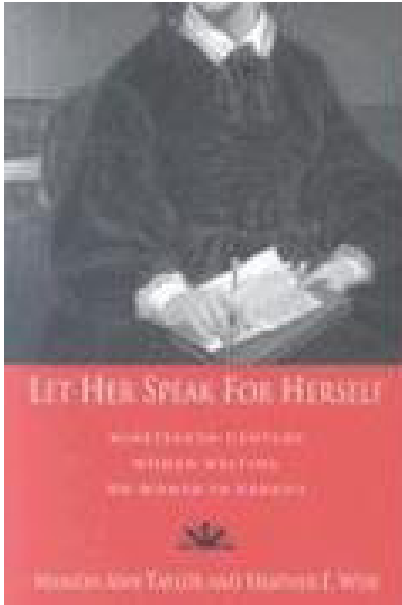


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Taylor, Marion Ann, and Heather E. Weir, eds.

Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis

Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 495. Paper. \$44.95. ISBN 1932792538.

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This is a unique and fascinating book. It takes a look at how nineteenth-century women interpreted the women in Genesis. That in itself is not remarkable, but Taylor and Weir succeed in turning the book into an intriguing reading experience. It seems that during the nineteenth century a significant number of English-speaking women wrote and published biblical interpretations. Unfortunately, until now, the works of these women interpreters were not considered important enough to be remembered and so were lost until Taylor and Weir undertook the mammoth task of recovering their voices to “let these women reenter time and speak for themselves” (1).

These writings are significant in that they shed light on women’s culture in the nineteenth century and the role women played in their communities. They contain information on the literary genres and lost exegetical traditions used by women, Jewish and Christian. Most interesting is the gendered exegesis done by these lay women, who subconsciously read the biblical text through women’s eyes. Their writings show the impact of changes in biblical studies due to the rise of historicism, evolution, travel, and archaeology in the nineteenth century (2). In order for us from the twenty-first century to interpret and understand their work, the obvious question of the context (social, religious, and cultural) of the authors needs to be taken into account.

In that regard, Taylor and Weir, the editors, were most helpful. In the introduction the reader is taken on a journey through the “world of women” in nineteenth-century Britain and America, since these contexts serve as aids in understanding their interpretations. The reader is brought in the picture before being confronted with the texts, which, the editors admit, can be an uneasy experience, seeing that “we cannot expect them to conform to modern assumptions” (17).

We are reminded that the nineteenth century was a patriarchal age and learn that the “cult of domesticity” and “true womanhood” were the center of most women’s lives as industrialization and urbanization forced their men to leave home. The cult of domesticity restricted women to their homes and their families in the private sphere. “True womanhood” held an elevated view of women’s piety, purity, and self-sacrifice, and most of the selected texts propagate these feminine features. Then the “woman question,” concerned with women’s rights, affected the way some women read the Bible. In the United States the issue of slavery was on the foreground, and it was obvious that the American interpreters supported the abolitionist cause. British women writers approached the text from a position of wealth, privilege, and status where household servants were not uncommon. They had access to archaeological finds in the British Museum, which gave them a better historical-cultural awareness of the Bible lands (2–10).

This information sensitizes the reader to approach texts deriving from a different world and age sympathetically. According to Taylor and Weir, it can also make us more aware of the way our context influences our interpretation (18).

The next 420 pages are devoted to the nineteenth-century interpretations of Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. Taylor and Weir provide introductions to each interpretation as well as background details for each writer. Very good summarizing analyses conclude the interpretations. The meticulously analyzed information in this book must be commended. Repetition is inevitable and forgiven.

Readings on Eve are diverse. Traditional readings emphasize women’s subordination at creation, her weakness and vulnerability to temptation, and her responsibility for “the fall.” But the nineteenth century was a time of tremendous change in the status of women, resulting in most interpreters attempting to give Eve another chance. Lucy Barton (1808–1898) writes for children: “Are there not many things in which you are as much to blame? Have you not often disobeyed the commands of your parents? Now, this is a temptation of Satan’s” (31). Hannah Crocker (1782–1847) believes that God, “who is ever wise in his dealings,” passed a more severe sentence on Eve. “She was reduced from a state of honorable equality to the most mortifying state of subjection. Heaven never intended she should be ruled with a rod” (27).

British and American women understood Sarah differently based on their cultural contexts. Jewish authors presented a very positive image of Sarah. They recast or omitted negative scenes involving Sarah, their first mother. British women read Sarah in the light of their own experiences as women of wealth and status. The Hagar incident is understood through the lens of their experience of possessing household servants. There is harshness in Sarah's treatment of Hagar. Frances King (1757–1821) is disturbed by Sarah's preparation of a meal for strangers. English ladies did not work in the kitchen. American women were at home in the kitchen, so they read Sarah's story in the light of the institution of slavery. Sarah is identified as the rich white mistress and Hagar as the oppressed black slave: she "carried her pretty black head high," Warner (1819–1885) wrote (254).

A final interesting point pertains to scenes in the women's stories that are ignored by these nineteenth-century women writers. Taylor and Weir point out that scenes involving sexuality, the rape of Dinah, and the affair between Reuben and Bilhah are simply disregarded. They were considered "unspeakable" acts. Cady Stanton (1815–1902), author of *The Woman's Bible*, excluded texts that upheld patriarchy. She wrote: "The texts on Lot's daughters and Tamar we omit altogether, an unworthy place in the 'Woman's Bible.'" The reason was that delicate women were supposed to be shocked when they encountered evil, not write about it. As the editors repeatedly remark: "Nineteenth-century women writing on the marginal female figures in Genesis revealed more about themselves and their world than they did about the women in Genesis" (441).

To conclude, while reading this book I realized yet again the importance and value of the history of interpretation. The book is a reminder that exegesis is a never-ending process of interpretation and reinterpretation. Past interpretations determine our present understanding; therefore, understanding and meaning can never be complete or final. The nineteenth-century champions in this book are about to deliver a contribution to this important process. This is an excellent book that deserves to be studied by scholars as well as students of women's studies, the history of biblical interpretation, and nineteenth-century cultural history.