

HANDBOOK OF
WOMEN
BIBLICAL
INTERPRETERS

A Historical and Biographical Guide

MARION ANN TAYLOR, EDITOR

AGNES CHOI, ASSOCIATE EDITOR


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To Glen, David, Catherine, and Peter
And in memory of my parents, Archie and Mary Finlayson

Contents

Preface *Marion Ann Taylor* ix

List of Contributors xi

Introduction *Marion Ann Taylor* 1

Handbook Entries 23

List of Entries 553

Chronological List of Women Biblical
Interpreters 557

Subject Index 563

Scripture Index 579

Preface

The concept of a dictionary of women interpreters of the Bible was born out of a conversation with Dr. Carey Newman in 2000. The idea gradually took shape as I focused my research interests and teaching on women interpreters of the Bible. In 2001, my search for women interpreters of the Bible began in earnest. Dr. Renata Koke created the first chart of the names and publications of women interpreters, and I began to collect the writings of women on the Bible. When I realized that the number of women who had published on the Bible exceeded all my expectations, I focused my research on women interpreters of the nineteenth century.¹ In time and with the help of dedicated research assistants, students, and colleagues, the quest to find the writings of forgotten interpreters of the Bible in the nineteenth century was extended to include women interpreters throughout history.

1. Publications that grew out of this research include Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir, *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006); Christiana de Groot and Marion Ann Taylor, eds., *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible*, SBL Symposium Series 38 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Marion Ann Taylor, "The Psalms outside the Pulpit: Applications of the Psalms by Women of the Nineteenth Century," in *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV and D. Brent Sandy (St. Louis: Chalice, 2010), 219–32, 284–86; idem, "Cold Dead Hands upon Our Threshold: Josephine Butler's Reading of the Story of the Levite's Concubine. Judges 19–21," in *The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation: Hearing the Word of God through Historically Dissimilar Traditions*, ed. Randall Heskett and Brian P. Irwin, Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 469 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 259–73; idem, "The Resurrection of Jephthah's Daughter: Reading Judges 11 with Nineteenth-Century Women," in *Strangely Familiar: Protofeminist Interpretations of Patriarchal Biblical Texts*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather E. Weir (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 57–73; idem, "Anglican Women and the Bible in Nineteenth-century Britain," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 75 (2006): 527–52.

This book is the culmination of years of collaborative research. I want to thank everyone who has supported the vision of creating a one-volume reference tool that introduces readers to women interpreters of the Bible throughout the history of Christianity. Dr. Heather Weir was in the first class I taught on women interpreters of the Bible in 2002 and has worked tirelessly with me on this project. Dr. Agnes Choi has been involved in the project since 2006, and her gifts of organization and attention to detail have made her an ideal associate editor. Thanks also to Dr. Meredith Donaldson Clark and my students who joined the quest to find forgotten women interpreters, especially to Isa Hauser for her diligence in finding German interpreters of the Bible and for her translation of German entries; to David Horrocks for his diligent work on issues related to genealogies; to Eleanor Clitheroe and Renee Kwan Monkman for commenting on an early draft of the book; and to Chris Dowdeswell, David Karram, Nola-Susan Crewe, and Maureen Teixeira for their research. Thanks to Dr. Robert Derrenbacher, treasurer and membership secretary for the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, and Navar Steed, membership coordinator for the Society of Biblical Literature, for the statistics they provided regarding female membership in the CSBS and SBL. My colleague Dr. Michael Kolarcik deserves special thanks for his translation of Italian materials.

I want to express my gratitude to the scholars whom I consulted for ideas about which women should be included in this book, especially Kirsi Stjerna, Joy Schroeder, Timothy Larsen, Cynthia Scheinberg, Peter Erb, Michaela Sohn-Kronthaler, Ruth Albrecht, Pamela Nadell, and John Sandys-Wunsch. I bear the final responsibility for selecting the women interpreters included in this book.

I am grateful to the staff and board of Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto for their encouragement and support. I want to thank especially Wycliffe's principal, Dr. George Sumner, for his continued support of my research. My colleague Dr. Thomas Power deserves special mention for his help in tracking down primary sources and bibliographic material related to this project. The librarians at the interlibrary loan office at Robarts Library who tracked down the often hard-to-find books of women interpreters were very helpful. Thanks also to Brian Bolger, Jim Kinney, and Rachel Klomp maker at Baker for their guidance, support, and encouragement.

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Finally I want to thank my husband and colleague, Glen Taylor, for supporting my work, and our children, David, Catherine, and Peter, who spent their adolescence patiently listening to me talk with excitement about my latest discovery of the writings of yet another woman who dared to interpret Scripture.

Marion Ann Taylor

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Introduction

MARION ANN TAYLOR

Are There Women Interpreters?

A Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970), opens his story “The Wisdom of Women” as follows:

In the city was an important Woman from a good family, who would read the Bible and study Mishnah and midrash and *halakhot* and *aggadot* and have learned discussions with the scholars in the *beit midrash*. There were those who esteemed her and sang her praises, and there were those who looked at her resentfully, saying that it is not suitable for a woman to study Torah, for a woman is only for children and there is no wisdom for a woman except at the spindle.¹

As Agnon’s short story continues, the men in the study hall, resentful of her presence, place a beautifully bound, dark red leather volume titled *The Book of the Wisest of Women* on the bookshelves. When the woman finds the book, she discovers its pages are blank. She is angry but acknowledges that the men are right to think, “We have no book that a woman authored.”² She decides that her foremothers bear some responsibility for failing to leave a written legacy of Jewish wisdom.³

1. This story was first published in the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*, Nov. 13, 1943. It was re-published as “Ḥakhmot nashim,” in *Me’atzmi’el’atzmi*, ed. Emunah Yaron (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), 294–98. See Brenda Socachevsky Bacon, “‘The Wisdom of Women’: From Epstein to Agnon,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 15 (2008): 30.

2. Bacon, “‘The Wisdom of Women,’” 32.

3. I wish to thank Yael Unterman for introducing me to Agnon’s short story.

This story resonates with the experience of anyone who has tried to find women interpreters of Scripture from the past.⁴ Standard histories of the interpretation of the Bible provide little help: they focus on the history of biblical scholarship, highlighting the lives and work of the most significant and authoritative voices of the academy, church, and synagogue. In his impressive *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, Donald K. McKim chose to highlight “leading biblical interpreters by virtue of their particular approaches. . . . Some who are included have pioneered distinctive viewpoints. Others have engaged in thorough expositions of Scripture over a long period of time. Still others had made particular advances in some aspect that shapes the interpretive process.”⁵ Only three out of the more than two hundred biblical interpreters included in McKim’s *Major Biblical Interpreters* are women (Julian of Norwich [1342–ca. 1416], Phyllis Trible [b. 1932], and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza [b. 1938]).⁶ Gerald Bray’s history of biblical interpretation similarly focuses on credentialed scholars and theologians; at the same time he admits that the “systematic learned interpretation” of Scripture stands in tension with “unsystematic” or “popular” uses of the Bible.⁷ Ironically, however, it is often “popular” interpreters who have had more impact on a generation than academic and scholarly interpreters, and since most women interpreters of Scripture used the Bible in an unsystematic or popular way, they have not been included in histories of the interpretation of the Bible.⁸ Women had neither the academic training nor the status that allowed them to be heard in the university, church, synagogue, or even the press.⁹ This book argues that women deserve inclusion in histories of the interpretation of the Bible.

Several important recent developments in scholarship suggest that future histories of the interpretation of Scripture will be more inclusive of popular voices in general,¹⁰ and the voices of women in particular. Popular and

4. This handbook is more than a collection of the lives of women; it is part of a larger quest to recover the voices and lives of women by scholars in many fields and disciplines. Alison Booth suggests that the effect of supplementary canons of histories “may be corrosive rather than a slow water-drop effect; . . . many collective biographies undermine the order of monumental history, disrupting the small circles of icons in the temple of greatness.” Alison Booth, “The Lessons of the Medusa: Anna Jameson and Collective Biographies of Women,” *Victorian Studies* 42, no. 2 (2000): 258.

5. Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), ix.

6. William Yarchin includes samples of the interpretive work of Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in his reader in the history of biblical interpretation. William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

7. Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 40.

8. *Ibid.*, 40, 360.

9. As a number of entries in this book will show, some exceptional women deserved inclusion in “traditional” histories of the interpretation of the Bible.

10. For a discussion of the revisionist approach to writing history, see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “History from Below,” *Social Scientist* 11, no. 4 (April 1983): 3–20.

marginalized voices are now included in studies of the reception history of the Bible. David Gunn's commentary on Judges models such an inclusive approach.¹¹ Scholars draw on the pioneering work of Patricia Demers, Gerda Lerner, Elisabeth Gössman, and Marla Selvidge, which called attention to the work of women interpreters of Scripture, highlighting especially examples of profeminist writings.¹² Their work of recovering and analyzing the work of women interpreters continues.¹³ Joy Schroeder includes women's interpretations in her masterful work on the history of Christian interpretations of sexual violence.¹⁴ Timothy Larsen's 2011 publication, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*, signals a shift toward the inclusion of women's voices in historical works that consider the impact of the Bible on life and culture.

This volume continues the task of recovering and analyzing the writings of women interpreters of the Bible. It offers scholars and graduate students the challenge mentioned in many entries that the interpretive work of a particular female interpreter has not yet been fully studied. It provides a resource for those wanting to include the writings of women in courses on Scripture, theology, history, religious formation, and preaching.

The Women Interpreters of the Bible

"Are there any lives of women?"

"No, my dear," said Mr. Sewell; "in the old times, women did not get their lives written, though I don't doubt many of them were much better worth writing than the men's."

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Pearl of Orr's Island*

11. David M. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, BBC (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). The Blackwell series of commentaries focuses on the reception history of individual biblical books.

12. Patricia Demers, *Women as Interpreters of the Bible* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992); Gerda Lerner, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Biblical Criticism," in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Elisabeth Gössman, "History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 27–40; Marla Selvidge, *Notorious Voices: Feminist Biblical Interpretation, 1500–1920* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

13. The Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (CSBS) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) have supported this work by including sections on recovering female interpreters of the Bible. Papers from these meetings continue to generate considerable interest. See Christiana de Groot and Marion Ann Taylor, eds., *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible*, SBL Symposium Series 38 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather E. Weir, eds., *Strangely Familiar: Profeminist Interpretations of Patriarchal Biblical Texts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather E. Weir, eds., *Breaking Boundaries: Female Biblical Interpreters Who Challenged the Status Quo* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

14. Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament: Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

The question of where to begin this biographical history of women interpreters is important. God's chosen people and their prophets and priests interpreted God's words from the earliest days. Perhaps Huldah, the prophetess (2 Kings 22:14–20) who delivered God's judgment on the legitimacy of the words on the scroll found in the temple during the period of Josiah, was interpreting Scripture. The New Testament contains a number of stories of women who encountered Jesus and interpreted his words and their experiences with Jesus for others. The stories of the woman of Samaria (John 4) and the women who were witnesses to the resurrection and interpreted it (Luke 24:10), for example, have empowered many women throughout history to interpret their own encounters with Jesus and the Scriptures.¹⁵ Perhaps Mary, the mother of Jesus, should be considered an interpreter of Scripture since she pondered the events surrounding the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:19). A long tradition of understanding the Virgin Mary as an ideal reader or interpreter of Scripture is attested in the history of art and literature.¹⁶ In her book for children on the life of Jesus, popular evangelical writer Hesba Stretton (1832–1911) wondered if Mary might have pondered the meaning of Jeremiah's prophecy about Rachel's voice of lamentation, weeping, and great mourning for her children (Jer. 31:15) when she passed Rachel's tomb on the way to Jerusalem for the presentation of Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:22–40).¹⁷ Other women in the New Testament, including Eunice and Lois (Timothy's mother and grandmother), may be considered interpreters of Scripture since they taught the Christian faith to others (2 Tim. 1:2–5).¹⁸

Although it is possible to find women interpreters within the Bible, this book begins with women interpreters from the period of the early church and focuses primarily on the lives of women whose writings on the Bible are extant.¹⁹ Of course women also used other media such as embroidery, music, and art to interpret Scripture, but their stories are left for others to tell. Of the hundreds of women who left records of their interpretations of the Bible, I

15. M. Marsin (fl. 1696–1701) emphasized the importance of Jesus's birth by a woman and his postresurrection appearance to women, and argued uniquely that Jesus's second coming should also be declared by a woman. M. Marsin, *The Womans Advocate* (London: J. Clark, 1697), 2–3.

16. See David L. Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 215–24, 228–30.

17. Hesba Stretton, *The Wonderful Life of Christ* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1899), 27.

18. Christina Rossetti cited Lois and Eunice as examples of female teachers to justify her authorship of a commentary on Scripture: *Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 1892), 195.

19. In cases where women's interpretive work has not survived the ravages of time (e.g., the writings of Marcella [ca. 327–410] and Paula [347–404]), was accidentally destroyed (e.g., many of Susanna Wesley's [1669–1742] writings were burned), or was intentionally eradicated (inquisitors thought they had destroyed Teresa of Avila's [1515–82] *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, but other copies survived the purge)—in such cases descriptions of their interpretive work are based on the witness of others to their contributions.

chose to highlight women whose interpretations were influential,²⁰ distinctive, or unique in terms of ideas²¹ or interpretive genre,²² or representative of the kind of interpretive writings done by a number of women at a certain period of time.

The availability of women's writings on the Bible has changed over time. In the first twelve hundred years of the Christian era, few records remain of women's interpretive work; no women interpreters from the first, second, third, sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries are included in this collection. In the post-Reformation period, women's writings on the Bible increased; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, hundreds of women published their writings on Scripture. Some of them published books that were more academic than popular, including commentaries on Scripture; others published dozens of popular books on the Bible. There are many reasons for the increase in women's writings, including such factors as women's increased literacy and education and access to the Bible and the publishing world. In addition more recent writings are more easily found and accessed.

Given the significant increase in women interpreters of the Bible in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a decision had to be made as to when to end this biographical history of women interpreters. Since the names and publications of contemporary women are easily accessed and disproportionate in terms of sheer numbers in comparison to women from earlier periods in history,²³ I limited the number of post-nineteenth-century entries by using three criteria: the woman had to be deceased,²⁴ her work had to be representative,²⁵

20. For example, Phoebe Palmer's arguments for the legitimacy of women's preaching convinced many, including Catherine Booth. Phoebe Palmer, *The Promise of the Father, or, A Neglected Specialty of the Last Days* (Boston: Henry V. Degen, 1859); Catherine Booth, *Female Ministry; or Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (London: Morgan & Chase, ca. 1870).

21. Amanda Berry Smith's justification for her public ministry was based in part on her unique reading of 1 Cor. 14:34–35 KJV: "Let your women keep silence in the churches; . . . and if they would learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home." "As I had no husband at home to ask, I thought according to my orders in John [15:16], I had my authority from the words of the Master." Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (Chicago: Meyer & Brother, 1893), 431.

22. In *The Story of Jesus Christ: An Interpretation* (1897), Elizabeth Phelps crafts an interpretive approach that implicitly criticizes traditional male approaches. Erin Vearncombe, "Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the 'Laws of Narrative Expression,'" in *The Story of Jesus Christ: An Interpretation*, paper presented at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, June 2007.

23. The number of female members of the largest professional societies devoted to the study of biblical literature is impressive. For example, in 2011 the SBL boasted over 8,534 members, and current data show that 23 percent of the SBL members are female; also, more than one-quarter of the more than 400 members of the CSBS are women.

24. This criterion meant that Leona Glidden Running (b. 1916), whose noteworthy career as a biblical scholar and teacher of biblical languages began in the early 1950s and continued into the twenty-first century, had to be excluded from this book.

