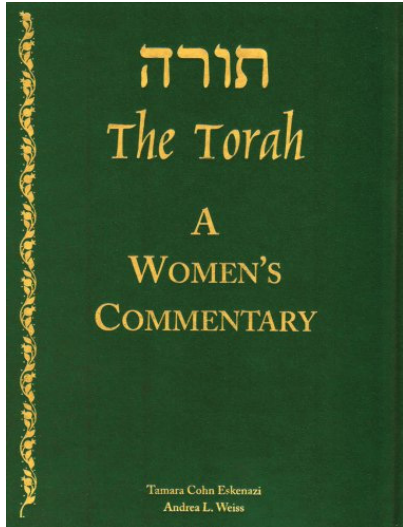


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Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn, and Andrea L. Weiss, eds.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

New York: URJ Press and Women of Reformed Judaism, 2008. Pp. lxiii + 1350. Hardcover. \$75.00. ISBN 0807410810.

Susanne Scholz
Perkins School of Theology
Dallas, Texas

This volume makes a historic contribution to the feminist study of the Pentateuch from across the spectrum of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox Judaism mainly located in the United States. No other volume brings biblical scholarship from Jewish women scholars, poets, and readers together in one volume as this one commissioned by the Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ). Certainly, other one-volume women commentaries were published before, such as *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe and written primarily from a Christian-Protestant academic perspective (Westminster John Knox, 1992). There is also *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (InterVarsity Press, 2002), a Protestant evangelical lay-reader-oriented publication, or the German and Christian academic *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998). They all stand in the tradition of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, originally published in 1895/1898 and grounded in a Protestant-U.S.-American perspective.

All of these publications are exegetically, theologically, and hermeneutically unique, and all of them are of historic significance because, for hundreds of years, women's interpretations have been ignored, marginalized, or even ridiculed by androcentric Christian and Jewish scholars, thinkers, and readers of the Bible. Eskenazi and Weiss's

publication is particularly momentous because no other commentary contains exclusively Jewish women's scholarly and intellectual work on the Torah. It is the first Chumash presented by and from Jewish women. This volume should thus be welcomed not only within the various Jewish traditions but also by secular academic and Christian communities, who have much to learn and appreciate from this book. The volume's foreword, written by the president of Women of Reform Judaism, Rosanne M. Selfon, and the volume's preface, written by cantor Sarah Sager, who proposed at the thirty-ninth Women of Reform Women Assembly in 1993 the creation of the present volume, illustrate the institutional and individual support this publication has received especially from the Reform tradition in terms of funding, time, and endorsements. The editorial board of the commentary includes feminist Jewish scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum, such as the late Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Carol Meyers, Ellen Umansky, and Judith Plaskow. This publication, then, is both an academic accomplishment and the result of Jewish women's grassroots efforts.

The actual commentary is preceded by several essays that introduce the volume and provide informational articles on "Women and Interpretation of the Torah," "Women in Ancient Israel," "Women and Post-biblical Commentary," "Women and Contemporary Revelation," and "The Poetry of Torah and the Torah of Poetry" (xxxii–lxiii). Written by the editors, an introduction article (xxxii–xxxv) provides detailed information on the rationale, origin, and purpose of *A Women's Commentary*. For instance, Eskenazi and Weiss disclose that three words ("contemporary," "Jewish," and "women") guided the conceptualization and development of the volume. *A Women's Commentary* is "contemporary" because it seeks to explore the Torah's contemporary meaning "by using both traditional tools and innovative approaches" (xxxii). The volume is "Jewish" because "it follows the centuries-old liturgical division of the Torah into 54 portions," "preserves a diversity of voices" similar to the Mikraot Gedolot, and includes "the full spectrum of the Jewish community" (xxxiii): Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox. The commentary highlights "women" because it is written by women "trained in various aspects of Bible and Jewish studies ... academics, rabbis, cantors, educators, and poets" and because the women's "commentaries show how women's experiences can shed light both on the text of the Torah and the *torah* of our lives" (xxxiii). In other words, the commentary stands in an explicitly feminist tradition, although participation seemed not to have required an explicit commitment to second- or third-wave feminism.

A Women's Commentary does not include male scholars because the editors did not want to include token male voices. They explain: "Even after much deliberation, we could not see a way of inviting male colleagues without having their voices be mere tokens. We concluded that this would not adequately represent men's scholarship, and also it would detract from giving women a full representation. Although we invited only women

contributors, we draw upon the work of all scholars—women and men, Jewish and non-Jewish—many of whom do not appear in these pages by name but who are indispensable to any study of the Torah” (xxxii). This explanation seems essentializing and to stand in opposition to postmodern feminist views on gender as a nonbinary and fluid category, but in light of the historio-cultural and religio-political context of this Bible commentary, the editorial decision has to be applauded. This is, after all, the very first Jewish commentary featuring exclusively women’s work and voices on the Torah. After more than two thousand years of Jewish commentary writing, it is about time for such a publication.

