressing intellectual questions are those tied to actual lives, livelihoods, and identities. And they remind us that all of our intellectual quests and questions are part of rich, extensive conversations that began long ago. Here are lost ancestors, they seem to be saying to us. Choose them. Hear what they have to say. Listen for the life-and-death issues that prompted them to write in the first place.

Second, I would like to relay an observation made recently by David Morris, publicist with Zondervan, a Christian publishing house that has catered to white evangelical audiences. In the last five or so years, Morris claims, there has been a decline in the popularity of authors—such as Rick Warren—who built their reader base as pastors of large mega-churches. These authors have been replaced on religious bestseller lists by women who are not mega-church pastors, but who rather have built and sustained their reader base networks on social media. This turn in publishing trends is significant, notes Morris, not only because of obvious shift in gender and source of social capital, but also because of what this might say about where Christians in the U.S. in particular are looking for community, authority, guidance, and inspiration. I can't help but think of our nineteenth-century women writers finding their authority and offering their voices in their own alternative frameworks. If only social media had been an option for them—we might not be reading these words from the past with such a sense of surprise and wonder.

When I put Morris's observations about religious publishing and these once lost, but now found, nineteenth-century writings together with the results of the recent U.S. presidential election, I keep coming back to the kind of work, the kind of publishing that we do as scholars. I admit a sense of failure—my own certainly, but also communal failure—that we as academics and teachers have not done an adequate job of sharing, teaching, and learning with the wider world. What might we do to make our work more comprehensible? More relevant? More compelling? What should we be doing to ensure that our own writing, teaching, and commitments are not simply destined for archives, whether material or ethereal, but are sustainable resources for cultural and communal transformation?

**Joy A. Schroeder, Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University**

*Women of War* is a wonderful, affordable collection of writings by nineteenth-century women reflecting on stories found in the book of Joshua and Judges. It is a lens into the varieties of ways that middle- and upper-class British, Irish, and Euro-American women approached biblical interpretation and struggled with

questions of morality, gender roles, and the ethical questions raised by biblical narratives of sex and violence. The cover illustration—a determined Jael with her mallet and tent peg—is quite striking.

Each of the fifty-eight excerpts [of commentary] has an evocative title, added by the editors. Sometimes the excerpt's title is taken from the historical women's own words. Other times an imported phrase captures the essence of the excerpt, such as the selection from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, about Achsah insisting on her inheritance rights, entitled "Assertiveness Training." When the reader views the table of contents, he or she does not simply see a rote list of the women authors. Instead, the reader sees compelling titles like: "Etty Woosnam: Unsexing Jael and Fighting Demon Drink." This makes me want to dip into particular passages—sampling from the selections based on what most intrigues me.

The volume has an insightful introduction, which I will elaborate on below. There is also a separate introduction for each unit, first introducing the biblical woman and the Scripture text, then providing an overview of the diverse ways that nineteenth-century women approached the texts. And then there is a really great introduction to each separate excerpt, providing biographical material for each of the women authors and an assessment of the women's approaches. I appreciate that when a female author is excerpted a second or third time, there is, again, a brief one- or two-sentence biographical introduction and a footnote leading back to her earlier appearances; a mere footnote would not have been enough, particularly since these authors are unfamiliar to most readers. Though studying female interpreters of the Bible is part of my life's work, Taylor and de Groot managed to find and include some women I had never heard of before. I learned much about women's interpretation while reading this collection. The names of some authors would be familiar to readers with a college education: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Other names ought to be an assumed part of the educational canon. Seminary-educated people should know that Grace Aguilar, a Jewish woman living in Victorian-era Britain, wrote a volume defending Judaism against accusations that her religion denigrated women compared to Christianity, which, according to many Christian interpreters, elevated women. Reflecting on Deborah's role as judge, Aguilar says pointedly that Deborah's example is "rather an *unsatisfactory* proof of the degradation of Jewish women" (79; italics original). Biblical scholars—especially women interested in their forerunners—should know about the Hebrew linguistic skills of Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, a Moravian.