25. For example, representing distinguished twentieth-century biblical scholars are Kathryn Sullivan (1905–2006) and Elizabeth Achtemeier (1926–2002); representing female scholars in social sciences whose work impacted biblical studies are archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon (1906–78) and

and her primary publications had to predate the globalization of the profession of biblical studies and the significant expansion in the involvement of women and ethnic minorities in professional biblical studies in the 1970s and '80s.²⁶ Thus missing from this book are entries on second-wave feminist biblical scholars (e.g., Phyllis Trible and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza), feminist historians (e.g., Carol Meyers and Naomi Steinberg), feminist literary critics (e.g., Mieke Bal and Cheryl Exum), and womanist biblical scholars (e.g., Renita Weems), as well as biblical scholars who bring new feminist multicultural perspectives to biblical interpretation (e.g., Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, and Kwok Pui Lan). Also omitted are the many contemporary biblical scholars whose specialties in biblical interpretation include such classic disciplines as text criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition criticism, and more recent literary approaches including structuralism, deconstructionism, narrative criticism, and reader-response criticism. Not included are present-day women specializing in the history of the interpretation of the Bible and reception history and female scholars working in ancillary disciplines such as archaeology, Near Eastern languages and literature, and the social sciences as they relate to the Bible. Popular voices from this period are also missing.

I attempted to be inclusive in terms of religious, cultural, racial, and geographical diversity; however, Catholic female voices from Western Europe dominate until the time of the Reformation, after which point diverse Protestant voices prevail. British and American voices dominate the modern period, and non-Western and nonwhite voices are unrepresented in the book. Jewish women, representatives of various non-Christian and sectarian groups, and idiosyncratic writers are included. Women living in many different countries have interpreted Scripture: early women interpreters resided in such diverse places as Cappadocia, Antioch, Rome, and Bethlehem; medieval women tended to live in Continental Europe and England; the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed increased numbers of women writers in North America, though women in Britain and other parts of Europe continued to publish on Scripture. Living in the dominant culture of the day seemed to provide opportunities for women in that culture to write.

anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921–2007); representing the popular voice is Dorothy Sayers (1893–1957); representing the work of religious educators are ecumenical lay leader Suzanne de Dietrich (1891–1981) and Jewish Bible interpreter Nehama Leibowitz (1905–97).

26. For a discussion of recent trends in biblical studies, see Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 21–22. For a helpful discussion of the history of feminist biblical interpretation, see Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon, 1998). The volumes on feminist biblical studies in the twentieth century (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza) and on current trends (eds. Maria Cristina Bartolomei and Jorunn Økland) in the much-anticipated multivolume international, interdenominational, and multidisciplinary history of the Bible and women—these works promise to fill out what is missing in this book.

Most of the women in this book published under their given names, though there are a few women whose identities are questioned (e.g., the English pamphleteer Ester Sowernam [fl. 1615–17]). Many nineteenth-century authors published as Mrs. X, with X representing her husband's name (e.g., English writer, Elizabeth Baxter [1837–1926], wife of Michael Baxter, published as either Mrs. Michael Baxter or Mrs. M. Baxter). Some women published pseudonymously. Several works of Italian author Arcangela Tarabotti circulated pseudonymously under anagrams such as Galerana Baritotti (or Baratotti). After her marriage, Mary Petrie published as “Mrs. C. Ashley Carus-Wilson,” though she published as Helen Macdowall with *The Sunday at Home*. Charlotte Tucker (1821–93) wrote under the pseudonym A. L. O. E. (A Lady of England). To hide their identities, some women omitted their surnames or used their initials when publishing; Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790–1846) published simply as Charlotte Elizabeth so that her estranged husband would have no claim on the income from her books, and English commentator Gracilla Boddington (1801–87) published as G. B. The identities of many women who published without revealing their full names are now lost. A surprising number of women were identified in print simply as “the author of X,” with X representing the author's first or most famous book (e.g., Susan Warner published as “the author of *The Wide Wide World*,” and Elizabeth Rundle Charles as “the author of *The Chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta Family*”).

A Typical Entry

Each of the 180 entries contains a short biography of a female interpreter of the Bible, where possible including factual details about her birth, family, education, and formative influences. Such information provides the context for her interpretive work. Her work is then analyzed, focusing on her approach and methods of biblical interpretation and highlighting key themes and providing examples. Attention is given to evidence of gendered exegesis, especially when a woman's experiences shaped her interpretation or when she addressed traditionally problematic passages (e.g., Gen. 1–3; 1 Cor. 11 and 14; 1 Tim. 2) or discussed female biblical figures. Entries include comments on the interpreter's significance and legacy and include a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The entries vary in length, and the length generally reflects the person's significance as an interpreter of the Bible.

Calling Up the Spirits of the Dead

There have been pens enough, Heaven knows, to chronicle the wrongs, the crimes, the sorrows of our sex: why should I add an echo to that voice, which from the

beginning has cried aloud in the wilderness of this world, upon women betrayed, and betraying in self-defence? A nobler and more grateful task be mine, to show them how much of what is most fair, most excellent, most sublime among the productions of human genius, has been owing to their influence, direct or indirect; and call up the spirits of the dead,—those who from their silent urns still rule the pulses of our hearts—to bear witness to this truth.

Anna Jameson, *The Romance of Biography or Memoirs of Women Loved and Celebrated by Poets, from the Days of the Troubadours to the Present Age; A Series of Anecdotes Intended to Illustrate the Influence which Female Beauty and Virtue have Exercised over the Characters and Writings of Men of Genius*

This book features both famous and forgotten figures in the history of women interpreters. The famous women include queens, noblewomen, abbesses, founders and cofounders of sects and denominations, wives of famous church leaders, martyrs, preachers, authors, and scholars. The seventh-century bishop Isidore of Seville, for example, recognized Proba's (ca. 320–ca. 370) importance by including her among the illustrious *men* (!) of the church.

Many female interpreters were highly regarded in their circles of influence. Their writings on Scripture empowered them privately in terms of their own spiritual devotion, and publicly, bringing them renown, financial gain, and occasionally persecution or death (e.g., French mystic Marguerite Porete [d. 1310] and English Protestant Anne Askew [ca. 1521–46]). Some women gained notoriety through their writings alone (e.g., German commentator Justitia Sengers²⁷ [fl. 1585]); others, like Italian preacher Domenica Narducci (1473–1533) and English prophet Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), were involved in polemical public discourse and preaching. Some women were renowned in other contexts (e.g., Elizabeth I [1533–1603] was Queen of England; Florence Nightingale [1820–1910] was remembered as the lady with the lamp; Josephine Butler [1828–1906] worked to repeal the Contagious Diseases Laws), but their work as biblical interpreters has not yet been fully recognized. Lesser-known women include those whose biographies are lost to time or whose importance was recognized by only a few. However, as F. Digby Legard has recognized, “Woman’s sphere is wider than we think and women’s influence is perhaps stronger than we like to allow.”²⁸

27. Some scholars remember her as Justitia Sanger. William L. Holladay mentions a commentary on 96 psalms by Justitia Sanger, but her commentary is only on Ps. 69. *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 198.

28. F. Digby Legard was the editor of Mary Simpson’s seemingly unimportant writings for young poorly educated farm laborers. Mary E. Simpson, *Ploughing and Sowing; or, Annals of an Evening School in a Yorkshire Village, and the Work that Grew Out of it, From Letters and Private Notes By a Clergyman’s Daughter*, ed. F. Digby Legard (London: J. & C. Mozley, 1861), vi.

The biographies of individual women interpreters attest to their uniqueness, though patterns are seen in their lives. Women writers were married, divorced, widowed, or single. Some had children, some gave up their children. Many women gave up family, including young children, to follow their call or sense of vocation, which included interpreting Scripture. Marie of the Incarnation (1599–1672), founder of the Ursuline order in Canada, left her young son in the care of her sister when she entered the novitiate. A number of women gave up their wealth and privilege to live ascetic or monastic lifestyles. Paula (347–404) forfeited a life of privilege in Rome to live in utter poverty in a monastic cell in Bethlehem. Not all interpreters adopted unconventional lifestyles, however. A number of nineteenth-century interpreters lived conventional family lives, but changes to family life brought on by a financial crisis, illness, or death pushed them to publish for profit to provide for their own needs and those of others. Examples include authors Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790–1846), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96), Elizabeth Rundle Charles (1828–96), and Susan (1819–85) and Anna Warner (1827–1915).

