

Theologische Zeitschrift

---

Jahrgang 75

2019

Heft 1

---

Female Biblical Interpreters  
in the Middle Ages and Reformation

Edited by  
Joy A. Schroeder and Marion Ann Taylor

---

Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag Basel

## Introduction

When women, in growing numbers since the 1980s, entered the academic field of biblical studies and related disciplines, they transformed the study of Scripture by offering new interpretive methods and insights into the biblical text. Pioneering luminaries like Delores Williams, Renita Weems, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Phyllis Tribble, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza were joined by a veritable host of scholarly women throughout the globe who interpreted the Bible and published their work. However, even before they had formal opportunities to study at universities, seminaries, and rabbinic schools, women have been biblical interpreters. Ever since late antiquity, Christian and Jewish women have been reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves. Sometimes their words have been preserved in writings of their own. In other cases, echoes (and sometimes distortions) of female voices resonate through the writings of male admirers and detractors.

In the last two decades, a growing number of twenty-first century historians and biblical scholars have worked tirelessly to retrieve women's interpretive voices. Beginning in the early 2000s, pioneering Canadian scholars organized sessions at the Canadian Society for Biblical Studies and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) annual meetings. The «Recovering Female Interpreters of the Bible» SBL section sponsors at least two panels each year. Some of these papers were collected and published in volumes such as *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible* (Atlanta 2007), edited by Christiana de Groot and Marion Ann Taylor; *Strangely Familiar: Protofeminist Interpretations of Patriarchal Biblical Texts* (Atlanta 2009), edited by Nancy Calvert-Kooyzis and Heather Weir; and *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 5.2 (2009), guest edited by Marla Selvidge. Most of the essays in these collections dealt with nineteenth-century women, who published an astounding number of books and articles. These nineteenth-century women's voices might have remained forgotten and unacknowledged without the retrieval work of diligent researchers.<sup>1</sup> Methods for retrieving nineteenth-century women inter-

1 Many of these women's writings have been anthologized in collections such as M. Taylor and H. Weir (eds.): *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on the Women of Genesis* (Waco 2006); M. Taylor and C. de Groot (eds.): *Women of War, Wo-*

preters included searching library databases by typing «Bible» as subject line and Victorian-era women's first names (or «Mrs.») in the author search query!

More recently, there has been increased interest in medieval and early modern women who were biblical interpreters. Interpretive writings by over a hundred Christian women from this time period are extant; however, when compared with the enormous literary output by men, this represents only a tiny fraction of women's potential. Apart from some grammar schools and convent classrooms (where nuns were sometimes encouraged to teach only «liturgical literacy» and phonetic decoding of Latin), women lacked access to formal education. In Western Europe, some privileged women from wealthy or scholarly families were instructed in Latin or the vernacular by family members or private tutors. In Byzantium, some elite women studied Greek and interpreted the biblical texts in sophisticated hymns and poetry.<sup>2</sup>

A woman who authored texts or taught others (apart from her own children) about scripture could find herself facing significant opposition. For instance, in a Lenten sermon delivered in Florence in 1305, a Dominican preacher named Giordano of Pisa (1260-1311) ranted against laypeople – especially women – who dared to interpret the Bible for themselves and instruct others:

There is so much peril when a person has to instruct others! But it is the greatest peril to teach about the Holy Scriptures, about the epistles and the gospels, because they pertain to salvation and damnation. There are many lunatics – shoemakers and furriers – who wish to interpret Holy Scripture. Their audacity is great, and their offense is incredibly serious! If this is true for men, how much more is this the case for women, because women are farther removed than men from the scriptures and from literary instruction. There are some women who make themselves expositors of the epistles and the gospels. Their folly is great. Their stupidity is too much.<sup>3</sup>

men of Woe: Joshua and Judges through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters (Grand Rapids 2016); M. Taylor and H. Weir (eds.): Women in the Story of Jesus: The Gospels through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters (Grand Rapids 2016).

- 2 K. Sherry: *Kassia the Nun in Context: The Religious Thought of a Ninth-Century Byzantine Monastic*, Piscataway 2011.
- 3 Giordano da Pisa: *Quaresimale fiorentino*, ed. C. Delcorno, Florence 1974, 140-141: «Grande pericolo ad avere l'uomo ad ammaestrare altrui! Ma sommo si è ad ammaestrare ne la Scrittura Santa, nelle pistole, ne' vangeli, perciò che in ciò s'appartiene la salute e la perdizione. Sono molti i matti, calzolaiuoli, pillicciaiuoli, e vorrassi fare disponentore de la Scrittura Santa. Grande ardimento è, troppo è grave offendimento il loro! E se questo è negli uomini, si è nelle femine maggiormente, però che lle femine sono troppo più di lungi che ll'uomo

This sort of criticism is ubiquitous in western medieval and Reformation-era texts from Catholic and Protestant leaders alike. Nevertheless, medieval and early modern women studied the Bible, taught about scripture in convents and schoolrooms, copied manuscripts, owned print shops that published women's writings, preached, and wrote pamphlets and books.

