Schaberg, Jane, Esther Fuchs, and Alice Bach, eds.

On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza


This volume is one of three Festschriften in honor of and presented to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on the occasion of her sixty-fifth birthday in the year 2003. The mere fact that a body of sixty-five contributors felt compelled to engage aspects of her critical theory and extend their gratitude to this groundbreaking scholar speaks for itself. Each volume with its authors and specific focal theme zooms in on one of the arenas in which Schüssler Fiorenza has contested and made key contributions.

Whereas Walk in the Ways of Wisdom, with its focus on feminist theology but also on theology in general, represents, so to speak, the house-Festschrift offered by former and current colleagues and doctoral students at Harvard Divinity School, and Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth, with its focus on feminist and liberation theology, brings together a more international group of authors, many of whom come from or live in third-world countries, On the Cutting Edge has feminist biblical criticism as its focal theme.

and draws exclusively on female American and international feminist scholarship, with a high participation of Jewish scholars.

The editors’ preface contains general information on the authors’ indebtedness to Schüssler Fiorenza, together with an appraisal of her body of work and her personal engagement in biblical, feminist, and ecumenical studies, in both institutional structures and revitalization movements worldwide. Additionally, the preface offers a rough grouping—yet no summary—of the essays (viii), which unfortunately does not correspond to the table of contents. The book ends with a list of contributors. Neither an index of sources nor an index of modern authors is offered. For a bibliography of the writings of Schüssler Fiorenza, one will have to consult Walk in the Ways of Wisdom (371–85); for an in-depth interview with her, Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth (1–30).

In the first essay, “Points of Resonance,” Esther Fuchs (editor) focuses on a few themes in Schüssler Fiorenza’s work as specific points of resonance for her. They revolve around the making of a biblical feminist historiography, the reconstruction of biblical women’s history, the hermeneutics of suspicion, the problem of “malestream” scholarship, the problem of anti-Judaism in feminist theological work, and the position of the “foreigner” as exegetical standpoint.

In “Women’s Altars: Lived Religion from Now to Then,” Alice Bach (editor) ponders popular religion by applying a scheme of lived religion. She looks at women’s altars and shrines as images of visual piety that reflect women’s culture, with its domestic locus and fragmented use of everyday objects. By looking at altars of the day of the dead, Vodou altars, and New York City inasmuch as it became an altar with 9/11, one may see in both the traditional and spontaneous instances that religious imagery anchors everyday life to reliable religious routines in the home and provides historical traces of the worlds these images helped to construct.

In “The Ekklêsia of Women and/as Utopian Space: Locating the Work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in Feminist Utopian Thought,” Elizabeth A. Castelli deals with one of Schüssler Fiorenza’s central topoi, the ekklêsia of wo/men. It serves as a multivalent category for describing a sociopolitical communal formation in the past and present and a critical idea whose full liberatory potential remains as yet unrealized. Because of the “already but not yet” quality of this category, it resonates with important aspects of utopian thinking. This invites Castelli to situate Schüssler Fiorenza’s work within the strong, historically varied, utopian strands of (especially nineteenth- and twentieth-century) European and North American feminist thought. She considers feminist
utopianisms, looks at the *ekklêsia* of women as past and as process, and reflects the heritage of Schüssler Fiorenza’s work and the *ekklêsia* of women as utopian space.

In “Trailblazers: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and George M. Soares-Prabhu,” Pushpa Joseph compares Schüssler Fiorenza with the Indian biblical scholar George M. Soares-Prabhu. She presents four important ideas of theirs: their notions of the biblical poor, their specific hermeneutical methodologies, their dialogical hermeneutics, and their understanding of liberation. She then specifies the areas of convergence and also the divergent aspects of the methodologies of these two scholars. She concludes that, if Soares-Prabhu has given a radical and wholesome definition of transformation as change of hearts and change of structures, Schüssler Fiorenza has generated the method to achieve this vision.

In “Some Reflections on Violence against Women and the Image of the Hebrew God: The Prophetic Books Revisited,” Athalya Brenner wrestles with issues of violence within the “marriage metaphor” in passages such as Jer 2–5; Ezek 16; 23; Isa 47; Nah 3; and Mal 2. She considers the following questions: (1) What is the meaning of “marriage”? (2) How do we understand “metaphor”? (3) Why is the component of violent and pornographic images absent in commentaries? (4) What is the nature of the partners? (5) What are the implications of the metaphor for the Hebrew Bible? And finally, (6) what memories, what cultural constellation, could have created or advanced such descriptions? She concludes with a sharp rejection of the violent description of YHWH as a professional soldier and dissatisfied husband who tortures his “wife,” and she does so on general humanistic-ethical as well as theological grounds.

In “Paul and Pharisee Women,” Tal Ilan is concerned with the historical reconstruction of women. She contributes to Schüssler Fiorenza’s project of feminist renewal by demonstrating how a rather conventional reading of Jewish sources indeed confirms the suspicion that women were members of the Pharisee movement. Even more so, she convincingly illustrates that they participated in the activities of the Pharisaic table fellowships, the *havurot*. She does so by examining a corpus of data from rabbinic literature hitherto not discussed by feminist scholars (*t. Damai* 2). She then compares this data with material found in 1 Cor 7 and shows the influence of one corpus on the other.

