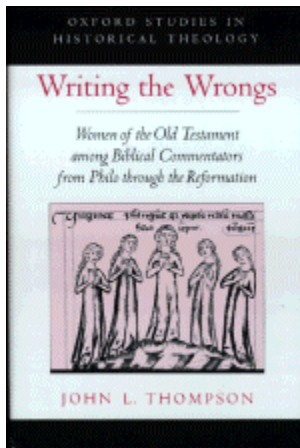


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Thompson, John L.

Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation

Oxford Studies in Historical Theology

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Thompson opens his book with reference to two works by Phyllis Trible (*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984]; idem, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]) as examples of the “veritable eruption of interest in the women of the Bible, as in women’s gender issues generally” (3). Trible’s *Texts of Terror* was the publication of her 1982 Beecher Lectures at Yale, which is called “a landmark of sorts”: “Trible offered these [Old Testament] women a memorial.”

The question of how these women’s stories should be read has drawn them “into the much wider controversies of contemporary feminist theology” (4). Trible’s intention was not to reject the Bible, only its patriarchy. Others took a more hostile position to the Bible as well as to Christianity, causing many traditional Christians to harbor suspicion of feminist criticism. This mutual suspicion has inspired Thompson to this study. His study is also inspired by the suspicion that something important has been overlooked: Have Christian interpreters always read these texts as perpetuating patriarchy?

To illuminate this question, Thompson offers a study of how the stories of Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, and the Levite concubine were read by a selection of so-called precritical interpreters. He concentrates on the period from Philo of Alexandria to the Reformation, as his subtitle tells. He does not think he will solve the modern controversy, "but I do hope to give a voice to others interested in the past" (7). The purpose of his book is not to offer a critique of modern feminist biblical criticism, "though perceptive readers will probably have detected my mixed but genuine appreciation for many feminist insight and priorities" (253).

His own method is a descriptive and comparative study of precritical commentators, whom Thompson takes seriously. Their commentaries are not "childish babblings" but "serious thoughts, which are well worth striving to understand, even if we are not obliged to follow them" (12; as cited from De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*). He has "tried to give the highest priority to documenting and articulating the texts and writers ... to present them sympathetically and without feeling obliged to debunk their views or filter them through a mixture of sophistication and cynicism" (14). He reserves his own analysis to the end of each chapter and to a more wide-ranging discussion in a final conclusion at the end of the book.

The precritical commentators investigated are personalities such as Philo, Josephus, the apostle Paul, the church fathers (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, Procopius of Gaza, Novatian, Hilary, Ephraem the Syrian), early medieval commentators (e.g., Isodor, the Venerable Bede, Raban Maur), rabbinical exegesis (including midrashim, Rashi, Sfomo), later medieval interpreters (e.g., Rupert of Deutz, Peter Comestor, Hugh of St. Cher, Nicholas of Lyra, Denis the Cartusian), and interpreters from around the Reformation (e.g., Cardinal Cajetan, Huldreich Zwingli, Conrad Pellican, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Wolfgang Musculus, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Johannes Brenz). The number and variety of commentators investigated is imposing. This gallery of interpreters

represents a wide variety of interpretations, mirroring the history of exegesis. To get a general view of the different opinions is sometimes difficult.

First Thompson traces the interpretation of “Hagar: Abraham’s Wife and Exile” in Gen 16 and 21. After presenting his “gallery” of interpreters, he makes a few summary observations. The once-dominating allegorical exegesis had “a meteoric rise” and “a more gradual decline” (94). This method was almost licensed by Paul. His one-sided allegorical interpretation of Hagar (Gal 4) “would not seem to bode well for the personal destiny of Hagar and Ishmael, nor for their descendants.” Paul was “one of the very few ever to construct a pure allegory” on Hagar (95). Thus many of the earliest commentaries were wholly allegorical and disapproving of both Hagar and her son, but around the Reformation the commentators were mostly uninterested in allegory: “none of these readers wanted to reduce Hagar to a mere palimpsest inscribed with the words of St. Paul” (98). To the feminists, Thompson comments that these precritical commentators were able to disarm us with their concern for issues of injustice and human suffering. Thus Hagar was a woman to identify with: “We are at some times all like Hagar,” to combine a citation from Renita Weems and Martin Luther.