The introductory chapter and the material introducing the various excerpt includes a reminder that these women were struggling to interpret violent biblical texts during an era of colonialism, warfare, and violent conflicts such as the American Civil War, the War of 1812, the Crimean War, and conflicts in the Eng-

lish colonies in Canada, India, South Africa, Nepal, and Ireland (5). De Groot and Taylor draw attention to the overt orientalism in the text: some women's claims, e.g., that Arab culture remained static and backward while western culture had progressed (120). The editors also point out the gender assumptions we find in some of these passages, including Victorian values that we might not be comfortable with, celebrating women's place in the home to the exclusion of the public sphere.

There were things that I wish nineteenth-century women had not said. For instance, Elizabeth Baxter, an evangelical Anglican, thought that Deborah was not sufficiently modest and humble when she sings her song in Judges 5: "There was so much of herself in it. The position had been too much for her; she could not forget the part she had played in it" (109).

Other passages I found empowering, such as the work of Julia McNair Wright, who used the story of Deborah to advocate for women's education.

There are times when a woman can do a man's work more nobly and fitly than he can do it himself. . . . The capacity of women for learning is, on the whole, the same as that of men. . . . There has been much prating about women's *intuition* and *instinct*, and her weakness being her strength. Woman's weakness is *not* her strength; for her, as for man, knowledge is power. Intuition is no more the peer of education than the dog's instinct is the equal of his master's knowledge. (98–99)

In the text we also see Elizabeth Cady Stanton's indignation that so many biblical women are unnamed—mentioned only as "daughter of Jephthah," "wife of Manoah," and so forth. Stanton calls these women part of the "no-name series," and she draws a parallel with the practice of women replacing their surnames by taking on their husbands' names (198, 228–29). In another selection—that section entitled "Assertiveness Training"—Stanton comments on Achsah requesting an inheritance from her father:

Achsah's example is worth the imitation of the women of this Republic. She did not humbly accept what was given her, but bravely asked for more. We should give to our rulers, our sires, and sons no rest until all our rights—social, civil and political—are fully accorded. How are men to know what we want unless we tell them? They have no idea that our wants, material and spiritual, are the same as theirs; that we love justice, liberty and equality as well as they do. (69)

There are interesting temperance lessons, such as this from Etty Woosnam on the

story of Jael impaling Sisera, a lesson on quitting alcohol cold turkey, with total abstinence, rather than tapering off:

Let every woman among us be a spiritual Jael and nail to the ground her Sisera. For sin will ever continue to tempt and harass a Christian. . . . There are thousands of men and women in England who resolve every day to give up strong drink gradually, and become very moderate drinkers—poor misguided creatures! . . . Did Jael use over-strong measures when she took one of the long pins or stakes with which the tent was fastened? And yet it was the only available one which was effectual. Are we thought to be stretching a point too far if we advocate total abstinence in an age in which fearful ravages are being made by the demon drink? It is the only available means of crushing it that we know of which is effectual; and God works by means. (145–46)

Even more delightfully, in a selection titled “Drink Milk Not Beer,” Mary Elizabeth Beck uses the case of Manoah’s wife, who abstained from alcohol while pregnant with Samson so that he would keep the Nazirite vow even *in utero*. Beck urges pregnant and nursing mothers to abstain from alcohol so that their children would not acquire the tendency to drink. Samson’s mother exemplified this: “What, then, is the lesson to the mothers of the present day? Prepare for the duties and responsibilities of your motherhood. Do not let one drop of intoxicating drink flow through your system” (214). When people object that hard-working mothers must drink beer or substantial stout to keep up their strength, Beck gives us a recipe for porridge: “It should be carefully made—clean boiling water, a clean saucepan, and good meal. Mix three tablespoons of oatmeal very smoothly with a quarter of a pint of milk and three-quarters of a pint of boiling water. Boil gently for two hours, and flavour as you please” (214).

Some of the authors represented in this collection wrote reference works or commentaries on the entire Bible or at least substantial portions of it. A greater number of excerpts come from a genre called Scripture biography, a genre in which writers provide short, imaginative biographical portraits of biblical characters. Dozens of nineteenth-century women published such collections featuring female biblical figures, usually with an intended female readership. Scripture biographies offered an opportunity for women to explore psychological motives of the characters, moral issues arising from the plot, historical details, and comments on women’s roles. Grace Aguilar’s *Women of Israel* was a bestseller, as was Stowe’s impressive coffee table book, *Women in Sacred History*.