In “The Women ‘Priests’ of Philo’s *De Vita Contemplativa*: Reconstructing the Therapeutae,” Joan E. Taylor deals with women’s self-understanding. By freeing the women of the so-called Therapeutae from androcentric rhetoric, she detects an egalitarian model, which she does not perceive as exceptional. Rather, she expects many other such paradigms within Judaism, Christianity, Greco-Roman religions, and other ancient cults.
and philosophies. Yet this optic requires the renunciation of anti-Jewish concepts that contrast an overarching patriarchal Judaism with a less patriarchal Christianity.

In “The Happy Holy Family in the Jesus Film Genre,” Adele Reinhartz looks at the depictions of Jesus’ family relationships in film. She concentrates primarily on the cinematic expansions of and additions to the texts about Jesus and his family in the canonical Gospels and Acts. Most of the family-related expansions in the Jesus films express a theme that might be called “The Happy Holy Family,” in which emphasis is on the love and harmony among Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. This needs to be distinguished from depictions of the adult Jesus where his relationship to his mother becomes central. She argues that these additions serve two functions. One is to resolve the tensions inherent in the canonical accounts. The second is to convey, indirectly and implicitly, the filmmakers’ Christologies, that is, their understanding of Jesus as the Messiah whose nature is both human and divine. Fundamental to both of these functions is a set of commonplace assumptions regarding family life, human development, and social relationships.

In “Wisdom’s Deviant Ways,” Tina Pippin pushes Schüssler Fiorenza’s theory on deviant behavior in the story of the “wo/men anointing Jesus” further. Rather then being a reconstructionist, making meaning in communities of wo/men within a framework of socioliterary and historical-critical methods, she applies a postmodern reading. Pippin deconstructs structures such as faith, etymologies, Roman society, and authorship and spins off into different territories across the centuries and cultures, seeing this as another step in the dance/s.

In “Boundary Transgression and the Extreme Point in Acts 10:1–11:18,” Ute E. Eisen applies a narrative reading. Out of the plethora of narrative-theoretical questions, she works with the central concept of the “events.” After presenting the theory of boundary transgressions suggested by the Estonian literary and cultural semiotician Jurij M. Lotman, and its further development in the “extreme points” by Karl N. Renner, she then applies this method to the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1–11:18.

In “Slavery and Gender,” Sheila Briggs considers the emancipatory interpretation of the baptismal formula in Gal 3:28 in the context of slavery and gender. She concludes that not all early Christian women, slaves, and other subordinated persons would have adopted an emancipatory and egalitarian interpretation of the baptismal formula. Many would have clung to the relative “privilege” afforded them by their status in the patriarchal household as freeborn wife or well-placed slave. Yet the patriarchal household’s victory was never complete. One enactment of the baptismal formula is to be found in the story of Thecla, who refused marriage. Women continued to resist the
patriarchal household, defying its prescriptions on female behavior, which distinguished between honorable free women and those who could be dishonored like slaves.

In “Magdalene Christianity,” Jane Schaberg (editor) deals with wo/men’s leadership. Even if one may not be able to locate its center(s) or identify all its leaders, one can imagine what she calls Magdalene Christianity, a movement or set of movements that continued from the first century to the fourth and beyond. In using the name of Mary Magdalene, which appears in the canon only in the Gospels, she names something that was unnamed and associates it with the testimony of this specific woman, a testimony understood as central to the resurrection faith and firmly rooted in Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions.

In “Rising Voices: The Resurrection Witness of New Testament Non-writers,” Antoinette Clark Wire too explores resurrection witnesses. She first looks at the various stories of Jesus’ rising from the dead. Then she considers the early women’s witness to Jesus’ resurrection and, finally, the resurrection witness of Christian women prophets in Corinth twenty years later. In each case she indicates how one hears their voices through the writings of others and what kind of claims they are making.

In the final essay, “Jephthah’s Daughter: A Lament,” Alicia Ostriker, poet and critic, presents the material in Judg 11 as a lament-libretto that is intended to offer women an opportunity to grieve the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter and to ponder the meaning of her sacrifice in a ceremony. Ostriker invites groups of women to experiment with her text, which may be read or performed in total or in part. With that she pays tribute to Schüssler Fiorenza in three ways: (1) her example of scrupulous reading of biblical texts, reading that always requires that one pay attention to its use of power and powerlessness; (2) Schüssler Fiorenza’s naming the principle in every form of religious (and intellectual) orthodoxy as “kyriarchy”; and (3) most important to her, she is inspired by her concept of the sacred collective creativity of women-church, where women turn from pain and rage to a vision of strength and hope that is biblically based.

This Festschrift may first and foremost be of interest to those students and teachers who are on the one hand concerned with the reception of Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical theory and on the other hand with feminist biblical criticism. I especially enjoyed reading the essays of Castelli, Brenner, and Reinhartz. Those who have come to appreciate that Schüssler Fiorenza’s approach generates creativity will be particularly impressed by the final contribution of Ostriker. One can only hope that this kind of pathos may revitalize exegesis that so often has become stale.