Unfortunately, very few works by medieval Jewish women survive, apart from several letters, wills, and poems.<sup>4</sup> In the early modern period, Rivkah bat Meier Tiktiner of Prague (d. 1605) wrote a Yiddish conduct manual for women, drawing on her reading of scripture and rabbinic texts.<sup>5</sup> Deborah Ascarelli, a Jewish woman living in Rome in the 1530s, translated Hebrew liturgical material into Italian and composed poetry about the biblical Susannah.<sup>6</sup> Another woman, Royzl Fishl owned a publishing house and printed a Yiddish translation of the Psalms in Krakow in 1586.<sup>7</sup>

A number of SBL annual meeting sessions, sponsored by the Recovering Female Interpreters of the Bible section, have been specifically dedicated to the topic of female interpreters in the medieval and Reformation era.<sup>8</sup> Most of

da la Scritture e da la lettera; e trovansi di quelle che.ssi ne fanno sponitori de la pistola e del vangelo. Grande è follia loro, troppo è loro scipidezza.» A number of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian women were admired as spiritual teachers by their contemporaries. For primary sources written by or about these women, see Elizabeth Petroff: *Consolation of the Blessed*, New York 1979. Giordano's contemporary, Angela of Foligno, who is treated in an essay in this issue, engaged in precisely the sort of behavior that he was trying to discourage.

- 4 On the topic of learned medieval Jewish women, some of whom served as copyists for texts of scripture and rabbinic commentaries, see A. Grossman: *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*, trans. J. Chipman, Waltham 2004; and S. Pantel Zolty: *And All Your Children Shall be Learned: Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History*, Lanham 2005.
- 5 Rivkah bat Meir: *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women*, ed. F. von Rohden, trans. S. Spinner, Philadelphia 2009.
- 6 E. Taitz, S. Henry, and C. Tallan: *The JPS Guide to Jewish Women in History 600 B.C.E. to 1900 C.E.*, Philadelphia 2003, 108-109.
- 7 D. Kay, Seyder Tkhhines: *The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women*, Philadelphia 2004, 102.
- 8 For some earlier forays into medieval and early modern female interpreters, see G. Lerner: «One Thousand Years of Feminist Biblical Criticism» in: *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*, New York 1993, 138-66; E. Gössman, «History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women» in: E. Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.): *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, New York 1993, 27-40; and Marla Selvidge: *Notorious Voices: Feminist Biblical Interpretation, 1500-1920*, New York Con-

the essays in this volume, which treat Western European female Christian interpreters who lived during the 1200s through the 1600s, were given as papers at these sessions. This issue of *Theologische Zeitschrift* explores the fascinating contributions of some of the medieval and early modern women who authored texts that interpreted the Bible.

In «Thirteenth-Century Visionaries Engaging Scripture via the Liturgy,» Joy Schroeder illustrates ways in which liturgical attendance, especially observance of the church year, offered opportunities for women to engage with scripture and compose authoritative writings that interpreted the biblical text for their audiences. Notably, the exceedingly learned Benedictine nuns from the Saxon convent of Helfta, Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241-1298), Gertrude of Helfta (1223-1292), and their anonymous collaborators, offered sophisticated commentary on the biblical texts read or chanted during the liturgy. The Franciscan tertiary Angela of Foligno (ca. 1248-1309), representative of vernacular theology, interpreted New Testament narratives by imitating or imaginatively engaging with the biblical characters.

Heather McKay's article, «Using Biblical Interpretation Combined with Anti-Misogynist Strategies,» examines with the literary tactics employed by court writer Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) to offer advice to highborn ladies. In the first part of the essay, we see how de Pizan's writings offer a window into the life of highborn women who, despite their wealth privilege, encountered significant challenges because of gender. In particular, they had to protect their reputations so that they were not only innocent and blameless, but also blame *free*, that is unblemished by rumor or even the whiff of scandal. Toward that end, de Pizan retells the stories of exemplary biblical women such as Sarah, Susanna, Ruth, and Naomi in ways that gloss over, omit, or reinterpret inconvenient details so that these matriarchs can be appropriate exemplars and models of worthy female behavior.