In their introduction, Taylor and de Groot note that they mention or briefly quote more than seventy women and formally excerpt thirty-five. They report that

their search did not yield substantive writings on women in Joshua and Judges by “Catholic, Canadian, African American women, and other racialized minorities” (16). I think that the absence of African American voices has to do with the genres. Most of the female writers in this volume are women of privilege, who were able to publish Scripture biographies, commentaries, and the like. A major genre preserving the words of nineteenth-century African-American women is the spiritual autobiography—slave narratives and the memoirs of freeborn women who were preachers and evangelists—though African-American women also published sermons, poems, and essays. This means that scholars have not found sustained treatment on the women of Joshua and Judges, at least among the written material that survives. We have no idea how many oral sermons or Bible studies were delivered but not committed to paper. However, even if there are not substantial pieces of material to include as major excerpts, there should have been more effort to include black women’s voices in the introductory material, both in the general introduction and also in the sections introducing the biblical women.

Even a sentence or passing reference recorded by an African-American woman can warrant a short paragraph or several sentences in the introductory sections, which could provide details about the particular black woman’s life, work, and significance. That way, even if we do not have substantial excerpts from African-American women, we nevertheless would be provided with a fuller picture of the range and diversity of women doing interpretive work in the nineteenth century.

For instance, in the introduction to the chapter on Deborah, there could have been a quotation from Zilpha Elaw, a black preacher in the Methodist tradition who published her spiritual autobiography. She reports that an Englishwoman once told her that there was no place for female preachers in Methodism. When told that she should join the Quakers, Elaw responded that “the Lord who raised up Deborah to be a prophetess, and to judge His people, and inspired Hulda[h] to deliver the counsels of God, sent me forth not as a Quakeress but a Methodist, and chiefly employed me to labour amongst the Methodists.”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, there could have been a brief quotation from Maria Stewart, an African-American speaker and writer from Boston who lectured on women’s rights and condemned American racism. In 1833, she justified her call to public oratory with biblical examples: “What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times

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12 Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour; Together with some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]*, in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrew (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 147.

the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel?"<sup>13</sup>

Virginia Broughton, an African-American missionary in the Baptist tradition, left written outlines for Bible studies she taught. In "Bible Authority for Women's Work," she included subsection called "Women as helpmeet in business." She writes: "Illustrations: Deborah, Esther, Ruth, Lydia."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most striking example of an African-American woman's engagement with the text of Judges comes from Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the noted activist who brought public attention to the travesty of lynching. In 1892, in a speech delivered to African-American women at New York's Lyric Hall, Wells-Barnett referenced Delilah in order to deconstruct the myth that black men were particularly inclined to assault white women. She described a case on record where a married white woman from Ohio, a minister's wife, entered into a consensual relationship with an African-American man. Fearing the affair would be discovered since the neighbors had seen the man depart from her house, and afraid that she might give birth to a black child, the woman tried to escape blame and social stigma by claiming that he had raped her. She later recanted and gave testimony that she herself had initiated the affair. The man had already served four years in prison before the truth came out and he was released. As Wells-Barnett described the incident: "I feel that the race and the public generally should have a statement of the facts as they exist. They will serve at the same time as a defense for the Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs."<sup>15</sup> Twice in her speech, Wells-Barnett uses the Delilah story, warning African-American men, "poor blind Sampsons," to use caution when considering entering into relationships, asserting that they cannot trust that the white women that they love will not betray them. This is the sort of example that could have added additional diversity and texture to the volume—to have Wells-Barnett's anti-lynching activism and use of the Delilah image mentioned alongside the numerous white social reformers in this book.

Overall, this is a tremendous volume, worthy of inclusion in classes on the Bible, women's studies, and women's history. De Groot and Taylor are to be commended for their laborious research, insightful introductions, and accessible structuring. Also, it should be noted that the book is part of an emerging new

13 Maria W. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to her Friends in the City of Boston," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 68.

14 Virginia W. Broughton, "Texts of Special Significance in Virginia's Twenty Years' Experience," in *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology*, ed. Marcia Y. Riggs (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 40.

