Christiana de Groot and Marion Ann Taylor have put together a collection of women’s voices about the Bible in the late eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Or, to be more precise, they have assembled a collection of mainly British women’s voices, with a couple of American voices.

Those women were well educated, at times with a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, mainly from middle-class families, some of whose male members (husbands, brothers, fathers) were pastors, mostly Protestant. Therefore, whether married or mothers or not, they were devout and interested in the education of women according to what they understood as biblical norms and models—with the exception of Annie Besant (201–15). These sociopersonal contexts and circumstances largely dictated their interpretive work. Several of them were active in social reform in matters concerning women, and some can be examined for nascent, or proto-, feminism.

The book is arranged chronologically in that the interpreters and their work are introduced in order of their birth dates. Thus we read about Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810), Mary Cornwallis (1758–1836), Sarah Ewing Hall (1761–1830), Catherine McAuley (1778–1841), Mary Anne SchimmelPenninck (1778–1856), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896),
Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), Josephine Butler (1828–1907), Elizabeth Rundle Charles (1828–1896), Christina Rossetti (1830–1894), Elizabeth Wordsworth (1840–1932), Annie Besant (1847–1933), and Etty Woosnam (1842–1883). The authors writing about these women are also women, apart from one male contributor, and mostly Canadian: as the editors state in their introduction, the articles were first presented as papers in annual meetings of the Canadian Society for Biblical Studies since 2003. The editors’ work, de Groot and Taylor’s, is in fact the best represented in the volume: apart from the introduction, two articles by de Groot and three by Taylor. Other contributors are H. E. Weir, B. P. Lee, E. M. Davies, L. M. Wray Beal, A. W. Benckhuysen (two essays), R. G. S. Idelstrom, and D. Kerfoot. A list of contributors, index of ancient sources, and index of authors (each article has its own bibliography) are supplied.

The project is, of course, welcome and worthwhile. To bring women who wrote biblical interpretation “out of the shadows” is important not only for her-story but also for the history of Bible reception in general. That each article seriously engages the life and social context of the woman interpreter unifies the collection and makes it cohesive as such, with a good structure and historical understanding. In these senses, the book’s aim is certainly achieved: a certain gap is filled.

And yet, I ask myself, as a reader, am I drawn into learning more about these women who read the Bible, commented upon it, used it for education or reform in this or another way? Does this volume whet my curiosity into reading the “what” beyond reading the “about”? Here my answer is less enthusiastic. I would like to learn more about those women who are better known for their cultural contribution other than their engagement with the Bible, such as Nightingale, Beecher Stowe, and Rossetti. The other interpreters, the less-known ones, excite my imagination less—perhaps because their work tends to be so prescriptive and moralistic, firmly colored by their class and location and Christian concerns that its value to “outsiders” must perforce be limited. This is, in fact, hinted at by several contributors. They are well aware that the interpreters may not have been revolutionary scholars.

The commentators’ lasting worth is not the scholarly value of their work, in most cases. The reasons for foregrounding them are different. They dared to be Bible scholars and educators—and some even dared to claim the Bible for social reform—when such a pursuit was largely unavailable to women. It began to be available in their time, but only for certain women of certain contexts. These women seized the possibility. In this connection, Elizabeth Wordsworth’s work is perhaps the most transparently indicative. She was the first principal of Lady Margaret’s Hall, Oxford’s residential hall for women, and was eventually involved in the decision to let women study for a regular degree. In
addition, she taught Bible. So, by seizing the possibility, these women belong to those who opened the way for us—and this, indeed, is no small matter.