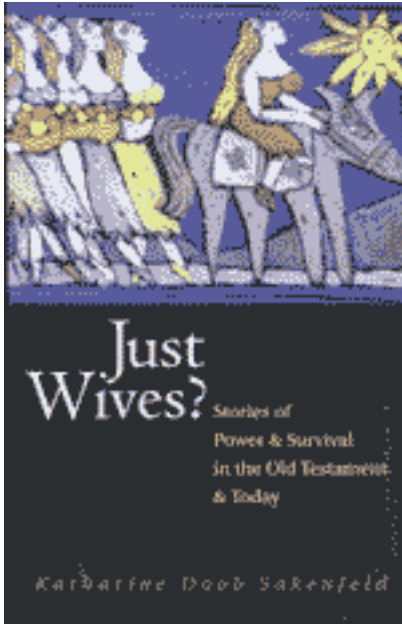


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**Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob**

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

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003. Pp. vii + 136.  
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Katherine Doob Sakenfeld's recent publication *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* features six studies of eleven female characters, all of whom are wives. Her overriding interest is the hermeneutics of the stories from a cross-cultural perspective. She states clearly that the assumption underlying her approach "is that people in very different life circumstances bring different questions to the stories and will see different answers to questions put to the Bible passages" (4). Nevertheless, *Just Wives?* is aimed primarily at a Christian readership, as the nomenclature of the title and the use of that nomenclature throughout the book indicate.

Sakenfeld's experience as a teacher in a Christian seminary and as a facilitator of discussion within varied communities of faith supply the grist and detail for her cross-cultural offering. She places this offering before the reader in the form of anecdotes, quoted viewpoints, secondary citations, and, in one case, commentary in the form of a poem. Her ear is cocked, as it were, to the voices of a readership from globally ranging communities that she has personally engaged. Her efforts manifest precisely what Clines describes in his introduction to *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*: "As the culture of those who read and interpret the Bible becomes more pluralist, it becomes less and less plausible to lay claim to determinate interpretations and more valuable to read the Bible afresh from the perspectives of

different readers” (David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* [JSOTSup 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990], 9). The specificity and concreteness of Sakenfeld’s examples and descriptions make a strong case for such readings.

She herself states in her introduction that she combines two ways of viewing the texts. The first is sociocultural and the second rhetorical. By means of the first she “investigates factors in the cultural, economic, religious and social structures of ancient Israel” to explain what may “seem strange to us today.” By means of the second she explores the “design of a text,” including such features as the narrator’s perspective, development of character and plot, and the use of metaphor. However, a more apt description of her endeavor is that she engages two exegetical approaches, reader-response and rhetorical, to serve her cross-cultural, hermeneutical interest.

The cross-cultural interest necessitates the reader-response approach. At points in her discussion the presuppositions or cultural grounding of her “readers” inform her exegesis as much as her self-described sociocultural investigation. For example, in her study of Ruth and Naomi, she juxtaposes the story of a woman from Thailand to her synopsis of the text. The Thailand story serves as her hermeneutical launching point. While exploring the question of economic survival in her discussion of the same text she tells the story of a Filipina child’s use of the Ruth-Naomi story to justify acceptance of a recruiter’s offer to become a “dancer” in a foreign country. This anecdote powerfully serves two purposes. The first is to enliven the heart-rending survival issues that women across cultures and throughout history have faced, one version of which is depicted in the Ruth-Naomi story. The second is to demonstrate practically the multifaceted and sometimes dangerous use made of such a text. Sakenfeld critiques this use and discusses the hermeneutical implications of her critique.

She uses the second approach, rhetorical, to deconstruct some of the gender biases of the text. Issues she raises include the following: economic survival of women in worlds where men control the production of goods; use of women for sexual pleasure and production of progeny; possession and trade of women as symbols of male honor, power, and alliance. If “differences are the focus of this book,” as she states they are, then the results of her deconstruction may be viewed as one more voice, an essential one, within the cultural mix.

She states that she leaves aside historical questions, by which she means political events and dates, because “women of the Old Testament, with just a few exceptions, were not involved in the public sphere.” The growth of the text and the diversity that occurs within textual witnesses, as well as the shifts in reading female characters that such growth and

diversity reveal are, of course, also outside of the parameters of her study, which is aimed at a lay readership. However, in the Vashti- Esther study she does mention that there are three different versions of the book of Esther (54). Her purpose in mentioning this is to present Esther's prayer from the Greek version. The prayer constitutes a difference in development of Esther's character among the textual witnesses. Sakenfeld perhaps misses an opportunity at this point in her discussion to emphasize explicitly the fact that the textual witnesses themselves are an example of diverse "readings" of the "text" and its characters, although her readers may well infer this information from her discussion.

She is not afraid to name what might be considered disturbing aspects of the text for the readers of her particular audience. For example, she critiques the biblical use of the metaphor of God as husband in her discussion of Gomer and the impossibilities of the ideal woman in Prov 31. Her concrete examples and descriptions as well as her explanations, which fall under what she calls her concern for the "socio-cultural background of the biblical material," prepare the reader for her critiques. The general tenor of her discussion and the questions concluding each study allow the reader room to make his or her own thoughtful choices about the text.

The motivation for Sakenfeld's study is pastoral and unitive, and this constitutes the enduring value of her book. She presents the diversity of cultural approaches to the text so that we might better recognize the similarities among us, raising a new level of empathy for one another. This impulse to see unity in diversity is, of course, much needed in all communities of faith today, and Sakenfeld is to be lauded for her efforts in this direction.

This book is a basic introduction to reading the text from a diversity of cultural perspectives. It is a good introduction to the skill of "hearing" the gender biases of the text without throwing out the text. For this reason it is an excellent work for study groups within communities of faith, especially diverse Christian communities. Each chapter begins with a synopsis of the biblical text and concludes with a set of questions, both of which facilitate its use for Bible study. A limited bibliography for further reading is also included.