15 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York, 1892); and Anita August, "Shaping Presence: Ida B. Wells' 1892 Testimony of the 'Untold Story' at New York's Lyric Hall," *Peitho Journal* 16/2 (2014): 145–67.

genre—twenty-first-century women’s Scripture biography collections containing nineteenth-century women’s Scripture biographies, excerpts framed by the biographies of nineteenth-century writers. Ten years ago Taylor co-edited with Heather Weir a similar volume, entitled *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis* (Baylor University Press, 2006), and now, also recently released from Eerdmans (2016), is a new volume—a companion to this one—from Taylor and Weir, *Women in the Story of Jesus: The Gospels through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters*. Taylor and de Groot have been among a handful of pioneering forerunners in the work of retrieving nineteenth-century women’s voices. I am grateful to them for bringing to light the forgotten and previously overlooked voices of women from previous eras.

### **Response: Christiana de Groot, Calvin College**

First of all, let me thank the CETA conference in May and the SBL meeting in November for organizing these panels. It’s an honour for Marion and me to have our book given this close attention by scholars in this field. Also, many thanks to the panelists, who read our book so carefully, and have made thoughtful, insightful, and gracious comments in their responses. Finally, I’d like to thank my co-editor. Marion Taylor is a leading scholar in the area of women’s interpretation and has been very generous with her resources. Unlike the scholars who discovered the Qumran manuscripts and tended to hoard them, Taylor has been a model of encouraging and empowering colleagues by pointing them to new interpreters and interesting works that she has discovered. She operates with an economy of plentitude rather than of scarcity, and I and many others have benefitted. Indeed, in the past fifteen years we have discovered a treasure trove of biblical interpretation by women, and we haven’t seen the end of it yet.

Now, some comments in response to the panelists’ points. You have applauded our inclusion of a variety of voices. The interpreters we included do not all agree with each other on what the biblical text means or what it teaches. They hold diverse views on women’s role, identity, and status, and what constitutes an appropriate ethical response. Some we would label traditional, some progressive. They write out of their context, and those contexts also differ. Most are upper class, with resources and leisure to allow them to read and write. A few interpreters write to support a family, and have experienced poverty firsthand, and their views reflect that. In effect, our book is an archaeological exercise. We are bringing to light what our research uncovered. We decided not to limit our publication to any particular ideology, even though that is a legitimate exercise for scholarship. For example, Marla Selvidge’s book *Notorious Voices: Feminist Interpretation, 1500–1920* (New York: Continuum, 1996) only included writings which promote

feminist leanings. Our criteria required that these women's writings had a significant impact in their own time and place. We intentionally allowed the variety of women's viewpoints to emerge.

I am grateful to Joy Schroeder for pointing out one of the limitations of our project. The voices of African-American women are missing. Schroeder rightly points out that though there may not be extensive material written by slaves and freeborn women, their words can be found in slave narratives and memoirs. The few women that she discovered in her own research convincingly demonstrate that this volume would have been stronger if their voices were present.

Danna Fewell and Matthew Lowe asked us delightful questions about how we engage these commentators today. Who has captured our imagination and why? Lowe asks us to answer some of the questions that we pose at the end of each chapter. For example, do our commentators' findings ring true? For me, one commentator whose interpretation and application do *not* ring true is Elizabeth Baxter. She wrote later than many of our interpreters and dispels the idea that progress towards women's equality moved at a steady rate: her popular *Women and the Word*, published in 1897, contains views among the most traditional represented in our volume. That alone is not the reason that I find her frustrating. Rather, it seems to me that she does not walk the talk. In her life Baxter was a sought-after public person. She worked with her husband, and together they toured England speaking and preaching. She taught as many as fifteen hundred women each week when they joined Dwight L. Moody in his crusades. She authored some forty books on the Bible and the Christian life and contributed to the *Christian Herald* for many years. She was an accomplished public figure, yet she counseled women that their calling was domestic, and their first loyalty was to their family. Baxter was critical of Deborah, who filled the roles of judge, prophet, military leader, composer, as well as mother and wife, describing her as "an imperfect, but a useful woman" (110). Baxter allowed that God did use women to promote his cause, but only because the men were not being faithful. The goal of women's involvement in public life was to shame men into taking their rightful place.

