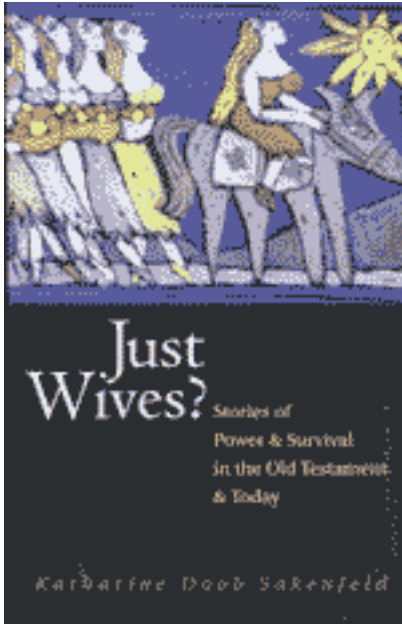


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**Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob**

***Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today***

Louisville: Westminster John, 2003. Pp. vii + 136.  
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Athalya Brenner  
University of Amsterdam  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands 1012 GC

As set out in her introduction (1–5), Doob Sakenfeld is concerned with rereading the Hebrew Bible stories about eleven biblical “wife” figures from two clusters of perspectives: sociocultural backgrounds to women’s lives in biblical times and in contemporary locations; and the rhetorical-literary properties of the relevant Hebrew Bible texts. The stories reread are of paired or grouped woman figures: Sarah and Hagar (ch. 1 [7–25]); Ruth and Naomi (ch. 2 [27–48]); Vashti and Esther (ch. 3 [49–67]); Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba (ch. 4 [69–0]). In the last two chapters Gomer wife of Hosea (ch. 5 [91–115]) and the “good wife” of Prov 31:10–31 (ch. 6 [117–34]) are in fact paired as well (see below). Each chapter ends with “Questions for Individual Reflection or Group Study,” followed by the notes to this chapter. A small list of “Suggestions for Further Reading” concludes the book (135–36).

This is obviously a book written for the larger, in the sense of outside the scholarly guild, public by an erudite, well-informed, nonjudgmental, nonsentimental, and yet highly compassionate biblical scholar. Having written that, I do not mean that the book does not contain new insights that would benefit professional biblical critics. It does. Doob Sakenfeld draws into the reading of the biblical text data experiences and critique of women (and men) from Asia, Africa, “Black” America, and her own “white” America, of

various class backgrounds. This expansion of the interpretive horizon endows the well-known texts with fresh illumination from wide-ranging angles. Furthermore, her angle—as set out in the book’s subtitle—is to uncover and describe properties, devices, and techniques that would make the interpretation of the stories chosen vehicles of female empowerment and survival in today’s assorted locations. This, for this reviewer, is a fine example of the Bible’s feminized globalization and how readings from different cultures may have an influence on the reader’s life, whatever her particular location.

Sarah and Hagar are read for conflict as well as for understanding each one’s plight, Ruth and Naomi for the way they survive and attain security. Vashti and Esther are presented as two models of resistance to injustice. David’s women—Abigail, Michal, and Bathsheba—are allowed complexity of motive and behavior rather than being reduced to “stereotyping or pigeonholing,” with the recommendation to avoid this for the self and others (89). Gomer is read as a “real person”; hence, her use as a symbol is dangerous and troubling especially for Christians used to the figure of the church as the bride of Christ. (I love the poem by Mary Caroline Jonah, “The Autobiography of Gomer,” which is reproduced on 107–14.) Finally, the Proverbs “woman of valor” (here: the “good wife”) is read for a reversal of the Gomer picture, through the dual lens of viewing this female figure as well as Jesus for their “wisdom” attributes.

All in all, this is an optimistic endeavor: female survival is the key concept and the key hope. It is more reflective than prescriptive, although the theological bend is unmistakable. Other “pluralistic,” meaning transethnic and transclass, readings of biblical texts have been attempted before. This reviewer likes this one for its moderation, good sense, and appeal for the nonprofessional reader. I wish for many more such readings to be published (and soon) and that my own readings, from my own location, would be different and thus only prove Doob Sakenfeld’s point.