

L. Juliana M. Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp, eds., *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*.

London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017

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This book is a collection of essays by an international group of feminist scholars of the Hebrew Bible. The chapters engage a variety of hermeneutics, all of them attuned to the concerns of women and other marginalized readers. Each author discusses her social location and how it affects her reading of a biblical story. The volume grew out of a 2015 conference at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, where Claassens teaches, held in conjunction with her inaugural address there. According to the book's introduction, participants were asked "first, to reflect theoretically on their definition of feminism and how it relates to the various intersections at which they read the Hebrew Bible and, second, to choose one Hebrew Bible text to illustrate the framework/prism/optic that governs their interpretive practices" (2). The book includes additional contributors who were not at the conference.

The editors highlight their contributors' regional diversity—there are contributors from the United States, Germany, New Zealand, Botswana, Nigeria, and South Africa—as well as their generational diversity. Claassens and Sharp maintain that, among the contributors, "there is general agreement in terms of key themes and core values that are important for feminist biblical scholars everywhere, such as justice, peace, equality, inclusion, reconciliation, and transformation. These are values and themes that bind us together, even though we might still be divided as to the details or the definitions of what is meant by justice, inclusion, or transformation" (3).

Katherine Doob Sakenfeld provides a retrospective essay, "Feminist Biblical Interpretation: How Far Have We Come?" She discusses the roots of feminist criticism and her journey studying the Bible from a feminist perspective. Sakenfeld highlights newer trends in feminist biblical scholarship, most relevantly the tendency for authors to consider their own experiences and contexts alongside questions about a text's meanings.

The next section of the volume is called "Celebrating Intersectionality" and contains four essays. The first, by Claassens, is "An Abigail Optic: Agency, Resistance, and Discernment in 1 Samuel 25." Claassens uses "multiple, intersecting reading lenses," particularly her experiences studying and teaching in European, American, and South African contexts, to discuss contemporary resonances of Abigail's story. She invokes critical theory in these discussions; for example, Judith Butler on resisting violence. Abigail transcends the violence of her world by making peace and providing food, Claassens writes.

The second essay in this section is Musa W. Dube's "Dinah (Genesis 34) at the Contact Zone: 'Should Our Sister Become a Whore?'" Dube begins the chapter by recounting the story of a South African rape case from 1850, where at first the offender is condemned to death but is later spared when the judge learns the victim

is not white but “colored.” Dube uses this tale of rape in the “contact zone” between colonizers and colonized to explore the rape of Dinah by Shechem. Dube writes that the context here is the Israelites’ imperialist dreams for the land, in which the indigenous peoples of the land are constructed negatively, with uncontrolled sexual appetites and an inappropriate desire for Israelite women. When these indigenous, prospective colonized people propose “long-term relations of mutual interdependence that threatened to put the colonized and the colonizer in a relationship of equality,” they are killed (54).

Next is “Jezebel and the Feminine Divine in Feminist Postcolonial Focus,” by Judith E. McKinlay, which asks why Jezebel is so thoroughly “othered” by the biblical text. McKinlay links Jezebel’s extremely negative portrayal to anxieties about the worship of Asherah alongside YHWH. McKinlay invokes her identity as a white New Zealander and engages with the work of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha to make comparisons to Christian missionaries’ efforts to erase Māori devotion to the earth mother Papatūānuku. McKinlay ends with intriguing questions, noting her use of the first-person “I” and her inclusion of an imagined, fictional statement by Jezebel: for whom should feminist scholars write, and, so, asking if it is permissible for the Other to write “Otherwise”?

The last essay in this section is Christl M. Maier’s “The ‘Foreign’ Women in Ezra-Nehemiah: Intersectional Perspectives on Ethnicity,” also makes use of Bhabha’s work. Maier explains that the polemic against intermarriage in Ezra and Nehemiah stems from an effort to establish Yehud as an autonomous entity united by religion, politics, and ethnicity. She argues that the authors tried to draw clear boundaries between groups precisely because such boundaries were porous. She suggests that the authors may have been mimicking their Persian colonizers in pushing for a homogenous, ethnically defined population.

The next section of the book, “Interrogating Power,” begins with Marie-Theres Wacker’s reflection on reading Esther in Germany, “The Violence of Power and the Power of Violence: Hybrid, Contextual Perspectives on the Book of Esther.” She writes that Haman’s assertion that the Jews in Persia follow only their own laws reflects persistent conspiracy theories about Jews, and that his proposal to fill the king’s coffers in exchange for permission to eliminate the Jews recalls Nazi confiscation of Jewish property.

