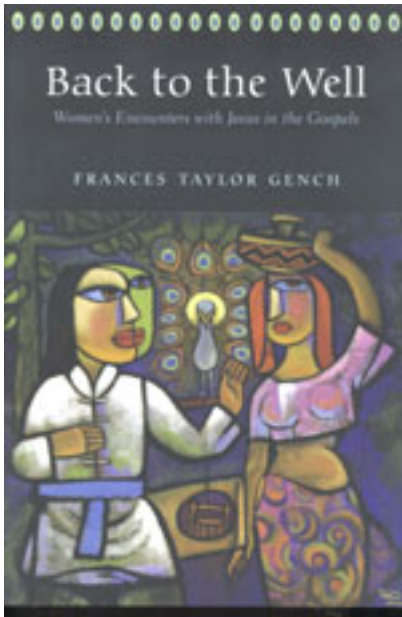


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**Gench, Frances Taylor**

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

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The study of biblical characters is an fascinating enterprise, particularly when it is coupled with insightful commentary, lucid summaries, and stimulating perspectives for contemporary consideration. Frances Taylor Gench, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, has combined these elements in her study of six New Testament women. The book is divided into six chapters plus introduction, along with endnotes, index of authors, and a brief bibliography at the end of each section. Chapters begin with a translation of the biblical text followed by a thorough exegesis, “angles of vision,” group study questions, and questions for discussion or reflection. The “angles of vision” are perhaps the most intriguing discussions and attempt to engage readers with recent biblical (and feminist) scholarship in order to “consider ways in which these stories can inform Christian life and faith in the practice of daily ministry” (xv).

The introduction is a candid and refreshing account of Gench’s sometimes difficult journey with the Bible. In it she describes her evolution from a disgruntled teenage girl (with regard to Paul’s view of women) to a Reformed, feminist scholar. In her words, “the emergence of her feminist consciousness” has enabled her to “wrestle more constructively with the question of how to appropriate a book that has proved to be

profoundly liberating but also profoundly oppressive at times in the lives of Christian women” (xii–xiii).

In chapter 1 Gench examines Matthew’s account of the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28). She carefully notes the peculiar features in the Matthean text that emphasize the public setting, woman’s ethnicity, extended nature of the conversation, apparent harshness of Jesus’ words, and the woman’s bold response. The “angles of vision” challenges readers to consider three sets of boundaries: Jewish-Gentile boundaries, gender boundaries, and socioeconomic boundaries. For Gench, the Canaanite woman is a paradigmatic example of human initiative and persistence over prejudice.

In chapter 2 the author discusses the intercalated accounts of the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:21–43). These accounts have frequently been read against the backdrop of Jewish purity laws. To touch or be touched by a woman with a flow of blood or a dead person would render an individual unclean. For many, these texts suggest the Markan Jesus’ disdain for and rejection of the Jewish purity regulations. Gench raises the possibility that these readings are erroneously based on misconceptions of Judaism and women. She notes that impurity is not explicitly mentioned in the text, is not sin, and does not correspond to social class or gender. Moreover, Gench underscores the notion that the focal point of the Jewish purity system was the temple in Jerusalem (e.g., Lev 15). Because Mark 5:21–43 transpires in the northern region of Galilee, she concludes, “if Jesus is rendered unclean by the touch of a hemorrhaging woman or by contact with a corpse, and thereby restricted from the distant central sanctuary, so what?” (43).

Chapter 3 explores the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38–42. Gench sets the story in its larger literary context by noting its relation to the preceding pericope. Viewed in this light, the story of Mary and Martha in conjunction with the account of the Good Samaritan illustrates the two great commandments (10:27). The Good Samaritan exemplifies what it means to love one’s neighbor, and the Martha and Mary episode depicts loving God. Scholars have traditionally assumed that Martha was distracted by her meal preparations, but the text makes no specific mention of a kitchen or food. Such a reading, Gench suggests, may reflect a commentator’s preconceived ideas about women’s roles. Gench also challenges dualistic readings of the pericope common throughout the history of the church. Read apart from the larger literary context, the pericope would appear to juxtapose Mary’s “good” choice over and against Martha’s presumably “not so good” choice. However, when understood in the broader narrative, the story depicts the complementary nature of discipleship: service *and* worship.

In chapter 4 Gench discusses the crippled woman found only in the Lukan material (Luke 13:10–17). She details the significance of the woman’s malady, the symbolism of

“standing up straight,” the unusual phrase “daughter of Abraham,” and the synagogue official’s response to the healing. In the “angles of vision,” two other issues are explored: anti-Judaic interpretations of the text and Luke’s ambiguous presentation of women. Many Christians throughout the ages have rationalized anti-Semitic thoughts, feelings, and behavior based upon Jesus’ harsh response to the religious leaders. The author suggests that such interpretations can be defused by (1) acknowledging the anti-Judaic sentiments inherent in the New Testament, (2) avoiding misleading caricatures of the Jewish religion, and (3), most importantly, recognizing that Jesus was a Jew.

Chapter 5 considers Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42). The account, which is the longest recorded conversation in the Gospels, is one of the few instances where a dialogue does not become a monologue for the Johannine Jesus. Gench pays careful attention to the literary connections within the narrative (i.e., Nicodemus) as well as Old Testament echoes of the betrothal type-scene. She carefully engages the myriad of views regarding the peculiar details of the women’s marital history and the abandoned water jar. Had the women been divorced or widowed? Had she been a promiscuous woman, or was she the victim of her previous husbands? Though the text is silent with regard to these issues, Gench examines how scholars throughout the history of the church (as illustrated in the Protestant Reformers) have attempted to fill these gaps. Hindsight is clear that conjecture along these lines is shaped by theological presuppositions rather than inherent textual markers. Gench concludes the chapter by exploring possible implications for the practice of Christian mission.

The concluding chapter discusses John 7:53–8:11 and is entitled “A Woman Accused of Adultery.” Gench notes that the “story is traditionally referred to as ‘the woman caught in adultery’ [and] tends to focus our attention solely on the woman and issues of sexual sin and obscures the significant role that others play in this scene” (137). After a brief exegesis, Gench turns to the placement of the pericope and the accompanying text-critical issues. She then draws attention to potentially inaccurate presuppositions about the religious leaders and the woman. If the account is a free-floating tradition and can be divorced from its surrounding context, then perhaps the story can be read without the negative and textually questionable narrative statement in 8:6. If this is the case, the story would actually provide a positive portrayal of the religious leaders. Gench comes to no definitive position on these issues but concludes by noting the importance of the passage for the contemporary church: “To know ourselves as sinners, and thereby to heal our judgmental hearts, would appear to be foundational to our ability to extend ourselves in love and compassion to others, and perhaps to ourselves” (156).

*Back to the Well* is designed for and will be enjoyed by a wide-ranging audience. The style is efficient and engaging, scholarly and devotional. All citations from the Greek text

are transliterated, and technical discussions are informed yet terse. Though “feminist” connotes different things to different people, the exegesis is judicious. New avenues of interpretation are offered as possibilities for consideration rather than ideology to be advanced. Readers will likely not endorse all the “angles of vision” but will find themselves enriched for having considered a diversity of interpretive viewpoints. Overall, the book is insightful and makes a positive contribution to Synoptic and feminist studies. Interested laypeople, Bible study leaders, seminarians, pastors, and scholars alike will find this book both provocative and challenging.