Most women who interpreted Scripture were well educated. Many from privileged families were given the finest education available. Women like the erudite Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806) and scholar and poet Ann Francis (1738–1800) learned from their fathers and brothers; Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–78) attended lectures at the University of Utrecht, though she was hidden from the male students; English poet Elizabeth Hands (ca. 1746–1815) likely received her exposure to literature in the home of her employer. Some, such as Elizabeth Smith (1776–1806), were self-taught scholars; however, even self-educated women needed access to books.

Many women lamented their lack of formal education. English devotional writer Susanna Hopton (1627–1709) bewailed the defects of her education, especially in classical and biblical languages, though her knowledge of Scripture and theology was recognized by many. Some interpreters, including African American Sojourner Truth (ca. 1791–1883), were illiterate. Many published interpreters advocated for women's equal access to education. Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95) and English philosopher Mary Astell (1666–1731) were both early advocates of women's rights to higher education, including the study of Scripture. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of women were granted the kind of equal access to education that their foremothers only dreamed of. Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825–1921), lay biblical scholar Emilie Briggs (1867–1944), and ordained rabbi Regina Jonas (1902–44) had access to theological education; Elizabeth Achtemeier (1926–2002) and Sister Kathryn Sullivan (1905–2006) were theological educators who participated fully in the academy and church, though Sullivan was not allowed to do advanced Scripture studies in the 1950s, and full participation in the church included

ordination only for Achtemeier, a Presbyterian; a priestly vocation was not an option for Sister Sullivan, RSCJ.²⁹

Women interpreters gained access to Scripture in various ways, depending on such factors as religious affiliation, cultural and social location, education, and financial resources. Many early interpreters, even highly educated women, only prayed and memorized the Scriptures they heard recited in the liturgy and preached on by clergy. Doctor of the Church Catherine of Siena (1347–80) was so familiar with the words of Scripture that its words became her words. In contrast, some post-Enlightenment women had direct access to multiple versions of the Bible. Text critics Agnes Smith Lewis (1843–1926) and Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843–1920) discovered, photographed, deciphered, and published early manuscripts. Generally speaking, women gained greater access to the Bible over time.

Women's access to academic and theological resources for the study of Scripture similarly was uneven and related to such factors as religious affiliation, cultural and social location, education, and financial resources. Paula (347–404) studied with Jerome and provided him with the reference tools needed to translate the Scriptures into Latin. Mary Cornwallis (1758–1836) shared her husband's theological library and had the financial resources to buy any books she needed. Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96) accessed the theological resources provided first by her father and then by her husband, whose love for books put great financial strain on the family. In general, nineteenth-century British interpreters had greater access to scholarly resources, including artifacts in the British Museum, than did American and Canadian interpreters. The interpretive work of Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), (Frances) Julia Wedgwood (1833–1913), and Mary Carus-Wilson (1861–1935) was indelibly shaped by the critical scholarly resources they used to aid their study of Scripture.

Throughout history a surprising number of women recognized the importance of studying the original languages of Scripture. Paula (347–404) was certainly not the only woman to learn Greek and Hebrew so that she could read the Scriptures in the original languages. In her *Epistle* of 1539, Genevan reformer Marie Dentière (1495–ca. 1561) mentions that her young daughter had written a Hebrew grammar for young girls from whom Scripture had been concealed. In 1841, an introduction to the basics of reading Hebrew was included in *The Christian Lady's Magazine*, edited by Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790–1846), to encourage lay Anglican women to study the Old Testament in Hebrew. Artist and musician Helen Spurrell (1819–91) learned Hebrew after she turned fifty and went on to publish a translation of the Old Testament from an unpointed or consonantal Hebrew text. Catholic educational writer Elizabeth Bowerman (1852–1930) studied Greek as she prepared to write commentaries on the Gospels.

29. RSCJ is an acronym for the religious order Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Women who translated and paraphrased Scripture often became aware of gender bias in translations of texts relating to women. Mary Astell (1666–1731) was convinced that men used “their skill in Language and the Tricks of the Schools” to change the original meaning of texts to limit women’s voice and role.³⁰ Women’s rights activist, minister, and biblical scholar Lee Anna Starr (1853–1937) believed that the King James Version and Revised Version were tainted with masculine bias and argued that the Scripture—correctly translated—authorized the liberation of women. Julia Smith’s (1792–1886) translation of the Bible was used by the compilers of *The Woman’s Bible*, who commended this first American translation of the Bible by a woman. Medical doctor and social reformer Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946) believed that women’s suffering would be allayed and gender equality secured when prejudice in translation was removed.

Many women interpreters were connected to men in positions of power in their families, communities of faith, the academy, or publishing world. Macrina (ca. 330–379), the elder sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, and Melania (ca. 340–ca. 410), whom Palladius named “man of God,” had a significant influence on men in positions of power. Marriage brought Agnes Smith Lewis (1843–1926) closer to the heart of Cambridge University and the resources she needed to carry out her work as a text critic. Marriage to Michael Baxter, owner of the Christian Herald Publishing Company, facilitated Elizabeth Baxter’s (1837–1926) extensive publishing career (she published at least forty books and a great number of smaller pamphlets). The Rev. E. H. Bickersteth, a prolific author and father of Charlotte Bickersteth Ward (1822–96), nurtured his daughter’s significant writing career. A number of women worked collaboratively with relatives; handwritten entries for the renowned *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon* indicate that Emilie Briggs (1867–1944) did much more work for her father than their coauthored book on the Psalms suggests. Further, women often sought endorsements from recognized and credentialed male authorities for their publications on Scripture. Joana Julia Greswell (1838–1906), author of the *Grammatical Analysis of the Hebrew Psalter* (1873), sought the endorsement of the famous scholar-churchmen J. J. S. Perowne and R. Payne Smith for her Hebrew textbook for divinity students at Oxford and elsewhere.³¹ Some women worked in the shadow of men; Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1899–1975), Karl Barth’s assistant, was herself an independent and significant biblical interpreter. Beatrice Goff (1903–98), who defended her doctoral thesis on the J Document in the

30. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell, Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

31. J. Glen Taylor, “‘Miss Greswell Honed Our Hebrew at Oxford’: Reflections on Joana J. Greswell and Her Book *Grammatical Analysis of the Hebrew Psalter* (1873),” in *Breaking Boundaries: Female Biblical Interpreters Who Challenged the Status Quo*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Kooyis and Heather E. Weir (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 83–106.

Hexateuch at Boston University in 1933, spent her career assisting male colleagues in various research projects, yet also published several major works of her own.

Women interpreters of the Bible were not disinterested readers of Scripture. Most brought to their interpretive work theological presuppositions about the nature of Scripture. They read, studied, and meditated on Scripture, using various spiritual disciplines and an assortment of interpretive methods and study guides. They produced a variety of written responses to Scripture, including paraphrases, hymns, poetry, diaries, autobiographies, dramas, letters, tracts, diatribes, study guides, commentaries, sermons, and spiritual writings. Anglican Elizabeth Rundle Charles (1828–96) published poetry, hymns, essays, scriptural reflections, historical fiction, a travel journal, and commentaries. The plays, poetry, tracts, essays, and novel of English writer and social reformer Hannah More (1745–1833) reveal her profound engagement with the Bible. Some genres used by women had a limited life: the Latin Cento, which retold salvation history by using lines from Latin poets, flourished for a time, as did biblical epics in the seventeenth century and instructional literature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many women interpreters would have agreed with the sentiments of learned Reformed gentlewoman Anne Lock (1534–ca. 1602), who felt constrained “by reason of [her] sex” and yet did what she could to bring her “poore basket of stones to the strengthening of the walles of that Jerusalem, whereof (by grace) we are all both Citizens and members.”³²

Women interpreters inspired, educated, and entertained a range of audiences: the young, other women, mixed audiences, the uneducated, the unconverted, the unenlightened, and even authorized experts. Herrad of Hohenbourg (fl. 1176–96) wrote *Hortus deliciarum* (*Garden of Delights*), a synthesis of twelfth-century monastic and scholastic learning specifically for the women of Hohenbourg. A number of women wrote for a variety of audiences: the prolific author Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901) founded and edited *The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Younger Members of the English Church* (1851–99) and published educational resources for Sunday school and catechism classes, novels, poetry, history, biographies, and commentaries on biblical themes and texts for adult audiences.³³ As education became more available to women and academic disciplines became more specialized, the writings on the Bible by credentialed women became more focused and often addressed colleagues in the academy, a relatively new primary audience for female writers. A recent example is the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas

32. Anne Vaughan Lock, *The Collected Works of Anne Vaughan Lock*, ed. Susan M. Felch (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 77.