The second essay in this section is Charlene van der Walt’s “‘Is There a Man Here?’ The Iron Fist in the Velvet Glove in Judges 4,” which compares the story of Jael’s assassination of Sisera to South African activist Winnie Madikizela-Mandela as presented in the film *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. The film, van der Walt writes, argues that Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment during the fight against apartheid protects him from the worst excesses of the movement, while his then-wife Winnie becomes more militant. Both Jael and Winnie, in their efforts to resist violence, end up committing it.

The third and last essay in the “Interrogating Power” section is Funlola Olojede’s essay “Miriam and Moses’s Cushite Wife: Sisterhood in Jeopardy?” Olojede discusses the history of interracial marriage in South Africa in relation to the story in Numbers 12 of Miriam (and Aaron) speaking against Moses’ wife. She notes that women often police the boundaries of intergroup marriages.

The next section of the book is called “Embracing Ambiguity” and begins with “Is This Naomi? A Feminist Reading of the Ambiguity of Naomi in the Book of Ruth,” by Carolyn J. Sharp. The essay starts with a statement that could serve as the entire book’s mission: “The sun is beginning to set on forms of biblical scholarship that assume the adequacy of an ‘objective,’ androcentric, white, Western interpretive gaze and the marginalization of the female, or one of its corollaries, an essentialist romanticizing of women’s bodies and agency” (149). Sharp also argues that Naomi is a deeply ambiguous figure, especially as she exploits the foreign-born Ruth: “Fidelity? I see only manipulation, commodification, and erasure” (156).

The next chapter in this section is “Stuck Between the Waiting Room and the Reconfigured Levirate Entity? Reading Ruth in Marriage-Obsessed African Christian Contexts,” by Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele). Masenya discusses the concerns of single, devout Pentecostal women in South Africa, barred from sex and procreation because they are unmarried. Inspired by the levirate marriage story in the Book of Ruth, where all parties consent to the levirate union, Masenya wonders whether this could guide African Christians in fashioning polygamous marriages and, perhaps, alleviating the plight of single women.

The third chapter in this section is Claudia V. Camp’s “Daughters, Priests, and Patrilineage: A Feminist and Gender-Critical Interpretation of the End of the Book of Numbers.” Camp asks why the Book of Numbers ends with Moses revisiting the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, modifying his earlier ruling on their right to inherit. Camp argues that the story of the daughters is not just about women’s rights, and that indeed “gender is never just about gender” (190). Instead, the question raised by the ruling on the daughters’ case in Numbers 27—what will happen if the daughters marry outside the tribe of Manasseh—concerns the unity of Manasseh, the only tribe that is split between Cisjordan and Transjordan, and by extension the unity of Israel. Camp argues that whenever the Bible appears to challenge male authority, it does so for the benefit of other men.

The final entry in this section of the book is “‘I Will Take No Bull from Your House’: Feminist Biblical Theology in a Creationist Context,” by Jaqueline E. Lapsley. Lapsley writes that Christians are sometimes guilty of harming the environment by placing humans at the center of creation. She argues that Psalm 50 sets the cosmos, and not humans, at the center, even criticizing animal sacrifice because all creatures belong to God. While other biblical texts critical of sacrifice explain that the sacrifice is unacceptable because it is done incorrectly, this text does not, she writes.

The volume concludes with a reflection by Elna Mouton, “Feminist Biblical Interpretation: How Far Do We Yet Have to Go?” Mouton argues that, in biblical criticism, intersections of gender, race, and class ought to be recognized as theological and not just ethical issues because God is fundamentally impartial. She writes that Jesus had a “radical and all-inclusive manifestation of God’s presence in the world” (215). Mouton writes that the book invites readers to give priority to God’s healing love to repair a broken world.

Diverse as the contributors to this volume are, they all appear to come from Christian contexts. Though Claassens and Sharp present the book as a collection

that “wants to celebrate the rich colors making up the feminist biblical interpretation landscape today” (2), it thus represents a circumscribed palette. Additionally, given how the book is pitched, it was surprising to encounter Mouton’s forthrightly confessional essay at the end. The editors might have more explicitly acknowledged the Christian perspective of the volume as well as the confessional nature of some of the work.

For biblical scholars invested in the use of critical theory, some of the essays in the volume will be more useful than others. I recommend especially the essays in the “Celebrating Intersectionality” section of the book, by Claassens, Dube, McKinlay, and Maier, which engage with theorists such as Butler and Bhabha. The contributions to this volume are mostly relatively short—about 10-15 pages, including footnotes. Additionally, each author clearly lays out the hermeneutic she plans to use in her essay, and most bring in some aspect of personal experience or social location. These factors will make the chapters here uniquely approachable, even to undergraduate students with a minimal understanding of the Bible.



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