Much the same could be said about Thompson’s second study, the story of Jephthah’s daughter and sacrifice (Judg 11). The interpretations vary along the same main lines as on the Hagar story. Both Jephthah and his daughter are interpreted very differently. Thompson summarizes six different interpretations (171–76): the daughter was interpreted (1) allegorically as a martyr, (2) typologically as a precursor for Christian virgins, and (3) as prefiguring the death of Christ; in addition, (4) casuistic analyses were developed to excuse Jephthah, (5) rabbinic exegetical arguments claimed that the daughter survived, and (6) in modern times feminist analyses developed.

The third study, on the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judg 19, titled “Four Expendable Women,” is somewhat shorter because not so much was written on it by the authors investigated by Thompson. Sidelights are currently made to the similar

story of Gen 19. The method used is basically the same. The reason why not so much was written on this story is indicated to be general embarrassment over this cruel story.

The last chapter is a comprehensive conclusion, with the subtitle “Reading Scripture in the Presence of the Past.” In this chapter Thompson attempts to draw precritical interpretation and modern feminist criticism “a few steps closer together” (223), first by allowing the concerns of feminist readers to query precritical commentators, and second by reversing their roles to allow these earlier interpreters a similar inquiry.

How theologians of the past would respond to modern issues would simply be an exercise in historical speculation, but it is important for the modern reader to consider—and reconsider—past theologians, because their interpretations have to some extent set the agenda for our own interpretations. Thompson subscribes to and concludes his book with the careful statement by Emely Cheney (253): “Reading strategies are needed to enable women to feel drawn to the ‘humanist’ values of male characters to explore how and whether they can affirm these values. It may not be necessary to reject male character(s) in every case.”

Thompson’s book is a comprehensive and substantial work that performs a good deal of spadework. Important aspects of the history of biblical interpretation that have been previously unknown, at least to this reader, are gathered in this volume. Thompson’s analysis is clever, with many cross-references between the different interpreters and their different traditions of interpretation. Sometimes the book may be somewhat dull or boring, at least for an Old Testament scholar trained in modern exegetical methods. But to a church historian Thompson’s book is an important source, a veritable fountain of the history of biblical interpretation. The book should be of particular interest to church historians and scholars working with the history of biblical interpretation, probably more than to Old Testament scholars. It is a book to return to.

It has been claimed by modern feminist critics that the grotesque Old Testament stories of rape, murder, torture, and abandonment of women passed without comment until modern times. In his book Thompson demonstrates that this is far from true. He documents that interpreters throughout the centuries have regularly addressed and wrestled with these Old Testament tragedies. He maintains that some of the precritical commentators read these texts in ways that subordinated their own patriarchal instincts to a far more existential concern with issues of justice, humanity, and women's dignity. But they took the texts seriously.

The book should preferably be read not throughout from the beginning to the end but "tactically." The introduction is very basic and important. After the introduction, one should read the conclusion in order to gain a general overview of the whole field of problems. The same method of reading can be used for each main chapter. That is, one should first read the general introduction to each chapter, the following presentation of recent feminist interpretation, and then the respective chapter's conclusion before reading the detailed survey. This will give an overview and gradual induction to the book before all the details are dealt with. There is a lot of historical information in this book, but its logic is very clear.

The book includes a comprehensive bibliography (seventeen pages) as well as indexes of biblical citations, biblical commentators, modern authors, and subjects. The contents of the book are clearly set up, so it is easy to find what one is looking for, even if the table of contents could have been much more comprehensive. None of the many subsections of the three main chapters are mentioned, though there are many subsections with their own headings.

The author is Professor of Historical Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, and not a feminist scholar. His book is something of a modification or correction to feminist scholarship, but, nevertheless, an investigation every feminist scholar should appreciate.