The commentary follows a cohesive structure. Each of the five biblical books is introduced with a short essay that describes the nature and content of each book and briefly explains major themes and characters. Subdivided by the traditional fifty-four Torah portions, or *parashot*, short introductions familiarize readers with the particularities of each *parashah*. For instance, the portion “Vayitzei 28:10–32:3” begins with an essay on “The Journey Within” by Rachel Havrelock in which she characterizes this portion as “the Torah’s greatest love story” (157) and then outlines the main story line and important characters, topics, and concepts relevant to this *parashah*.

After the introductory essay, each portion is interpreted within the following fivefold structure that adapts traditional and creative formats of Jewish commentary writing. First, the “Central Commentary” lays out the Hebrew text and its English translation (based on a modified inclusive version of the NJPS translation) on the top half of each page. An ongoing commentary appears on the lower half of each page and explains key phrases, words, and concepts. This commentary section is written by a Bible scholar who, according to the editors, elucidates the “plain sense of the text in its own cultural context as well as in ours” (xxxv). Second, a two-column and approximately one-page entry entitled “Another View” follows; it is designed to challenge one or several aspects of the “Central Commentary.” For instance, in the case of Vayitzei Tammi J. Schneider reflects on the problems related to the triangular relationship between Rachel, Leah, and Jacob and the sympathetic view of the divinity on Leah’s status as the unloved wife. Third, a selective description on “Post-biblical Interpretations” presents voices from the rabbinic teachings and classical commentaries. Fourth, a “Contemporary Reflection” that is written by “a scholar of contemporary Jewish thought and life, rabbi, cantor, or educator” (xxxv) discusses the meaning of the particular *parashah* for Jews today. For instance, on the portion about Gen 28:10–32:3, Wendy Zierler ponders the significance of Rachel’s stealing of the *t’rafim* and concludes that “Rachel ... emerges from this story as an archetypal feminist writer, who dares to steal across the border of masculine culture, seize control of her cultural inheritance, and make it her own. Understood this way, the theft of the *t’rafim* becomes a story about women’s potential to use and craft language, both holy

and mundane, in all of its many meanings, to speak potently—and cause others to listen” (179). Fifth, a final section, entitled “Voices,” offers poetry on various verses, characters, and themes on the *parashah* under consideration.

The genius of this structure is that it explores biblical meaning by a wide range of women’s and feminist voices. Countless exegetical observations, hermeneutical insights, and theological and feminist gems can be found on the texts of Genesis through Deuteronomy. One example shall illustrate the richness of this volume. Exodus 19 has always played a crucial role in Jewish thought, and this commentary is not an exception. Making gender an integral part of the interpretative process, the “Central Commentary” says this about Exod 19:8:

8. All the people. The presence of women in the *am* (“people”) is not explicitly indicated by the text. Other public occasions where the Law is read or covenants are made, expressly indicate the presence of women.... This is not the case at Sinai. However, since the event at Sinai represents the paradigmatic revelation to the Israelite nation, it seems unlikely that women would have been excluded. (413)

This observation is deepened in the section “Another View,” written by Diane M. Sharon, who explains that in Exod 19:10–13 God informs Moses that the people should sanctify themselves in preparation for the divine encounter. When Moses recounts the order from God, he, however, makes a critical change in the divine speech, instructing the people in verse 15 “not to go near a woman.” Sharon writes: “Feminists have wrestled with this disturbing verse and its implications. Does this formulation mean that Moses was only speaking to the men? Moses seems to have subverted God’s command to all the people by speaking only to half the Israelites” (421). Sharon then provides a solution to this problem when she observes that “Moses’ striking deviation from God’s command is troubling well beyond the feminist focus.” She suggests that this passage instructs every reader because of “Moses’ audacious transformation of God’s words ... to read, interpret, and find meaning in this *parashah* and its contradictions” (421). This passage “subverts omniscient external authority and hands authority to the readers. Hence, Sharon asserts that “we are all invited to grapple with revelation.”

The “Contemporary Reflection,” written by Judith Plaskow, heads into a similar direction. Plaskow explains: “Read from a feminist perspective, *Yitro* contains one of the most painful verses in the Torah.... Moses filters and interprets God’s commands through a patriarchal lens,” although God’s original instructions address the whole Israelite community (423). Plaskow informs that the ancient rabbis “have been disturbed by the implications of women’s absence from Sinai, because they read women into the

text in a variety of ways” (423–24). After providing several examples of the rabbinic efforts to include women at Sinai, Plaskow concludes that this *parashah* teaches the inseparability between revelation and interpretation. Text and history of interpretation demonstrate that the process of interpretation requires that this generation, too, develop biblical meaning based on current sensibilities and convictions. Thus Plaskow demands in a classic *kol va-homer* argument: “If women’s absence from Sinai is unthinkable to the Rabbis ... how much more must it be unthinkable to women and men today who function in communities in which women are full Jews” (424). In the section “Voices,” several poems articulate women’s interpretations of Exod 19 with creative liberty and strength. In this way, then, the various commentary sections contribute to a multifaceted and dialogical development of biblical meaning. In conclusion, *A Women’s Commentary* should be read and consulted by anyone involved in the study of the Hebrew Bible, whether Jew or Christian, male or female, gay or straight or transgender, expert or lay interpreter. This commentary enriches us all even when we disagree here and there about the biblical meaning established. But this is only going to make for a better conversation.