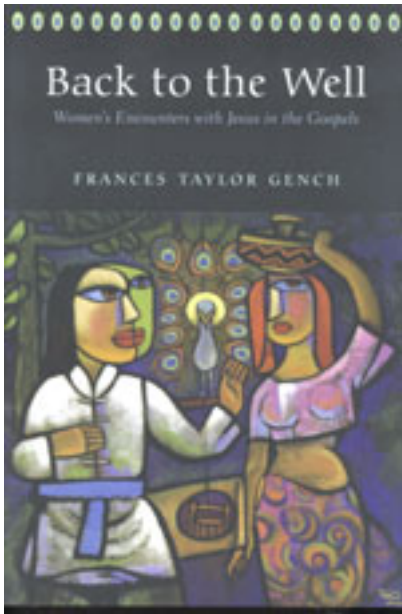


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**Gench, Frances Taylor**

***Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels***

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. Pp. xvi + 192. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0664227155.

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Having read the Bible for about two thousand years, Christians approach the Gospel stories with well-known and somewhat worn-out attitudes: we read and reread the Scriptures often posing same questions and giving the same answers. At times we stop asking ourselves at all: our community, our parents, our church, and our pastors have made sure that we understand the Bible “correctly.” Sure enough, there always will be a passage or two that remain enigmatic and uneasy to interpret, but many of us will choose to skip a line or page in order to stay untroubled by the text.

Frances Taylor Gench, biblical scholar and feminist, professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, does not feel comfortable with this traditional scheme of exegesis. She believes that as there are no uniform readers of the Bible, that there cannot be an identical approach to it. The importance of social location in interpreting the Gospels should not be overlooked, as the author explains: “All of us bring our own political, gender, racial, and religious biases to a biblical text, which affect not only what we see, but even the questions we think to ask” (xiii). She asks her readers to put aside their old glasses of Sunday schools and familiar preaching themes for a moment and to look at the biblical narrative as a challenging and unknown ground. Posing herself beside the biblical narrative as a Reformed Christian, woman, and feminist, Gench is not afraid to recognize

a male-centered perspective dominating Gospel stories and to engage herself and her readers in a challenging odyssey of interpretation. She recognizes that feminist scholars were one of the first to identify and criticize the one-sidedness of the traditional biblical scholarship; they also were the first to pay closer attention to the so-called “silenced” figures of the narratives: women and “others,” the marginal figures of the Scriptures. Readiness to be confronted by allegedly well-known biblical storylines is what Gench expects from her readers. Even given the most profound exegesis, she says, we must not limit our horizons to one way of interpretation but remain open to a range of possibilities as they open to us throughout our experience of the living God.

For her book, Taylor Gench has chosen six stories featuring the encounter of several biblical women with Jesus: the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28), a hemorrhaging woman and Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:21–43); Martha and Mary’s story (Luke 10:38–42); a bent woman, daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:10–17); the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42); and a woman accused of adultery (John 7:53–8:11). Each story is accompanied by scrupulous textual analysis as well as a biblical feminist reading that embraces at times much more than just feminist scholarship. Gench reveals a profound knowledge of the history of interpretation, including from more conservative to the most radical readings. Yet she is not afraid to misplace the accents of the “canonical” interpretation and to question the ideologies of the text.

The book is structured in such a way that a set of questions accompanies each chapter of the work, which undoubtedly will facilitate class discussions in the seminary or Bible studies in the church. “A variety of interpretive perspectives, problems, and possibilities emerge in connection with each of the texts,” she writes, “and we consider ways in which these stories can inform Christian life and faith and the practice of daily ministry” (xv). With this she shares a few of her personal convictions that impact the study and that, she believes, should be considered when starting the book. The Bible is not easy, says the author. It has never been and barely will be. But in wrestling with, and sometimes against, its claims, we engage into the spiritual quest. In this sense the Bible is truly a “holy” book.