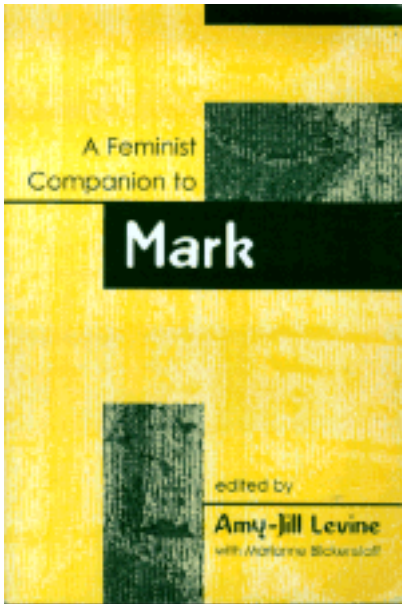


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Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marianne Blickenstaff, eds.

A Feminist Companion to Mark

Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings 2

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001. Pp. 261.
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In my office I have divided my books into various categories. One of these categories is labeled “biblical studies” and includes commentaries, monographs, and journals related to that field. Another one of these categories is labeled “theory” and includes books on literary criticism, feminism, and postcolonial theory. This book will definitely find its place in the former category stacked alongside other commentaries and monographs on the Gospel of Mark.

That a “feminist” title belongs more properly among my biblical studies monographs than among my theoretical texts is a testimony both to the centrality of the feminist perspective in current exegesis and to the nature of this collection of essays itself, which seeks to illumine the text just as much, if not more, than it seeks to address modern feminist concerns. Even though *A Feminist Companion to Mark* is modeled on Athalya Brenner’s *Feminist Companion to the Bible*, this collection should be essential reading for all serious students of Mark, including those few scholars who are still wont to dismiss feminist readings as “a fad” or “political.” In fact, what strikes me most about this collection is the willingness of the authors to move toward a less-unified feminist reading of the text, developing, instead, a more nuanced, even ambiguous approach to a text that admittedly was formed in a patriarchal world.

Joanna Dewey, who should be considered one of the pioneers in the feminist study of the Bible, takes on a text that is not normally associated with the feminist reading of Mark: the injunction “to deny oneself” (8:34). She notes that many traditional readings of this text seem to make suffering redemptive, a perspective that has tended to encourage Christian women to tolerate injustice as part of their “self-denial.” But Dewey reads this saying in an ancient context with a very different understanding of the “self.” In that context the self would be understood in terms of traditional ties within the kinship group so that “to deny self, then, is to deny one’s kin.” With this reading denying oneself is not so much encouraging self-sacrifice as it is encouraging one to follow Jesus—a move that will invite persecution. Dewey argues that this reading better fits Mark’s overall message on suffering, namely, that suffering is evil and will be brought to an end by the coming of the new age.

Deborah Krause offers a reading of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law that goes against the grain of some earlier feminist readings of this text (e.g., Tolbert and Selvidge). These other readings note that “serving” in Mark’s Gospel is something the angels do for Jesus and something that Jesus encourages of his disciples—the very thing the mother-in-law does upon her healing. However, Krause argues that the woman’s life was not transformed by her encounter with Jesus (i.e., she was not liberated from her traditional position) but had to return to her culturally prescribed role. Still, Krause sees a “utopian” moment in the woman’s healing.

Wendy Cotter considers the stories of the “Woman with the Hemorrhage” and the “Raising of Jairus’ Daughter.” She notes that these stories seem to have been linked in the pre-Markan tradition, and she asks what this might mean. She analyzes the hemorrhaging woman in terms of Mark’s apology for her behavior by comparing it to standards of female behavior found in Valerius Maximus, Pliny, and Tertullian. Seen in this light, Jesus’ response to the woman indicates that he is free from “the need for public honors, and also from the need to dominate women.” (60) Cotter analyzes the Jairus story by comparing it to other ancient resurrections performed by Asclepius, Hercules, Elijah, Elisha, Apollonius of Tyana, Empedocles, and Asclepiades. She concludes that Mark’s depiction of Jesus most closely resembles that of Asclepius: a god whose healing is characterized by compassion. These stories not only give credit to Jesus’ divine power but also illustrate that he is compassionate and “incapable of denying ... salvific transformations” to those who ask (77–78).