33. The most exhaustive, but incomplete, list of Charlotte Yonge’s works is found in Georgina Battiscombe and Marghanita Laske, eds., *A Chaplet for Charlotte Yonge* (London: Cresset, 1965), 204–16.

(1921–2007) on the doctrine of defilement in the book of Numbers, written specifically for scholars.

The Question of Authorization

When gender, lay status, historical moment, and even Scripture itself as traditionally interpreted precluded women from formally expounding and interpreting the Bible, women felt they had to justify their interpretive acts. Typically women who dared to interpret Scripture claimed some type of divine authorization for their work. Visionary Hadewijch of Antwerp (fl. 1250s) claimed divine approval for her work. Validation for the work of Gertrude the Great (ca. 1256–1302) came not only from a command from Christ but also from a charge from her superiors, who asked that she write religious instructions on parchment. Italian scholar and writer Olympia Morata (ca. 1526/27–55) felt that God spoke through her and that her readers were to ignore the fact that she was a woman. African American interpreter Maria Stewart (1803–79) appealed to her spiritual calling as the basis for her authority.

Women claimed other sources of authority to justify their work as interpreters of Scripture. Like many early Protestants, Katharina Schütz Zell (ca. 1498–1562) based her right to teach on her knowledge of the Bible and contemporary Reformed theology. In her quest for authority, devotional poet An Collins (ca. 1653) appealed to her intellect, vocation, gifts, experiences, and divine inspiration. Pietism provided a foundation for Johanna Petersen (1644–1724) to interpret and teach Scripture with confidence and authority. Margaret Fell (1614–1702) drew support from the Quaker belief in the continuing revelation of God to lambast priests who decried that women should not speak and yet preached sermons based on women’s words in Scripture. Anne Docwra (ca. 1624–1710) cleverly justified her expositions of biblical prophecy by citing the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Education and access to scholarly resources enabled women like Mary Astell (1666–1731) to put forward the notion of an independent religious scholar. Changing perceptions of women’s spirituality enabled a number of British and American nineteenth-century authors to speak from their positions of domestic power as angels or priests of the home.³⁴ Because opportunities for graduate education and positions of leadership in many religious institutions opened for women in the twentieth century, women did not have to justify themselves in the same ways that their foremothers did. Still, many women faced and continue to face the challenge of gaining full-time tenured teaching and research positions in the academy and employment in senior leadership positions in the church and synagogue.

34. See Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir, *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 2–10.

Favorite Bible Books

Women's interpretive writings on Scripture through the ages have manifested great diversity in subject matter. Some women wrote on particular biblical books or chapters within books (e.g., Justitia Sengers's 1585 commentary on Ps. 69); some reflected thematically across texts (e.g., Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Jesus Christ: An Interpretation*, 1897); some studied particular characters in Scripture (e.g., Grace Aguilar, *The Women of Israel*, 1845). Women seemed especially drawn to comment on Genesis, Song of Songs, Psalms, the Gospels, the Epistles (esp. texts about women), and Revelation. The stories in Genesis about the creation and fall and those featuring female characters elicited reflections on woman's nature and role in the family, in communities of faith, in society at large, and also on women's rights.³⁵ Venetian writer Moderata Fonte (1555–92) challenged the traditional understanding that Adam's creation before Eve signaled his superiority, arguing instead for his inferiority, since the order of creation moved from lower to higher beings.

Women's writings on the Song of Songs and Psalms focused on the life of devotion, prayer, and worship. *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, by beatified and canonized Teresa of Avila (1515–82), primarily explored the allegory of the Song as it related to her own mystical marriage to God. The sonnet sequence on Ps. 51 by Anne Lock (1534–ca. 1602), however, not only engaged the heart but also critiqued contemporary politics and theology, including eucharistic theology. English Moravian ecumenist Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck's (1778–1856) detailed spiritual exposition of the Psalms was influenced by the authors from the Cistercian convent of Port-Royal, France.

The Gospels allowed women to reflect on Jesus's relationships with women and on particular figures who not only modeled female devotion and discipleship but also public leadership, specifically preaching, prophesying, and evangelism. In her polemic against those who suggested that women lacked the academic credentials needed for preaching, English Elizabeth Baxter (1837–1926) held out the woman of Samaria as an example of a woman who preached based on her experience of Jesus and not on her academic qualifications. Methodist Episcopal preacher Mabel Madeline Southard (1877–1967) used historical criticism and cultural studies to shed light on Jesus's revolutionary treatment of women, a conclusion that settled her own sense of call to ministry.

Robert Kachur's study of women's devotional writings on Revelation lists a surprising number of commentaries by women in the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ These commentaries suggest that the book of Revelation

35. Ibid.

36. Robert Kachur, "Envisioning Equality, Asserting Authority: Women's Devotional Writing on the Apocalypse, 1845–1900," in *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, ed. Julie Melnyk (New York: Garland, 1998), 3–36.

inspired women to reflect on the notion of a new heaven and a new earth, where the injustices of this world would be rectified. English poet and devotional writer Christina Rossetti (1830–94) looked forward to the equality that women would find in heaven.

Key Biblical Texts

Many women specifically addressed biblical texts that traditionally interpreted defined women's roles in marriage and in communities of faith (e.g., Gen. 1–3; 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:21–33; Col. 3:18–19; 1 Tim. 2:11–15; 5:14; 1 Pet. 3:1–7). Mary Astell (1666–1731) included a detailed exegesis of relevant New Testament texts in her *Reflections upon Marriage*, arguing for mutuality of human dependency on God and submission to God. Itinerant preacher Zilpha Elaw (ca. 1790–fl. 1846), who believed Scripture taught submission to fathers and husbands and prohibited women from teaching or preaching in church, argued that these principles could be revoked in extraordinary cases like hers. Lee Anna Starr (1853–1937) challenged Paul's authority, noting that he himself considered some of his comments to be “uninspired” (1 Cor. 7:12, 25); she suggested that Jesus's teachings be given priority over Paul's. American social activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) rejected the authority of the Bible's teachings that prescribed women's subordination and circumscribed their roles. She encouraged women to rebel against the custom of head coverings at church as a sign of subordination (1 Cor. 11:2–16) and encouraged women to use common sense when interpreting difficult passages.