In no place in her writing does Baxter reflect on her own successful career and how she managed to fulfill her domestic and family obligations. It's hard to imagine that she could have been so productive and at the same time have given full attention to their son, fulfilled the calling of the "angel of the home," been a loving wife and attended to the details of running a household. She does not seem to embody her own ideals, and by requiring women to do it all, sets them up for failure.

An author whose writings are still inspiring today are those of Grace Aguilar. Perhaps this choice is influenced by the 2016 American presidential election campaign in which Muslims have been targeted and vilified. Aguilar was an advocate

for her Jewish faith, concerned with educating her Jewish sisters so that they would not be tempted to convert to Christianity. Nineteenth-century Christianity in England tended to portray Judaism as a rigid, legalist religion which worshipped a distant, an uncaring God, and Aguilar countered this view in her essays on women in the Hebrew Bible. What I find so remarkable and inspiring about Aguilar is that she speaks powerfully out of her Jewish faith tradition and yet does not demonize Christianity. She is in conversation with Christians, speaks positively of Protestant Christianity, and even visits churches on occasion to listen to beautiful music. She does not merely tolerate Christianity but appreciates it. Her posture of remaining loyal to Judaism while also staying in dialogue with other faiths is a model of how we in North America need to think and behave towards those who believe differently than ourselves. We do not need to give up our own convictions to be respectful of others and to value the diversity that different faiths and traditions contribute to our common life. We need more Grace Aguilar in the twenty-first century if we are to live at peace with one another.

Another set of issues that these interpreters model for me is the difficulty of being a pioneer. Each woman represented here stepped out of the expected norms for women when they addressed “promiscuous” public gatherings and when they published their writings. These actions involved claiming new roles for women and required them to transgress boundaries. Yet, it seemed to me that they were not consistent when they did so. For example, the Deborah narrative is used by Aguilar to support religious education for girls and women, since Deborah as a judge would surely have been highly educated in the Jewish laws. She further argued that the office of judge was not inherited, and therefore it was held by those who were best equipped to hold that office, regardless of their sex (78). She concludes that the Almighty is not a respecter of persons but looks only at the heart. Given these claims, one might expect that Aguilar would support women’s full inclusion in public life. But she ends her essay by describing the calling that married and single women have from God in nineteenth-century England: “Every married woman is judge and guardian of her own household. She may have to encounter the prejudices of a husband, not yet thinking with her on all points, but if she have a really great mind, she will know how to *influence*, without in any way *interfering*” (84; italics original). Again, this conclusion seems inconsistent, given her statements on how God used Deborah. Aguilar herself remained single for her short life, and her instructions to single women seem more consistent with her treatment of Deborah and would allow for the vocation of writer and teacher which she herself pursued: “To unmarried women, even as to wives, some talent is intrusted, which may be used to the glory of its Giver” (84).

I’d like to explore this inconsistency by considering our current situation in the United States. For the past eight years we’ve had an African-American President

and First Lady. Michelle Obama is a highly educated woman, graduating from Princeton and Harvard Law School. She practiced law in Chicago and was even Barack Obama's supervisor when he started at that law firm. However, she has been criticized by many as not being feminist. (See for example the Nov. 21, 2013 article *Leaning Out* by Michelle Cottle.) The causes she has promoted include the need for children to exercise, the promotion of healthy eating, and gardening. These have been seen as "domestic" and "motherly" issues. In addition, she has described herself as "mom-in-chief," a traditional label.

Has Michelle Obama been inconsistent in her choices? A more sympathetic reading might note that she transgressed many boundaries when she became the first African-American FLOTUS. For many Americans, the simple fact of the Obamas residing in the White House is staggering. In the Jan. 2, 2017 edition of the *New Yorker*, Amy Davidson details the many prejudices that Michelle Obama has had to overcome on the long road from the South Side of Chicago to the White House. Perhaps, given the context of racism in the United States, her new status as First Lady was enough change. Perhaps publicly promoting traditional women's concerns was her intentional strategy. Amy Davidson's article, "Mrs. Obama," ends with this appraisal, "But no one could doubt that Michelle Obama's courage has left an indelible mark. Her time as First Lady has changed this country and clarified its vision. And she has been one of the revelations" (18).