Another pioneer in feminist biblical studies, Sharon Ringe, rewrote an earlier article on the Gentile woman (in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985]). This new version is a significant revision of her earlier work utilizing the methodology she has advocated (along with Frederick C.

Tiffany) in *Biblical Interpretation: A Road Map* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). In the earlier version Ringe argued that the Gentile woman was able to teach Jesus something about messiahship. In this version she has reconsidered the woman in the story taking into account her social class. Mark places her in the dominant ethnic and social group of her culture—that is, among the oppressors—something that makes Jesus’ rebuke more comprehensible.

Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera looks at the same story from the perspective of a South-Asian woman. Her reading is, in a way, a return to Ringe’s earlier perspective, focusing in a sympathetic way on the woman’s status as a female pleading for her “girl-child.” Rebera argues that South-Asian women would have a lot in common with this woman, who is a model of a mother who is persistent on behalf of her female child, refusing to be silenced by shame and willing to avoid conflict by permitting the man to win the argument. At the same time, the fact that she is not required to convert before receiving healing for her child suggests possibilities for the kind of interreligious dialogue that is so relevant for South Asia.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon makes a methodological contribution as she analyzes the story of the “Poor Widow.” She points out that every pericope can be read in several contexts, and she encourages readers to take several approaches into account. After a summary of four different contextual approaches: historical-critical (Swete), form-critical (Taylor), redaction-critical (Nineham), and “against the grain” (A. Wright), she offers her own multilayered reading of the text that goes beyond Wright’s reading. Wright argued that Jesus was not so much approving of the widow’s action as he was condemning the system that exploited her in this way. Malbon agrees but feels this reading can be complicated by considering other contexts (e.g., the woman gives her “whole life” just as Jesus will).

Dennis R. MacDonald offers an innovative reading of the “anointing” story of Mark 14. He argues that the pericope is a literary creation that is based upon Odysseus’s Niptra (washing) by Eurycleia. He cites numerous parallels between the stories to indicate this relationship and to suggest that the anointing in Mark 14 is a kind of “recognition” scene.

Marianne Sawicki offers a different explanation for the anointing story, one that attempts to articulate an important theological role for women in the early stages of the Christian community. She provides a very illuminating cultural study of the various uses of oil, anointing, and female groups in ancient Greek and Jewish culture. She then reconstructs a history of the pericope that begins when the “disaster of Calvary becomes known.” Hellenized women gathered to grieve Jesus’ death and in so doing came to the conclusion that his death must have been “meaningful and deliberate.” This women’s interpretation

was then presented to a *symposium* (of men, the setting of the anointing story in Mark), and it became the consensus. However, the women's role in formulating this perspective was objectionable to some, and we see these objections in the pericope itself and in the Last Supper narratives.

Hisako Kinukawa recognizes the discipleship role afforded to women in Mark's Gospel, but she questions that it was a "discipleship of equals." She notes that apart from family gatherings male and female disciples function in separate spheres in Mark. She concludes that the "women depicted by Mark [in 15:40] are true disciples of Jesus in the sense that they are ready for devoting themselves to 'life-giving' suffering." Thus they represent a challenge to "those who avoid the struggles of the oppressed" (190). This kind of discipleship has the power to "regenerate a true community of faith" because of the way it disturbs the hierarchical order of things (190).

Kathleen Corley tries to establish the social class of Jesus' female disciples and concludes that "at least Mary Magdalene and Salome came from the lower classes and were either working women, hired servants, slaves or runaway slaves, not wealthier women as Luke 8.1–3 suggests" (191). She also argues that the "Last Supper" narratives that depict an all-male group are "later literary creations" and that women were probably present at those meals. She doubts that the women around Jesus included actual prostitutes, and slanders to that effect were just that, reflecting the mixed social standings of the group.

Victoria Phillips tries to explain the "failure" of the women in Mark 16:1–8. In her view it is their sudden realization that the Twelve knew to go to Galilee while the women did not have this information that caused the women so much fear. In this view it is the fact that the women realized that they had been marginalized by their community (and Jesus) that caused them so much distress. She connects Mark 14:28–31 with the special privileges (of information) given to the Twelve that were not given to the women. So, for Phillips, the women are disciples, but they are not included within The Twelve.

There is certainly room for disagreement with many of the claims in these essays, and, in fact, the authors often disagree with each other. That being said, every serious student of Mark should read them and carefully consider the arguments they make and the methodologies they employ.