Stories about Women

Women were also especially interested in stories about women and family life. They often brought a female perspective to their reading of these and other texts. English linguist Elizabeth Smith (1776–1806) revealed her particular interest in the character of Job's wife, whom she redeemed through her translation of Job 2:9–10 and 19:17. Mary Cornwallis (1758–1836) and Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810) read proverbs about the disciplining of children (e.g., Prov. 13:24; 29:15) through the lens of their experiences as mothers. Cultural sensibilities often influenced women's ability to engage issues related to sexuality. Trimmer, for example, refused to comment on the Song of Songs in her biblical commentary and notes only that the story of Tamar in Gen. 38 features “some very irregular conduct in Jacob's sons, which every true Christian must abhor, as contrary to the pure law of the gospel.”³⁷ Other in-

37. Sarah Trimmer, *A Help to the Unlearned in the Study of the Holy Scriptures* (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1805), 38.

terpreters openly discussed the biblical stories of women as victims of sexual violence. Italian nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52) courageously challenged traditional readings of the story of Dinah’s rape in Gen. 34, which blamed Dinah’s inquisitiveness and not Shechem’s sexual desires for the violent act. Josephine Butler (1828–1906) read the story of the Levite’s concubine (Judg. 19) through the lens of her own work with prostitutes as a prophetic call to women and men of England to hear the cries of England’s oppressed and to work for social change. In their quest to understand Scripture’s teachings about women, many women interpreters intuitively or intentionally followed the hermeneutical principle of common sense articulated by the American Methodist Frances Willard: “A pinch of common-sense forms an excellent ingredient in that complicated dish called Biblical interpretation, wherever it is set forth at the feast of reason, especially if it is expected at all to stimulate the flow of soul!”³⁸

Most women interpreters paid special attention to both what the Bible said and did not say about women. Those using literary genres that encouraged imagination often filled in perceived gaps in Scripture’s portrayal of figures, adding names, dialogue, and details. English educator Bathsua Makin (ca. 1600–after 1675) added to the information given in Scripture about the learning of such women as Miriam, Deborah, the Queen of Sheba, and Huldah to support her argument for female education. In her drama that retold the story of Moses’s birth with an all-female cast, writer Hannah More (1745–1833) embellished the character of Pharaoh’s daughter, suggesting that she empathized with Hebrew women suffering under her father’s cruel edict:

Unhappy mothers! Oft my heart has bled
In secret anguish o’er your slaughter’d sons;
Powerless to save, yet hating to destroy.³⁹

Catholic educator Elizabeth Bowerman (1852–1930) was sensitive to both the presence and absence of women in Scripture; she named unnamed women and added women to stories where she felt they should have been mentioned but were not (Acts 4:23; 5:14).

Reading the Bible like a Man

Not all women read the Bible through the lens of their experiences as women, highlighting stories and texts relevant to women’s lives or addressing polemical issues relating to woman’s nature and role. Many women’s writings are indistinguishable from men’s. Educator Bathsua Makin (ca. 1600–after 1675)

38. Frances E. Willard, *Woman in the Pulpit* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1888), 26.

39. Hannah More, *The Works* (London: T. Cadell, 1830), 1:13.

adopted a male persona when she published *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673). For a variety of reasons, a number of women authors did not address issues related to women. Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) showed little interest in texts related to women in the Bible; she found the image of the Suffering Servant in Isa. 49:3–4 to be a compelling model for her life of service.⁴⁰ Julia Wedgwood (1833–1913) regularly signed her name to her work yet rarely mentioned her sex; she even assumed a male persona in her article on the boundaries of science. The study materials Mary Carus-Wilson (1861–1935) prepared specifically for women made no mention of the women in the Bible. Nehama Leibowitz (1905–97), regarded by some as the first significant female Jewish Bible interpreter,⁴¹ opposed feminism and feminist readings of biblical texts.

It is not surprising that when women drew on the resources of the male academy, church, or synagogue and used the methods of interpretation honed in these centers, their interpretive work resembled that of their male contemporaries. Thus Fanny Corbaux (1812–83), a self-taught scholar, was invited to lecture and publish her work in historical geography, Semitic philology, and history of religions. A number of female advocates of biblical criticism in nineteenth-century Britain incorporated critical ideas into the educational materials they authored for children and young people.⁴² Julia Wedgwood popularized criticism in her book *The Message of Israel in the Light of Modern Criticism* (1894).

Women and Social Justice

In their teaching, preaching, theological reflection, and exposition, many women addressed issues of social justice. They wrestled with the inequities they saw regarding poverty, slavery, homelessness, education, and gender. Mary Cary (b. 1620/21, fl. 1647–53), a leading member of a militant, millenarian sectarian group, boldly advised the British government following the execution of Charles I. English commentator Elizabeth Bowdler (ca. 1717–79) engaged in social and religious commentary on such issues as slavery, suicide, purgatory, free will, and providence. Women’s concerns for social justice often went beyond the printed page. Some actively engaged in social and political movements intent on changing social conditions and

40. Florence Nightingale’s *Spiritual Journey: Biblical Annotations, Sermons and Journal Notes*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, ed. Lynn McDonald (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2001), 201.

41. Arguably, nineteenth-century British writer Grace Aguilar (1816–47) deserves that title.

42. See Barbara MacHaffie’s excellent study of how Old Testament criticism was taught to Victorian children in “Old Testament Criticism and the Education of Victorian Children,” in *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World*, ed. Stewart J. Brown and George Newlands (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 91–118.

standards. Nineteenth-century activists Sarah and Angelina Grimké wrote and spoke against slavery and in favor of women's rights. Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915) was an outspoken promoter of both holiness and temperance. Josephine Butler (1828–1906) campaigned on behalf of prostitutes in Britain and internationally. American Louise Pettibone Smith (1887–1981) was not only a credentialed biblical scholar, professor, translator, and author but also a woman whose social activism was rooted in her understanding of Old Testament law (e.g., Lev. 24:22–24).

Women as Theologians, Pastors, Religious Educators, and Preachers

[Gertrude] became a student of theology and tirelessly ruminated on all the books of the Bible she could obtain. The basket of her heart she packed to the very top with more useful, and honey-sweet texts of holy Scripture, so that she always had at hand an instructive and holy quotation.

Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of God's
Loving Kindness: Books One and Two*

The quest for the writings of forgotten women interpreters of the Bible revealed that many women interpreters were also lay theologians, religious educators, pastors, or preachers. Marcella's (ca. 327–410) passion for biblical exegesis was related to her interests in the theological implications of Scripture, which in turn led to her leadership in the anti-Originist movement in Rome. The highly venerated Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) authored a visionary work of moral theology (*Liber vitae meritorum*) and another that showcases her work in exegesis, theology, and spiritual anthropology (*Liber divinorum operum*). Franciscan mystic Angela of Foligno's (ca. 1248–1309) contemporaries designated her *Magistra theologorum*, master of theologians. Reformed Church Mother Katharina Schütz Zell (ca. 1498–1562) entwined her extensive knowledge of Scripture, pastoral sensitivities, and theology. Pietist Johanna Petersen's (1644–1724) theological treatises on millennialism and the idea of universal salvation also exhibit her work as a biblical interpreter. Irish nun Catherine McAuley's (1778–1841) *Cottage Controversy* features theological conversations between a Roman Catholic cottager and a Protestant lady of the manor. Not all female-authored theological writings gained ecclesiastical approval: French mystic Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) was burned at the stake for her heretical notion of a feminized Trinity and her call for salvation by faith alone.

Since many women's writings on Scripture are educationally focused, they shed considerable light on the history of women as religious educators. The letters of the pilgrim Egeria (fl. 380s) brought the Scriptures to life for her readers. Like many mothers throughout history, ninth-century noblewoman Dhuoda of Septimania (fl. 841) instructed her son in the basics of the Christian

life. Sarah Trimmer's (1741–1810) experiences of teaching her own children became the basis for her later career as a religious educator of children and adults. Women continued to play important roles in religious education in the twentieth century. Catholic biblical scholar Kathryn Sullivan (1905–2006), Reformed Old Testament scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier (1926–2002), and Jewish religious educator Nehama Leibowitz (1905–97) used their scholarship to inform their work as religious educators.

The numbers of women who preached in public or with the pen throughout history are surprising.⁴³ In her sermon on 1 Cor. 14:34, Italian preacher Domenica Narducci (1473–1533) challenged traditional ecclesial exegesis that prohibited women from preaching. Genevan Marie Dentièrre (1495–ca. 1561) opposed traditional readings of Paul and Calvin in her defense of women's right to interpret, teach, and preach Scripture. English Puritan Katherine Evans (ca. 1618–92) was publicly whipped and imprisoned for her preaching. Anglican writer Mary Deverell (fl. 1774–97) wrote and published a series of sermons on a dare. Author Esther Copley (1786–1851) wrote sermons for her alcoholic husband, enabling him to carry out his Sunday preaching obligations at the Baptist church in Kent. Finnish sleep preacher Helena Konttinen (1871–1916) delivered sermons in a sleeplike state. The numbers of women engaged in preaching ministries increased significantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁴

Moreover, women's interpretive writings on Scripture often contained pastoral insights for their readers. Women's letters to family members and friends often addressed pastoral care issues. German Reformer Katharina Schütz Zell (ca. 1498–1562) offered effective pastoral advice to those under her care. In her novel *Minister's Wooing*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96) advocated for female pastors. In her commentaries, Mary Cornwallis (1758–1836) offered practical and moral counsel to those facing life's challenges.

