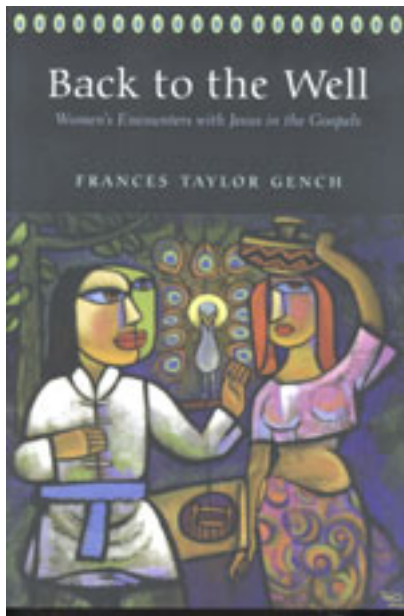


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Gench, Frances Taylor

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

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It is not often a book is both so compelling and accessible that it is easily, and eagerly, read in one sitting. Frances Taylor Gench's *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* is such a book. This is not to cast doubt on the complexity or intelligence of this work; on the contrary, it is a testament to Gench's superb ability to get to the heart of the matter with alacrity and insight, and to do it in an engaging, gentle style.

In *Back to the Well* Gench revisits popular accounts of Jesus interacting with women, as well as some that have received less attention. Devoting one chapter to each story, Gench chooses to examine the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28), the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:21–43), Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42), the bent woman, daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:10–17), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42), and the woman accused of adultery (John 7:53–8:11). Most of these have become standard fare for courses on early Christian women or in women's Bible studies, and Gench's ability to bring a fresh perspective is thus all the more welcome. For those looking for real innovations in interpretation or theory, they are rare here; *Back to the Well* is just a creative conversation between interpretive alternatives tailored for those encountering these stories for the first time.

In each chapter/story analysis, Gench begins with the text itself and a brief explication. This is followed by a section called “Encountering the Text,” which consists of solid exegesis and an identification of troublesome pericopes and interpretive issues. She continues with what is perhaps her most appealing contribution, a section called “Angles of Vision,” in which she presents at least two and sometimes up to five hermeneutical perspectives that have defined discussions of that narrative. Of course the angles of vision are different in each case study, as each text raises different concerns. For example, in her examination of Martha and Mary, the angles of vision are the importance of *diakonia* and the debate between dualism and complementarity, while the story of the hemorrhaging woman engages in several themes, including purity regulations and the prefiguring of the passion of Christ. These angles-of-vision sections allow her to draw together many different scholars, often in opposition, to present a variety of perspectives and conclusions. Thus, new students can enjoy “dialogues” between established scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Raymond Brown, and Kathleen Corley but also hear newer voices such as Loveday Alexander and Holly Toensing. More experienced scholars and instructors get a handy reference to the most thoughtful and innovative readings of these stories, plus a healthy reminder of the elusiveness of biblical “truth.”

Gench begins with the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, which she takes from Matt 15. Beginning with this episode is apt, because here Gench takes on matters that are of obvious concern to her and will become thematic in the book: the kind of model of action the woman offers for modern women; the issue of anti-Jewish attitudes in the New Testament; the possibility that Jesus acts and speaks wrongly at times; and the influence of the church communities on the composition of the Gospels. Regarding usable models, Gench follows Gail O’Day’s conclusion that the Canaanite woman offers women a positive example of persistence, though she acknowledges the alternative position of Schüssler-Fiorenza, that the story reinforces patriarchal relationships, and Musa Dube’s point that it may embody “imperialistic values and strategies” (19). In all of her chapters, the question of how the interpretations of the story affect modern women is fittingly foremost in Gench’s mind.