Although I have not found anywhere that Aguilar reflects on the seeming inconsistency between her assessment of Deborah and her application to nineteenth-century Jewish women, perhaps she, like Obama, decided to constrain her actions and her writings so that she could bring her constituency with her. Is this not the task that every pioneer of new thinking and actions must consider? Perhaps the inconsistency that I notice in Aguilar and Obama is better described as being pragmatic and aware of social context.

Let me close by thanking the panelists for allowing me to ruminate on what I'm still learning from these courageous foremothers. Their struggles with their roles and their engagement with Scripture to show them the way forward is inspiring. Their writings, taken together, give us a complex, multi-faceted picture of the life of faith. Although we may not agree with the particulars of all their convictions, they compel us to continue the conversation with them and the biblical texts they seek to interpret.

### **Response: Marion Taylor, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto**

First of all, I want to thank the respondents for their willingness to read and comment on our book at these two conferences. By reading, you were introduced to the lives and writings of many of the women whose books now sit on the shelves of my personal library and whose stories and writings continue to surprise me with

delight as their writings open up the forgotten world of women's interpretations of Scripture in the nineteenth century. Their stories also evoke sadness when I think that these women were denied equal access to education and employment and even the right to vote and own property. I experience anger because women's voices were not included in past accounts of the reception history of the Bible. But I too have hope and wonder what revised histories of the interpretation of the Bible will look like when the voices of women are included. Moreover, I often think about what a history of feminist biblical interpretation that moves beyond the notion of three waves beginning in the late nineteenth century will look like.

As the panelists noted, nineteenth-century women engaged the stories of women in Joshua and Judges with passion and zeal. Most often these women used the biblical stories as platforms for discussing not only such obvious subjects as war and violence, but also such less obvious topics as prayer, conversion, ethics, women's roles in the home and society, women's rights, temperance, prostitution, and even prenatal care. Nineteenth-century women's writings on the women in Joshua and Judges make me laugh and cry. I am continually amazed not only by what they wrote, but by the fact that so many women in the nineteenth century actually published what they wrote, taught, and preached. I am impressed with the depth of their engagement with the texts themselves, with issues being debated in the church, the academy, and the culture at large, and with the variety of approaches they used to interpret Scripture for diverse audiences using a surprising number of genres.

As Lissa Wray Beal notes, knowing something about the biographies of the nineteenth-century authors not only sheds light on what women said about each biblical story, and how they interpreted various texts, but also as makes us very aware that interpretation—past and present—is placed and flows out of the writers' life experiences, gifts, and social convictions. This is especially evident in the very sophisticated interpretive writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose work is indelibly shaped by her experiences as daughter of a theologian who trained all his children to preach and think theologically, as wife of an underpaid early American biblical critic and seminary professor, as mother attuned to questions about women's rights and roles, and as abolitionist and social justice advocate. What biblical scholar is not surprised by Stowe's application of the insights of German scholar, J. C. Herder, to her reading of the poetry of Deborah's Song? And what reader does not recognize her use of a hermeneutic of sympathy as Stowe picks up on the theme of wartime violence against women in Judges 5? Thus, she writes: "The outrages on wives, mothers, and little children, during twenty years of oppression, give energy to this blessing on the woman [Jael] who dared to deliver" (140). Stowe is a great reader of texts whose work merits close study.

Unfortunately, as Danna Nolan Fewell observes, little or nothing is known

about a number of the authors who published on the lives of women in Joshua and Judges. Their surviving work, however, sometimes gives us a small window into their lives and makes us want to know more. I would love to meet the colourful author M.G., whose writings reveal her Anglo-Catholic theological leanings and suggest her vocation as clergy spouse and teacher of mother's meetings. I would love to meet all these nineteenth-century foremothers, to hear their stories, and fill in the many blanks of their lives. I would love to ask Adelia Graves, the American author of a five-act play on Jephthah's daughter for teenaged girls, what or who inspired her to write a play on Jephthah's daughter? I would also love to know how the teenaged girls she wrote the play for received it. I imagine the play, which not only gives the unnamed daughter a name but strains to find significance in her Christ-like sacrifice, was a success. It certainly was in a class I taught on Bad Boys and Bad Girls in the Bible, when students read and sang various parts of the final moving lament for the lost daughter of Jephthah, the warrior whom Graves judged too proud to back down on his foolish vow.

