Richard Hiers holds the distinction of being both a long-time professor of religion as well as an affiliate professor of law and member of the Florida Bar. His recent book *Women’s Rights and the Bible* is a product of these two interests.

*Women’s Rights and the Bible* consists of two parts: In the first section, “Perspectives on Women in Old Testament Times,” Hiers offers a bird’s eye view of the Old Testament narratives that have women as main characters, including chapters on the “So-Called Patriarchs and Their Wives” (3–8); “Other Stories about Biblical Husbands and Wives” (9–14), including reference to David’s wives, Abigail, Michal, and Bathsheba, in addition to Jezebel and the narrative of Tobias and Anna; “Other Biblical Women of Recognized Status or Importance” (15–21), which includes women such as Deborah, Delilah, and the queen of Sheba; “Women in Books of the Bible Named for Women” (22–27), which focuses on Esther, Ruth and the deuterocanonical characters Judith and Susannah; and “Perspectives on Women in other Biblical Traditions” (28–44), which structures the material thematically by focusing on mothers, wives, daughters, widows, and “loose women” of the Old Testament.
The second part of the book is, in my mind, the most interesting, focusing as it does on “The Rights and Legal Status of Women in Biblical Law.” In this section Hiers includes chapters on “Women’s Rights (45–49); “Equal Protection” (50–55); “Capacity to Appear and Testify in Court” (56–59); “Capacity to Make Contracts and to Purchase, Own, and Sell Property” (63–67); “Women as Beneficiaries of Wills and Donors of Estates,” (68–70); and “Women as Heirs to Property by Operation of Law” (71–80), in which Hiers shows instances of women in the Old Testament having a recognized legal capacity equal to those enjoyed by men. After giving a summary of his findings in chapter 12 (81–84), Hiers in a final chapter reflects on the implications of his findings for Christian ethics and social policy (85–94).

Hiers makes a number of bold claims in his book. For instance, he challenges the view propagated by many conservative Christians that the Bible calls for women to be subservient to men. In the process he takes on feminist scholars who argue that “women [in biblical times] were considered inferior and subordinate to men” (xxx). His argument is that many texts in the Old Testament portray “women positively as strong independent persons, as well as the numerous biblical laws that recognize women’s legal rights” (xxxii). According to Hiers, the view that women should be submissive to their husbands as found in a number of “Pauline, Deutero-Pauline, Pseudo-Pauline and Post-Pauline” New Testament texts cannot be traced back to the Old Testament but rather stem from the Greco-Roman culture of the time (xxx).

The basic presupposition of Hiers’s study is that the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, cannot be used today to tell women to be submissive to their husbands—a point of view that many feminist scholars would also share.

Now, it would be nice if Hiers’s unequivocally positive portrayal of women in the Old Testament were true. I certainly agree with his desire to challenge the use of biblical texts to keep women in their place or to argue for male superiority. However, when one reads through the, as the back page says, “hundreds of biblical texts” that Hiers includes, “allow[ing them] to speak for themselves,” one is left with only half the story. In many of the very cursory treatments of the women in the Old Testament, Hiers only presents selected evidence that obscures the full (complex) reality of these stories.

For instance, Hiers portrays Sarah as not being subservient to her husband Abraham. He focuses, however, solely on Sarah’s portrayal in Gen 16 and 21, in which Sarah is depicted as commanding her husband to cast out her slave Hagar. He fails to include the story of Sarah being given by her husband to the pharaoh in Gen 12 (see also the repetition of this narrative in Gen 20), which shows a very different picture of a husband’s power over his wife that is rightly called the “endangering of the ancestress” narrative. One could also ask
where Sarah was when God told Abraham to sacrifice their long-awaited son. Some rabbinic interpreters actually described the potential effect on Sarah when they link Sarah’s death several chapters later with Sarah dying of shock after the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22 (see Phyllis Trible’s article on “Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah”). With reference to Bathsheba, Hiers focuses only on the second part of Bathsheba’s story where she emerges as the assertive queen mother who arranges for her son Solomon to be king instead of Adonijah (1 Kgs 1). He skims over the account in 2 Sam 11, which has been viewed by some scholars as “the rape of Bathsheba” if one considers the forceful language used to describe Bathsheba being taken by King David and being “laid.” It is difficult to see how this side of Bathsheba’s and Sarah’s narratives concur with Hiers’s statement that Old Testament women were strong and independent in nature.

The same could be said with reference to the cryptic treatment of Ruth, which as some scholars have shown raises all sorts of issues regarding the implication that a woman’s salvation only is situated in her marrying a rich Prince Charming (see, e.g., Katharine Sakenfeld’s treatment of Ruth in *Just Wives*) or the fact that Ruth disappears at the end of the story, giving up her Moabite identity to be fully assimilated into the Israelite community (Laura Donaldson’s “The Sign of Orpah”).

In this regard I miss quite a few of the feminist biblical interpreters who have persuasively written about these stories showing a complex, multifaceted picture of these female characters and the patriarchal situation in which they found themselves. There never was, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has pointed out in *In Memory of Her*, “a golden age of matriarchy,” but rather she and other feminist biblical scholars after her seek to recover the glimmers of female resistance in the midst of a patriarchal society depicted in the biblical account.

The strongest part of Hiers’s book is his exposition on the legal capacity of the women in the Old Testament. Using his legal expertise as a hemeneutical lens, he shows instances in the Old Testament in which women had the capacity to appear in court, make contracts, and own, buy, and sell property. In my mind, Hiers is standing here on more solid ground, even though as scholars such as Carolyn Pressler and Cheryl Anderson (who is missing from the bibliography) have pointed out, the presence of women in the legal codes should also be read in terms of a hermeneutic of suspicion.

In Hiers’s final chapter he helpfully points to the gains that have been made in terms of the status of women and women’s legal rights in the last hundred years in the United States. Nevertheless, he notes that, despite these gains, gender-based discrimination still goes on, citing the example of numerous universities currently under investigation for Title IX violations, including sexual harassment and sexual assault. He also notes how,
even though increasing numbers of women are entering professions such as law and medicine or becoming CEOs in the business world, there has not yet been a female president of the United States nor a female Supreme Court Chief Justice, Harvard University president, priest in some church denominations, or definitely a pope.

Moreover, despite the gains made in society with respect to gender equality, there gender injustice continues to exist, as is evident in the high incidence of gender-based violence, which attests to the fact that at least certain members of society fail to respect women’s human dignity. However, I wonder whether the solution for this continued denial of the rights and dignity of women is to hold up a picture of women in the Old Testament that is one-sidedly and glowingly positive. The Old Testament writers certainly were not feminists, and it may be somewhat of an overstatement to say that “the Old Testament’s portrait gallery of strong-minded and self-assertive wives might encourage and empower latter-day views who yearn to pursue their own paths toward authentic selfhood, mutual appreciation and respect” (87). A more realistic appraisal of the Old Testament witness that includes both its “texts of terror” and glimmers of female resistance may perhaps speak better to many contemporary contexts where women and men are fighting for a more just world in the midst of a world where the reality is far from the ideal according to which both male and female are equal members created in the image of God.