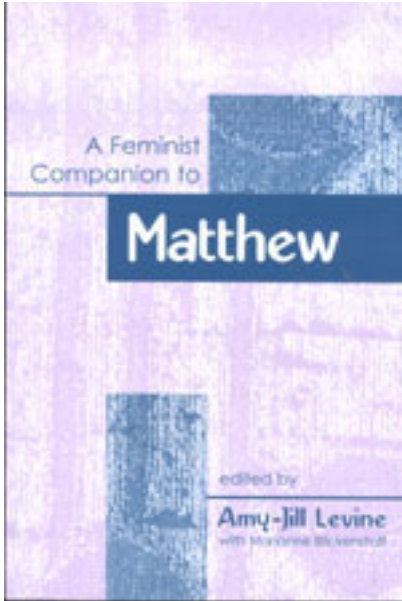


RBL 10/2006



Levine, Amy-Jill, ed., with Marianne Blickenstaff

A Feminist Companion to Matthew

Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004. Pp. 247. Paper. \$21.00. ISBN 0829815902.

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This book inaugurates a series of feminist companions anthologies, all under the editorship of Amy-Jill Levine, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion and director of the Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in Nashville, Tennessee. She has been assisted here by Marianne Blickenstaff, also at Vanderbilt Divinity School. In selecting contributors to the volume, Levine and Blickenstaff have avoided creating a lineup of “usual suspects” by selecting essays from an eclectic assortment of scholars: female and male, senior and junior, well-known and lesser-known. Some of the pieces have already been published elsewhere; others were commissioned specifically for this volume. Their authors employ a range of methodologies under the broad rubric “feminist,” including literary criticism (Capel Anderson), theology (Deutsch, O’Day), historical critical or sociohistorical approaches (Levine, Saldarini, Longstaff, Osiek) and form criticism (O’Day).

The first essay, “Matthew: Gender and Reading” by Janice Capel Anderson, sets the book’s tone. First published in 1983, this essay explores parallels between feminist biblical criticism and feminist literary criticism. She includes a review of their methodological starting points for approaching the Gospel as a whole, including reader-response criticism.

Women, she reminds us, have been forced to read as males (26). Capel Anderson's critical eye is trained on the symbolic significance of gender, as expressed through the language and structure of the Gospel. Overall, her essay is approachable and thoughtful, no less remarkable as a relatively early exercise in feminist theory that set a fine example for equally rigorous feminist scholarship still to come.

Julian Sheffield's "The Father in the Gospel of Matthew" surprises the reader with an examination of *male* language. Sheffield notes that Matthew consistently identifies God as "father" (52). Sheffield grounds Matthew's association of God as "father" in the structure of Matthew's community, which gave itself a special—and secret—status as God's children. This privileged relationship bespeaks a devaluation of earthly families, epitomized by Matthew's disassociation of Joseph as Jesus' father in the Matthean genealogy. This new kinship group, furthermore, retained a place for the mother and motherhood. But does this mean that women were more likely to have been valued in Matthew's community? More likely, Sheffield asserts, God's care for Matthew's community was seen to be "maternal" without a concomitant elevation of women's status generally (69).

"Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman," Amy-Jill Levine's contribution, turns the tables on the assumption of modern biblical exegetes that the hemorrhaging women of Matt 9:18–26 suffered from menstrual impurity. Whereas most readers have seen this pericope as an instance in which Jesus abrogated Jewish purity laws out of compassion for healing, Levine trolls Levitical and rabbinic materials to investigate the true nature of purity regulations at the time of Matthew's composition. She notes that Jews of the first century moved in and out of states of impurity daily, and therefore Jesus' ostensible "abrogation" of purity laws must be seen as a Christian overstatement of Jewish purity regulations. Furthermore, Levine queries our own scholarly assumptions about women. Why do we assume that the hemorrhaging woman was suffering from "female troubles" rather than bleeding from some other part of her body? And why have modern readers been so preoccupied with seeing a woman as "impure" when—given that seminal emissions rendered most men impure on a daily basis—no thought is ever given to Jesus touching or healing ritually impure men? Far from interpreting Matthew's Jesus as anti-Jewish, Levine notes that the woman touching the "fringe" of Jesus' robe makes it clear that, rather than rejecting Jewish laws, Jesus is wearing the garments appropriate to a devout Jewish male. Levine's constant questioning of dominant interpretations, her surprising inversions of those interpretations, and her lively prose full of double entendres make this essay one of most enjoyable in the volume.

Celia Deutsch's "Jesus as Wisdom: A Feminist Reading of Matthew's Wisdom Christology" demonstrates straightforwardly Matthew's identification of Lady Wisdom with a historical, if exalted, male figure (89). Matthew's wisdom language derives from a "male scribal group" (89; see also 94) either largely unconcerned with women or actively involved in their suppression (113). These scribes appropriated and mediated a female Wisdom for their community, eliminating feminine language and imagery but emphasizing Wisdom as teacher, now reformulated in the figure of Jesus. This essay presents a quick review of Wisdom imagery and language in the Hebrew Bible for those lacking the appropriate background, but in its source criticism alludes often to Q, which may limit its accessibility for students lacking a solid grasp of Q and its significance.