Rachel Krohn highlights how our book underscores the socially-conditioned nature of all biblical interpretation, with the writings of Josephine Butler pressing this point. Butler's keen sense of social justice was fostered by her parents; reinforced by her experiences at Oxford, where college masters often turned a blind eye to the plight of prostitutes impregnated by students; and established by Butler's experiences of working with prostitutes more broken than she was following the tragic death of her five-year-old daughter. Such social conditioning definitively shaped her experiential approach to interpretation. However, other factors also influenced Butler's hermeneutic. She practiced what we now identify as theological exegesis and read stories like that of the Levite's concubine as a "typical tragedy" that speaks prophetically to Christian readers of the story in her day. Moreover, as Butler and her contemporaries recognized, she practiced what was named as an "angelic," "motherly," and prophetic approach as she purposefully listened to what she felt were the quiet whispers of God at a time when "manly," scientific, and objective approaches were on the rise. Butler's brilliant readings of Scripture stand out from many others as unique and timeless. I love her interpretation of the concubine's story. Why she alone grappled with the gruesome story that others passed over and why she found in Judges 19–21 a message that called for change and redemption are questions that should cause us to ponder again that nature of the interpretive task.

I would like to address the important issue Lissa Wray Beal raises about the female figures in Joshua and Judges that are missing from our book, notably, the five daughters of Zelophehad (Num 26:33; 27:1–11; 36:2–12; Josh 17:3–6; 1 Chron 7:15). The omission of these and other minor female figures should have been noted and explained in the book's introduction. We should have explained

our process of choosing the women we included in our book more fully. I had a file folder for each female figure in Joshua and Judges, and as we found women's writings on each figure, we put them into the appropriate files. We later culled the files, choosing the most significant and representative pieces. Although I still have a file for Zelophehad's daughters, it is very thin, and we decided not to have a chapter on the daughters early on in the selection process. The only substantive commentary in the file on these women is that of Grace Aguilar, who found in the story of Zelophehad's daughters an inspiring and relevant message for her contemporaries. Perhaps we should have included them after all.

Joy Schroeder calls attention to another kind of omission in our book with her suggestion that we could have introduced additional voices, notably those of African-American women, if we had expanded our search to include such sources as slave narratives and the memoirs of freeborn women. While Schroeder admits that the references to the female characters in Joshua and Judges in these writings are brief, she suggests that we could have at least incorporated black women's voices into both the general introduction and into the sections introducing the biblical women. The examples Schroeder provides are undeniably important and would have done much to complete the picture of nineteenth-century women's engagements with the women in Joshua and Judges. I regret that I did not consult with Joy early on in the process of collecting materials, as the examples she found would have been a wonderful addition to our book. The larger lesson learned from this is that the work of recovering forgotten, lost, or little-known voices needs to be collaborative. Biblical scholars need to work side by side with scholars whose expertise includes materials ensconced in sermons, diaries, slave narratives, novels, drama, poetry, memoirs, and even anti-lynching speeches!

Matthew Lowe asks the probing question, is there is an implicit biblical (or biblical-historical) theology in our scholarship that finds application in other aspects of our lives? I would want to say that finding the writings of women interpreters through the ages has provided me with a much more complete and satisfying account of the history of the interpretation of the Bible. I always wondered about how women in the past read and interpreted Scripture. I had even looked for women's writings in the archives at Princeton as I was working on the materials related to how the Old Testament was taught at Princeton from its inception in 1812 to 1929 when the split to form Westminster Seminary took place. But the only material I found was a handwritten note of Archibald Alexander, entitled, "Hints to finding a wife." I have personally found the courage of many of the women writers to be inspiring and life giving. While I certainly don't agree with all their readings, many of their ideas excite me, especially their interpretive approaches, which anticipate those rediscovered and honed-in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I had never really paid much attention to the character of

Caleb's daughter, for example, but our foremothers have taught me to love her boldness and her father's willingness to respond to her ask. As practitioners of Celtic spirituality have long recognized, Caleb's daughter's bold ask can encourage us to also ask for what we need from God.

Finally, the larger project of recovering forgotten women interpreters of the Bible is far from complete. I encourage others to be part of the important work of recovering and integrating of women's voices into our accounts of the history of the interpretation and reception history of the Bible.