That the search for women interpreters brought to light female theologians, religious educators, preachers, and pastors is to be expected. Most of the women interpreters featured in this collection did not separate out the theological disciplines. They read Scripture in light of their experiences, questions, and needs; they expected Scripture to speak into their lives.

43. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, eds., *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Mary Kim Eunjoo, *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice through the Ages* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004).

44. Christine Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850–1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

The Cloud of Witnesses

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset [us], and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.

Heb. 12:1

Agnon's story of the beautifully bound but blank book of women's wisdom reminds us that for much of our history the wisdom of our foremothers was not passed on from one generation to the next. Instead of building on the wisdom of foremothers regarding biblical interpretation, faith, and tradition, each generation of interpreters confronted issues related to women and the Bible anew. What would it have meant for women in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries to have had before them Mary Astell's (1666–1731) reading of Paul and women? Would history have been different if Johanna Petersen's (1644–1724) empowering theology of women had been passed on to subsequent generations of Pietists? What would it mean today for women studying theology to know that their foremothers of faith also wrestled with how to balance family life and professional life?⁴⁵

Of course some women in history did have access to the wisdom of other women.⁴⁶ A number chose to live in community with other women, where they discussed religious matters and shared their ideas and writings. Women living in the intellectual and mystical center of the Benedictine-Cistercian monastery at Helfta (in Saxony) often had contact with other religious: Mechthild of Hackeborn (1240–98) learned from the prolific authors Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1208–ca. 1282/94) and Gertrude the Great (ca. 1256–1302). Some Protestant writers shared their wisdom with other women (and sometimes men) who encouraged them intellectually, emotionally, and financially. Mary Astell (1666–1731) had the companionship and patronage of female neighbors and friends; Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806) and Hannah More (1745–1833) were members of an association of women known as The Blue Stocking Society. Some women shared their wisdom with other women through the written word: Egeria (fl. 380s) wrote an account of her travels in the Holy Land for a community of women at home who shared her passion for the Scriptures; the writings of Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) influenced the early twentieth-century English prophetic figure Mabel Barltrop.⁴⁷ The wisdom of Madame Guyon (1648–1717) continues to influence a number of religious communities

45. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Harriet Beecher Stowe specifically wrote about the tension between professional and domestic self-fulfillment.

46. The influence of men's wisdom on women is assumed here. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, constantly drew on the expertise of her husband, renowned biblical scholar Calvin Stowe.

47. Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (London: Jonathan Cape; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

today.⁴⁸ As the writings of women are studied more fully, the patterns of influence will become clearer, including the transatlantic cross-pollination of women's wisdom. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the introduction to Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's (1790–1846) *Collected Works*; Sophia Ashton (1819–72) borrowed heavily from the writings of Grace Aguilar (1816–47).⁴⁹

Conclusion

This book shows that Agnon's suggestion that *The Book of the Wisest of Women* is empty is wrong. The wisdom of many women was written down and shared with individuals and communities of listeners and readers. Women's interpretations of the Bible did not, however, become part of the great-book tradition; as a result their influence was circumscribed, and their writings were lost or forgotten.

This book remembers women interpreters and suggests that what they wrote is important. It speaks of women who felt called to study, write, teach, and preach Scripture. It tells how Scripture inspired women to live lives of sacrifice and devotion, to daringly engage their culture and challenge tradition. It reveals patterns of interpretation, including a focus on female characters in Scripture and questions related to women's nature and place. It also shows that women did not all interpret Scripture in the same way: their interpretations were shaped by their experiences, culture, questions, and interpretive methods.

Discovering what the Bible meant to women in the past helps us in our quest to discover its meaning for today. As John Thompson states: "We don't fully know what the Bible *means* until we know something about what the Bible *has meant*."⁵⁰ Reading Scripture through the eyes of women can open us to hear the Scripture in new ways. As John Goldingay suggests, one generation's blindness to the meaning of a text can be corrected by reading through the eyes of interpreters from another generation or context: "There are certain aspects of this written witness [canon of Scripture] which one generation can 'hear' in the way that another cannot, so that interpreters who want to appropriate the text's significance as fully as possible are willing to look at it through the eyes of other generations' exegesis as well as of their own, which are inevitably blinkered in certain respects."⁵¹

48. Patricia A Ward, *Experimental Theology in America: Madame Guyon, Fenélon, and Their Readers* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009).

49. Taylor and Weir, *Let Her Speak for Herself*, 10, 149–50.

50. John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 11.

51. John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 41–42.

Women's wisdom through the ages deserves careful consideration. And as educator and social activist Frances Willard (1839–98) recognized, it is important to listen to both male and female perspectives on texts: “And the truth of God, a thousand times repeated by the voice of history, science, and every-day experience[,] resounds louder to-day than in all preceding ages: ‘It is not good for man to be alone!’”⁵²

52. Frances E. Willard, *Woman in the Pulpit* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1888), 45.

■ **Achtemeier, Elizabeth Rice** (1926–2002)

Elizabeth Rice Achtemeier was born in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, on June 11, 1926. Her strong faith and her love for the church were instilled in her by the example of her mother, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, and by the worship and Christian education offered at the First Presbyterian Church of Bartlesville. The church was the center of the family's life. Particularly meaningful to the young Elizabeth were the hymns and music of the church, through which, she recalled, she came to know the language of faith. She also developed an appreciation for good preaching and sound biblical scholarship at an early age. Faith, she learned, was "to be informed by sound and diligent learning" (*Not Til I Have Done*, 11), a commitment that shaped her life and her career as a biblical scholar.

Achtemeier was raised with a belief in the equality of women and was supported by her parents in her academic pursuits. She completed her undergraduate work at Stanford University, where she was encouraged to attend seminary by a university chaplain whom she credited with shaping her religious thought and her academic future. In the fall of 1948, Achtemeier entered Union Theological Seminary in New York with plans to become a Christian educator. After some congregational experience, however, she discerned a call to ordained ministry. She noted the influence on her life of many outstanding theologians and church leaders who taught at Union Seminary in the mid-twentieth century, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, John Bennett, Paul Scherer, George Buttrick, and James Muilenburg.

While a divinity student at Union, Elizabeth Rice met Paul J. Achtemeier, a fellow student. They married on her birthday in June 1952 and became partners in marriage and in scholarship, raising two children and coauthoring several articles and books. Together they traveled to Europe on fellowships to study with Gerhard von Rad in Germany and Karl Barth in Switzerland. Barth's teaching on the Word of God in Jesus Christ and transcendence in Scripture inspired Achtemeier's own lifelong emphasis on the Word of God, especially as it is made manifest in preaching. After returning to the United States, Achtemeier entered the PhD program at Columbia University in conjunction with Union Theological Seminary, focusing her work in the area of Old Testament, under the direction of Professor James Muilenburg, who had

inspired her academic interest and her commitment to “solid scholarship with revelatory insight into the Word of God” (*Not Til I Have Done*, 40).

While completing her doctoral work, Achteemeier joined her husband on the faculty of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where she taught Old Testament as a visiting professor. She also traveled to teach at Gettysburg and Pittsburgh seminaries. As she moved from teaching Old Testament theology to content, she adopted the methodology she had learned under Gerhard von Rad in Heidelberg, “dividing the Old Testament into three Heilsgeschichte (salvation history) units, each with its own major theological testimony” (*Not Til I Have Done*, 81). She was thereby able to organize and teach the vast amount of diverse material found in the Old Testament. In the process of working with Old Testament texts, Achteemeier also discerned a pattern of promise and fulfillment in the activity of God as revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. On examining specific texts more closely, the Scriptures became for her “a unified story” that defined much of her future work as a biblical scholar. Her understanding of God’s ongoing divine activity by means of the continuity of both Testaments was set forth in her first book, *The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith*.