Gail O'Day's "Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," first published in 1989, is the volume's most explicitly theological piece. O'Day focuses on the Canaanite woman of Matt 15:21–28 as the true protagonist of the pericope. She employs form criticism to identify the Canaanite woman's words as a lament psalm, in style, form, and substance equivalent to Pss 86:16 and 109:26. By shifting the reader's attention from Jesus' actions to the woman's words, O'Day illustrates how "Matthew has shaped her words to reflect the traditional, candid speech of Jews before their God" (122). From this perspective, the Canaanite woman embodies Israel, becoming an ironic exemplar of faith in the guise of the humblest petitioner before God: a woman from the ranks of traditional Israel's enemies, the Canaanites.

The next two pieces, Elaine M. Wainwright's "Not without my Daughter: Gender and Demon Possession in Matthew 15:21–28" and Stephenson Humphries-Brooks's "The Canaanite Women in Matthew," are perhaps less successful essays, although for different reasons. Wainwright claims she will take an "anthropological" approach to the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (127; see also 130 and 132ff.), but fails to cite much anthropological literature or comparative anthropological material on illness and healing in the ancient world. What Wainwright calls "anthropology" is really fairly standard exegesis, with a good deal of attention paid to the language for healing employed within the text. Her final argument—that there is in Matt 15:21–28 a "correlation between demon possession and ethnicity rather than gender" (137)—remains unsupported by clear evidence. As for Humphries-Brooks's essay, two of the three Canaanite women he profiles here—Rahab (mentioned in Matthew's genealogy at 1:5a) and the Canaanite woman of 15:21–28—are already the focus of other essays in the book. Partly because of space constraints, he brings no new interesting "angle" to these women. This is particularly the case with the Canaanite woman, whose story has already been thoroughly explored by O'Day and Wainwright. He is more successful with his third and final analysis, of Herodias, who appears here for the first time in this volume. Nevertheless, his conclusions provide only a "negative finding"; he claims that these three stories "block

and fragment meaning” (155). It is far from clear that this was Matthew’s original intention; it leaves the reader with the sense that Humphries-Brooks merely gave up a search for meaning.

Anthony Saldarini’s contribution, “Absent Women in Matthew’s Household,” responds directly to the work of another contributor to the volume, Elaine Wainwright. Against Wainwright’s plea that we see real women standing within the Matthean community—even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the text—Saldarini questions their absence. “What has the author of Matthew done to conceal women and why?” he asks (158). Saldarini focuses on Matt 18–20, sections that deal explicitly with household rules and regulations; these are places where one might reasonably expect the text to address women as well as men. But women are curiously absent even from Matthew’s household codes. Instead, the least-empowered members of the household are children. Matthew advocates that power relations in the house must be overturned, so that grown men yield their positions of power and superiority to “become like little children.” Although this inversion of household roles may have played to women’s advantage, this intimation remains entirely occluded within the text of Matthew itself.

Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt’s “Got into the Party after All: Women’s Issues and the Five Foolish Virgins” deals with a parable exclusive to Matthew, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt 12:9–14). She begins by noting the problematic and thus marginalized nature of this parable that renders it difficult to employ in pastoral settings. But the parable appears in “visual exegeses” in Christian art, from Blake to the Magdeburg cathedral; Thomas Merton, too, uses the parable as the basis for a poem that Rosenblatt includes and ponders (178). This attention paid to visual and literary appropriations and interpretations brings a welcome new element to the volume; it is only too bad that Rosenblatt’s images she selected to accompany the article in its first publication (1993) could not be reproduced here.

The final two essays in this volume, Thomas R. W. Longstaff’s “What Are Those Women Doing at the Tomb of Jesus?” and Carolyn Osiek’s “The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?” both examine the end of Matthew’s Gospel (28:1–10). Longstaff’s hypothesis is simple: the women are there to fulfill a traditional Jewish duty, checking to make sure that the deceased is really dead. But Osiek’s article pushes Matthew’s account further, implicitly raising the question Longstaff fails to treat: Why does this task fall to women, particularly considering that biblical exegetes often point out that women in Jewish law could not act as legal witnesses (a fact that apparently obviates Longstaff’s central argument). Osiek suggests that the stories of women at the empty tomb may have derived from oral traditions circulated among women, similar to those we find reflected in the apocryphal Acts. She also suggests that perhaps the account of women as the first

witnesses is very old but was suppressed in some strands of tradition because of the widespread conviction that women could not be credible witnesses (218). It remained, however, because the memory of the women at the tomb, and the role they played, could not be entirely suppressed.

This volume's eclectic collection of essays ensures that a broad readership will find something useful here; the book could be assigned for upper-level undergraduates, seminary students, and graduate students. The volume dumbs nothing down; articles include words and short passages in untransliterated Greek and Hebrew and lots of charts and tables. Each essay has extensive footnotes to articles in English, German, and French; the volume includes a comprehensive bibliography. The only lamentable element of this book is the occasionally defensive tone of its editor in justifying the academic rigor of feminist scholarship in general. This defensiveness is natural but perhaps ironic, as women position themselves in relation to what has historically been a male-dominated, unconsciously androcentric field. One wishes that elaborate and insistent justifications for such a volume or such a series did not have to be made in the twenty-first century. The volume's academic rigor and integrity speaks for itself, and Levine is both a sophisticated, lively author and an adroit, thoughtful editor. She knows well that *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* is essential reading not only for feminist scholars of the New Testament but for anyone interested in critical theory and modern approaches to biblical text.