Gench’s warnings about anti-Jewishness are appropriately frequent and direct, and she is especially sharp in her chapter “A Bent Woman, Daughter of Abraham,” which discusses the story in Luke 13:10–17 of Jesus’ healing of a woman who cannot stand up. She urges that we “mourn the fact that anti-Jewish rhetoric is embedded in Christian Scripture” and reiterates that what Jesus does for her “he does as a Jewish man for a Jewish woman” (93, 94). However, in her discussion of the Canaanite woman she backs down from what should have been a more thorough critique. Although she acknowledges the unsettled composition of the Matthean church—“a mixed congregation with a sizeable Jewish-Christian constituency”—she refuses to consider the possibility that the text is shaped by

that historical circumstance but instead argues that “the text provided guidance for the Matthean Church in its relation with Gentiles” (11). Gench seems to agree that the Gentile woman’s faith is the illustration of the “faith by which Gentiles gain access to healing and salvation” and is “the story’s central theological affirmation” (13). What is missing here is a discussion of what “inclusion” signifies when the outside group (Gentiles and Jewish Christians) uses Jesus’ words to redefine the original group (covenant Judaism) to include itself.

But for the most part Gench is not afraid to take interpretive chances. In the Canaanite woman chapter she calls Jesus’ identification of the woman with “the dogs” a “participat[ion] in human prejudice” (23). Her privileging of Hisako Kinukawa’s reading of the story of the woman accused of adultery is indicative of her commitment to feminist concerns. Kinukawa interprets the adulteress’ predicament as not unlike the Japanese “comfort women” of World War II—forced into sexual service. Kinukawa’s point for the adulteress story in John is that what men may define as adultery may be a woman’s desperate sexual situation, and the Gospel writer is not interested in the woman’s point of view. Although Gench questions some of Kinukawa’s conclusions, she agrees that it is possible that “Jesus fails to take notice of circumstances particular to the accused woman” (151).

This refusal to attempt to rehabilitate every troublesome text is surprising, given Gench’s unambiguous faith perspective. Although its explorations leave a generous berth for disagreement and exchange, the book is clearly written for a religious audience and would be best suited for a seminary. Its ultimate assumption is one of faith: the lessons of the stories will be applicable to a reader’s personal spiritual walk, and this is especially noticeable in the study and discussion questions provided at the end of each chapter. These features may be a drawback for instructors looking for a similar kind of scholarly overview, but from a nonfaith perspective. Gench alerts us of this in her introduction: “I presume that biblical stories are texts of transforming power with much to teach us about God’s way in the world and our own human experience,” but then adds, refreshingly, “which does not necessarily mean they are praiseworthy in every respect” (xv).

If Gench has a weakness, it is that in her relentless demonstration that every story has several very valid interpretations she sometimes falls into the either-or fallacy of reducing the possibilities to only two opposites. In most cases she rhetorically raises her hands in bewilderment and says, “Well, we have lots to think about!” But there are instances when she seems determined to see only two alternatives and wants to choose one. For example, she reviews the traditional interpretations of the Canaanite woman as a model of humility and submissiveness. She then urges reevaluation, citing F. Gerald Downing and Gail O’Day to argue that the woman is anything but submissive but is actually bold (that word

is used four times in one paragraph to describe the Canaanite), refusing to concede that the woman might be somewhere in the middle. Likewise, in her treatment of Martha and Mary, she engages in the debate over whether Mary, in sitting at the feet of Jesus, is passive or assertive. Is she crossing gender boundaries or reinscribing patriarchal practices? This is, of course, the decisive feminist dilemma of how to evaluate power itself, but it is also a failure to see the complexity of the lives of ancient women and our own. One action, of listening at Jesus' feet, is rarely completely submissive or completely assertive, participates in a myriad of simultaneous networks of expectations and motivations and may defy some norms at the very same time that it reinforces others.

Gench might have improved the book with a discussion of why she chose these particular stories and did not include, for example, a chapter on Mary the mother of Jesus. And I would have liked to see a concluding section that tied together many of the fine points she made in the separate chapters. But any criticisms of this book are minor and far outweighed by its accomplishments. Gench has produced an engaging, intelligent, extremely useful discussion of important scholarship on important stories.