In 1973 the Achteemeiers moved to Richmond, Virginia, where Paul joined the all-male faculty of Union Theological Seminary as a professor of New Testament. Despite gender bias and an unwritten policy forbidding the hiring of faculty wives, Elizabeth was offered an appointment as a visiting and, later, adjunct professor of Old Testament. The need on the faculty at the time, however, was for a homiletics professor, and Achteemeier was asked to serve as a visiting professor of homiletics. She had recently published what would become one of her most popular works, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*, making her the ideal choice for the appointment. She welcomed the opportunity, having embraced the field of homiletics as the ultimate venue for her biblical work, and she focused many of her subsequent publications on various aspects of preaching.

Achteemeier’s joint appointment in Bible and homiletics led to one of her greatest and most important contributions to the field of biblical scholarship: bridging the worlds of biblical scholarship and Christian preaching. Throughout her life, Achteemeier had been inspired by good preaching and came to see its importance for the life and work of the church. Because of her belief in the centrality of preaching, she lamented what she perceived to be a decline in the quality of preaching in many churches by the 1970s. In *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*, she addressed what she discerned to be one of the primary reasons for that decline: the loss of the Bible and a disregard for biblical authority in the church. Mainstream Protestantism, she lamented, had strayed from its biblical foundations, resulting in preaching that was little more than feel-good therapy or personal opinion, worship that reflected the congregation and its culture more than the Bible and the heritage of the

church, and pastoral ministry shaped by the ideas and practices of secular psychology and social agendas. “The Bible is that which creates the church,” she stated in an interview in 1989. “It is that story that sustains the church’s life. As soon as the church wanders away from the biblical story, it ceases to be the Christian church. It becomes something else—a social society, a good works agency, an ideological group, etc.”

Part of the reason for the loss of the Bible in the church, Achtemeier maintained, was Christianity’s abandonment of the Old Testament. Restoring the Bible and its story to a central place in the church meant acknowledging the *whole* story, including the Old Testament, as necessary for the life of the Christian church. The Old Testament’s understanding of God and God’s activity “forms the basis of the New Testament’s view of Jesus Christ and his church,” she wrote in *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*. “When the church lost the Old Testament, it therefore lost the Bible—and the Christian faith—as a whole,” leaving it “to carry on its life apart from the totality of its Scripture” (44). To that end, the majority of Achtemeier’s interpretive work was focused on the Old Testament and its use in Christian preaching.

Achtemeier entered the professional worlds of both the church and the academy at a time when feminism was on the rise. She played an interesting and important role in the evolving debate over feminist theologies and approaches to Scripture. After years of encountering feminist ideology, she wrote her definitive statement on feminism in an article for the journal *Interpretation*: “The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Theology” (1988). She concluded that “there is no one feminist approach to Bible and theology,” a field that embraces a multitude of views and is constantly changing (45). The question, she stated, was “not *if* women should enjoy equal status, personhood, and discipleship in the church but *how* that God-given freedom is to be gained—or perhaps better, regained.” She affirmed the work of biblical scholars in the 1970s and 1980s showing evidence in Scripture that women “enjoyed equal discipleship and service in the company of Jesus and in the earliest New Testament Church” (46). Over the centuries of the church, much of that freedom had been lost, she observed, making the question not one of “*if* women should enjoy equal freedom in Christ but *how* to reclaim it. How can the church in our time become the *whole* people of God? How can it be the one Body of Christ in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female?” (46).

The question of “How?” is the point at which Achtemeier diverged from other feminist scholars. She acknowledged the discrimination against women that persisted to some degree in all Christian communions, even those that ordained women as clergy, but the remedy for that discrimination lay in a deeper look at the Bible rather than in noncanonical resources such as personal experience or non-Christian religious traditions. She condemned the feminist approach that abandoned the authority of Scripture and claimed the Bible to

be “a totally androcentric book, compiled and interpreted through the centuries solely by men, and therefore useless for evaluating feminist positions” (“The Impossible Possibility,” 48). She also feared that in such an interpretive stance, “the basis for deciding what is or what is not the Word of God has been shifted from the givenness of the canonical whole to the subjective position of the reader” (49). Such a “standpoint-dependent” theology is open to distortion, she believed. One the one hand, “When our own experience is the criterion, what overcomes our tendencies to self-interest, to pride, to rationalization, and to sin? What becomes the measure of what is just and unjust?” On the other hand, “there is a ‘givenness’ to the canon. It has been assembled and handed down to us; it contains words that stand over against us and judge us; and we have to come to grips with it,” including its demands and call to obedience (51).

Countering the claims of some feminist scholars, Achtemeier argued that the texts they sought to “exorcize” from the Bible were neither as numerous nor as problematic as those scholars portrayed them to be. The Pauline strictures against women’s participation in the church found in 1 Cor. 14, she maintained, “are clearly contradicted by his assumption in 1 Corinthians 11 that women will prophesy and pray in worship, and chapter 14 is therefore historically conditioned.” Another seemingly problematic text, Eph. 5, was certainly “written out of a patriarchal setting,” but it “overcomes its own culture with the love of God: Husband and wife are to be *subject to one another* in Christ, acting toward each other as if toward the Lord (symbolized for the husband in Christ’s body, the church) and rendering to each other that sacrificial love with which Christ loves his own” (“The Impossible Possibility,” 53). There is nothing demeaning in that portrait, Achtemeier wrote. Texts about women found in the Pastoral Epistles “reflect the struggle of the church to set its own house in order, in the face of Gnostic asceticism and libertinism.” The “weak women” in 2 Tim. 3:1–9 had been led astray by gnostic teaching. The portrayal of women in that text “vividly illumines the problems that the church was up against, if it does not excuse the surrender to patriarchal culture that the church adopted” (53).

Rather than “throwing out portions of the canon,” especially in an age when many have questioned biblical authority and abandoned the Scriptures, Achtemeier advocated accepting the Bible as a whole and applying “the Reformation principle of letting the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures to understand rightly any particular passage” (“The Impossible Possibility,” 53). She maintained that at the very beginning of the sacred history, there is the affirmation of female equality: “our equal creation in the image of God, our mutual helpfulness and companionship with our mates, and the affirmation that male domination over female is the result of our sin.” At the end of that sacred history in Jesus Christ, “there is the defeat of that domination and the ringing affirmation that we are all one in our Lord, an affirmation acted out

so vividly in Jesus' own attitudes and actions toward every sort of woman" (52). Christ is "the final reinterpretation of the whole sacred history" (53), making the ultimate message of the Bible a "liberating message, in which in fact countless Christian men and women have found their one source of true freedom in the service of their Lord" (54).

In addition to her contributions to the fields of biblical scholarship and homiletics, Achtemeier sought the Bible's authoritative word on what she called "burning issues" of her time, including marriage and family, sexuality, abortion, and environmental issues. Above all else, she was a biblical scholar in and for the church, evidenced by more than twenty books and many articles. In addition, she was a popular preacher and lecturer, preaching from many of the best-known pulpits in churches and university chapels across the United States and Canada and giving several major lectureships. She was a frequent speaker at conferences for clergy and laity. All of her life's work—writing, teaching, and preaching—reflects her passion for understanding and responding to God's Word in Jesus Christ.

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— BEVERLY ZINK-SAWYER

■ **Adams, Hannah** (1755–1831)

Hannah Adams was born in 1755 in Medfield, Massachusetts. She was the second of five children born to Thomas Adams and Elizabeth Clark. Her mother died when she was twelve years old, and her father, a failed farmer and an unsuccessful merchant, was unable to provide financial security for his children, though his love for books translated into an extensive library. This access to books allowed Hannah to develop her appetite for literature. She