As women entered into sixteenth-century Reformation debates and polemics, they needed to construct public identities that permitted them to speak

tinuum, 1996. For a recent collection of essays dealing specifically with medieval female interpreters, see K.E. Børreson and A. Valerio (eds): *The High Middle Ages, The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History* 6.2, Atlanta 2015. Thirty-six of the one hundred seventy entries cover medieval and sixteenth-century women in M. Taylor (ed.) and A. Choi (associate ed.): *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, Grand Rapids 2012.

beyond the private sphere. First-generation Protestant reformer Katharina Schütz Zell (ca. 1498-1562) authored texts for publication. In «Take Upon Yourselves a Manly, Abraham-like Disposition,» Mette Bundvad compares Schütz Zell's writings with the journals kept by the Nuremberg abbess Caritas Pirckheimer (1467-1532), to show how Schütz Zell used male biblical figures to shape her defense of her public role.

In «Katharina Schütz Zell on a Hermeneutic Controversy about Whether or Not to Interpret the Penitential Psalms Christologically,» Glen Taylor offers a close textual reading of the exegetical work of a female Protestant reformer. He explores Schütz Zell's choice to include christological readings of Psalm 51, despite her usual preference to read the Davidic psalms in a strict historical sense. By arguing that David himself prophetically knew about Christ, she found a midpoint between interpreters like Martin Luther, who unabashedly read these psalms christologically, and John Calvin, who cautioned against going beyond the psalmist's intent. We are delighted that Taylor's essay is accompanied by a valuable contribution to the history of women's interpretation, Rachel Lott's English translation of Schütz Zell's essay justifying reading Christ in the Psalms, a previously untranslated portion of her *On the Miserere Psalms*.

Another sixteenth-century woman's approach to Psalm 51 is explored in Nathan Wall's essay «Penitent Sinner and Pleasing Host: Immediacy in Anne Lock's Psalm 51 Sonnet Sequence.» In 1560, Anne Lock (1530–ca. 1590) anonymously published a poetic paraphrase and interpretation of this psalm. In her work, Lock adopted the persona of a penitent sinner, rather than the historical David, the choice preferred by Calvin and by John Donne. Wall deftly argues that her approach heightens the sense of the psalm's immediacy. Expounding on a psalm filled with the language of sacrifice, Lock also entered into discussions of Eucharistic theology by re-appropriating the language of gazing on the «sacred host,» a form of Roman Catholic devotion, to be used, instead, to refer to God the Father's eternal gaze upon the ascended Christ, whose body remains in heaven.

In the Christian tradition, women have frequently been slandered as temptresses and «daughters of Eve,» sharing blame with the first woman, who was deemed responsible for sin's entry into the world. In «Rewriting Eve as an Act of Resistance,» Amanda Benckhuysen shows how women between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries resisted misogynistic applications of Genesis 2–3 by retelling the story for themselves. Some, like humanist Isotta Nogarola

(1418-1466), reinterpreted the story to point out that Eve's sin was lesser than Adam's since she was motivated by a desire for knowledge. It was Adam, who sinned in full awareness of the offense, and it was on his account that humanity shared in the punishment. Other women, such as poet Amelia Lanyer (1569-1645), «de-essentialized» Eve, arguing that all of womankind should not, as a class, be held responsible for the sin of one woman. A third strategy was to re-appropriate the story strategically, in a way that advanced women's opportunities. Educator Bathsua Makin (1600-1675) argued that *if* women were especially sinful on account of Eve's sin, it was all the more important that women receive an excellent education, for the sake of their moral formation.

We, the guest editors of this issue, have devoted our own scholarly efforts to discovering and examining the writings of historical Jewish and Christian women interpreters of the Bible, and to encouraging and nurturing research in this area.<sup>9</sup> We are pleased to offer readers these insightful essays, written by colleagues who share our commitment to retrieving and celebrating the accomplishments of women through the ages.

*Joy A. Schroeder*, Columbus OH, &  
*Marion Ann Taylor*, Toronto ON

9 We are in the midst of work on a new book surveying two thousand years of women's biblical interpretation, *Breaking Silence: Women Biblical Interpreters through the Centuries*, forthcoming from Westminster John Knox Press. Joy Schroeder is Bergener Professor of Theology and Religion at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, where she holds appointments at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and the Department of Religion and Philosophy. Marion Taylor is Professor of Old Testament at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, Ontario.