

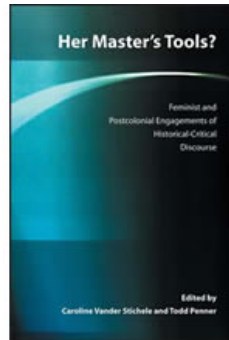
○ REVIEW OF CAROLINE VANDER STICHELE AND TODD PENNER'S *HER MASTER'S TOOLS?*

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Jennifer Bird reviews *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, edited by Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005. 390 pp.).



A bit over half of the chapters in this volume are edited papers from the ‘Whence and Whither? Methodology and the Future of Biblical Studies’ units at the 2002 and 2003 International Society of Biblical Literature Meetings. The forum was intended to engage traditional historical-critical discourses from various feminist perspectives and gradually expanded, including post-colonial and gender-critical approaches as well. The intent was to create a ‘springboard’ for further conversation and boundary-pushing within the field of biblical studies. The response to Hector Alvarez’s RBL editorial on the purpose(lessness) of the Bible and thus for the further study of it signifies the importance and relevance, for all biblical scholars, of the discussion regarding the ‘ends’ of biblical studies. This volume creates such a dialogue within itself, due to the various perspectives it includes, and highlights with fine entries all around many of the significant issues related to the ‘whither’ of biblical studies. In addition to those discussed in this review, the contributors include: Hjamil A. Martinez-Vázquez and John Marshall engaging postcolonial methods; Kristin De Troyer and Ann Graham Brock engaging feminist and text/redaction critical methods; Judith E. McKinlay, Madipoane Masenya (ngwana’ Mphahlele), Archie Chi Chung Lee, and Joseph Marchal analyzing the non-voices and disregarded presences in specific texts; ‘Paul and the Rhetoric of Gender,’ by Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Roland Boer with a Marxist interpretation of Ezra-Nehemiah and Jorunn Økland analysing gendered space in Revelation.

Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (‘Mastering the tools or retooling the masters? The legacy of historical-critical discourse’) open the book, and set the stage for the next six chapters dealing with methodological and systemic concerns, by outlining the fundamental issues associated with the developing changes within both the methods and ideologies that have been applied, consciously or not, within biblical studies. VS and P show the ways in which the masters’

tools have been re-appropriated, thus maintaining some form of continuity with traditional scholarship, while attempting to create new systems, structures (a new house or something different altogether?), knowledge and kinds of discourse. Given what has come before, and the state of the field now, what are the next steps and who gets to have an authoritative voice in the process?

The paired chapters, 'Historical-critical approaches and the emancipation of women: unfulfilled promises and remaining possibilities,' by Hanna Stenström and "'Tandoori Reindeer" and the limitations of historical criticism,' by Suzanne Scholz while seeing either the liberative potential or limiting confines of an historical-critical approach, both highlight the need to be able to question the status quo and reflect one's own experience and location in interpretation. Yet even this premise, which I wholeheartedly affirm and advocate, does not do more than bring in new furniture to the pre-existing house. While I respect Scholz's push for cultural adaptation in interpretive methods and allowing these texts to be sacred for those who need them to be, I am concerned that problematising the content and use of the bible, which has been employed to justify multiple waves of domination and colonisation around the world, does not seem to be a part of the new method Scholz proposes. In addition, a focus on individualised interpretations has contributed to a disconnect between biblical studies and current social, political and economic issues. The former is what I see her method doing though the latter is something she wishes to avoid. HmMMM.

Another pair of chapters, Vernon K. Robbins's 'The rhetorical full-turn in biblical interpretation and its relevance for feminist hermeneutics', and Priscilla Geisterfer's 'Full turns and half turns: Engaging the dialogue/dance between Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Vernon Robbins', presents a powerful example as to why 'rebuilding' with the master's tools just is not enough. As a feminist biblical scholar in the making, I welcome Robbins's challenge to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in particular, and other feminist biblical scholars indirectly, to be mindful of not creating a new hegemonic method and singular space from which biblical interpretation must be done if it is to be liberative and life-giving. His point is well noted but his passionate response to being critiqued is quite telling. In his chapter that seems to indicate why his work is not collusionary with mainstream scholarship, as charged by Schüssler Fiorenza, I am afraid that Robbins shows that he has not fully grasped the concepts of kyriarchy, *ekklesia* of wo/men, and mainstream interpretation, for example. Perhaps the misunderstanding has run in both directions. But the form and content of Robbins's plea indicates that he understands neither the depth to which this feminist critical approach reaches nor the expanse of socio-cultural dimensions it can and does include. As Geisterfer notes, both scholars are responding to something oppressive they have seen and experienced within biblical studies writ large. But at the end of the day, they are seeking *very* different things: Robbins – the respect and transrelationality of multiple voices and perspectives; Schüssler Fiorenza – the altogether new space that engenders critiques and new interpretations that counter the systemic domination and oppression of traditional biblical studies, which will *then* allow for liberation and full self-representation of all voices. These two chapters reflect the 'stay and rebuild/remodel' and the 'start anew' perspectives on this issue, and having them directly in conversation is quite powerful and unsettling.

'The history of women in Ancient Israel: Theory, method, and the book of Ruth,' by Esther Fuchs is a fantastically poignant exposition and critique of the 'state of' feminist historical-critical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. She clearly explains why we should 'reconsider biblical histor-

ical criticism as... a hermeneutical theory' (230), instead of as an objectivist means for (re)constructing the history of ancient Israel. The deeper issue that biblical texts written by or featuring women are not necessarily non-androcentric/non-patriarchal taps into another important discussion regarding what it is that 'we' – as multi-generational, -racial, -religious, -ideological 'female' and/or feminist scholars – are seeking in our pursuits that engage the biblical texts. Is the goal to have 'female' voices in the realm of biblical scholarship? Or is it to create something new: a new space, new paradigms of methods, new understandings of the purposes of these texts, and so on? Those who do not critique the text or the history of interpretation but simply offer a 'female perspective' (whatever that is) on these texts are colluding with the patriarchal (and kyriarchal) ideologies embedded within the texts. The connection between these two conversations – the difference women should make in this guild and where the guild is headed – is resoundingly clear. Fuchs's article is an important one for this conversation about the whither of biblical studies.

Athalya Brenner closes the volume ('Epilogue: Babies and Bathwater on the Road') with a well-qualified critique of the mostly Western (post) Christian focus of this volume, which I think is not due to shortsightedness on the editors' parts, as she notes, but is a symptom of the state of biblical studies in general... which leads me to the following questions. For whom is the state or direction of 'biblical studies' even a relevant concern? Which traditions are assumed to be a part of 'biblical studies' for this conversation (never mind the variations within each): Catholic, Orthodox Jew, Protestant, Atheist...? Is it a coincidence that it is the Christian church, its texts and interpretations thereof that have significantly influenced the western world and its colonies and that the people engaged in this conversation are primarily *of/from/related* to the Christian tradition *and its effects*? To what extent has the rise to power of a Jesus-believin' good ol' boy as 'leader of the free world' affected the urgency of this conversation? I am delighted that this book provokes such questions and does not feign to answer them.

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