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The Women's Bible Commentary, Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe

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Book Reviews

Markus McDowell,
Editor

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), reviewed by Ronald L. Tyler.

Carol Newsom, Old Testament professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory University and Sharon Ringe, New Testament professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, have edited the first *scholarly* commentary written by female Biblical scholars. Recent years have seen an incredible growth in feminist biblical studies. This 396-page commentary, written by forty-one women, is a product of that movement. To read the list of contributors is to be introduced to some of the world's leading women interpreters drawn from Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish traditions.

The editors admit being inspired by a two-volume work done in 1895-1898 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (*The Woman's Bible*), but recall that it did not have academically trained women willing to write for it. They have followed Stanton's model of commenting mainly on those passages relating to women.

In addition to covering each book of the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha (the Apocrypha in one chapter), the commentary includes some brief essays: the editors' Introduction, Sharon Ringe, "When Women Interpret the Bible", Carol Meyers, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible", Amy Wordelman, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament", and Deirdre Good, "Extracanonial Writings." These essays consider the lives of women in the biblical period, women in early Christian writings outside the canon, and modern feminist readings of the Bible. I urge you to read the Introduction and "When

Women Interpret the Bible" as an orientation before using this commentary.

Each book is briefly introduced with a discussion of contemporary critical issues and a summary of its content. The introduction is followed by brief comments on those portions relevant to, or about, women, including the presence (or absence) of women, marriage customs, family contexts, rights of women at that time, and various relationships of women with men and their culture. Here information is often found which is not in other commentaries. After reading another commentary, check the treatment of the book in this volume, and you will be in for some surprises—some intimidating and some exciting. Cited on the dust jacket is a reviewer's comment from the *Library Journal*: "This commentary will raise eyebrows, and it will raise consciousness as well." Select bibliographies are included for each book. These bibliographies, naturally, stress women's contributions.

Amy-Jill Levine's contribution on Ruth is one of the best treatments of Ruth available. She gives a solid overview of the book and does not hesitate to interpret chapter 3 as a "seduction" with Ruth uncovering, not Boaz's "feet" but his "genitals." Her study properly rescues Ruth from being labeled "A Love Story," and then misread and misused.

Gail O'Day's study of the fourth gospel reveals the important role that women play in the Jesus story. Especially interesting is her treatment of the role of women in the resurrection of Jesus. Correctly observing that all the gospels underscore that it was women who came early Sunday morning to the tomb, she stresses Mary Magdalene in the story. I first became aware of the importance of women in the Johannine resurrection story reading B. F. Westcott's, *The Revelation of the Risen*

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Lord, 1902, wherein he showed the revelation was to love. O'Day develops this in a different, but informative, direction.

O'Day also did the study of Acts, which will be of special interest to **Leaven** readers. A mention of her topics will give you some flavor of what to expect: women believers in the early church, asides about women, women and ministry in the early church, Ananias and Sapphira, the raising of Tabitha, Rhoda at the gate, the women at Philippi, Priscilla and Aquila, Acts and women's experience, women's roles, and women's futures.

Jouette M. Bassler's study of 1 Corinthians will also be of special interest to readers of **Leaven**. Regarding 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, which she labels "silence," you will find a clear statement of the problem these verses represent, followed by a listing of the major interpretations given. She opts for their being a marginal gloss.

Any student—male or female—interested in an overview of a given book of the Bible or Apocrypha and/or those portions wherein women are central should have access to this volume. You will not always agree with what you read but you will always be stimulated and you will learn. And what more can you ask from a one-volume commentary!

Ronald L. Tyler teaches New Testament studies at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, **In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins** (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983) 357 pp. \$17.95, reviewed by Christy Atler.

The quest for identity predominates the history of the restorationist tradition, many Sunday morning lessons, and even the strand of feminism threaded through churches across the country today. For many individuals, the church represents a means for discovering their identity. For many women especially, the desire to unveil and rediscover the role of women in the early church expresses an urgent need to embrace a female identity.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1983 published **In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins**, which voices her criticisms concerning the exclusion of women's history and her re-examination of early church history. Schüssler Fiorenza states that the void of women in church history is manifested by the treatment of the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' head with oil, a story which has little represen-

tation in the modern-day re-enactment of the Last Supper. Jesus' proclamation in Mark 14:9 that "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" is forgotten along with her name and remembrance of her faithfulness. For Schüssler Fiorenza, women's history in the early church is a lost and forgotten history resulting from androcentrism (a male bias in reading and interpreting the text). **In Memory of Her** seeks to revive the place of women otherwise overlooked and/or down-played in the early church. It also endeavors to rediscover women in the patriarchal world of the Bible to "not only restore early Christian history to women but also [to] lead to a richer and more accurate perception of early Christian beginnings."

Recognizing that the New Testament text was written according to androcentric presuppositions, Schüssler Fiorenza approaches the context of the biblical text affirming the theological principle of inclusiveness within the early church. Inclusiveness in Christianity allows for a greater acceptance of women and an expansion of their roles. Though the text may be silent on the whereabouts of women and their specific roles within the church, Schüssler Fiorenza casts New Testament women in a fundamentally new light. She not only focuses on the concrete biblical details about women, but she often contemplates some creative possibilities. These possibilities do not always have comprehensive evidence to support them, which may discourage the reader. Nevertheless, through reading **In Memory of Her**, we are challenged to remember the phenomenal women who labored, preached, housed Christians, and held significant leadership roles within the early church.

In Memory of Her is written for a specific audience, namely those who seek to challenge their perceptions of women in Christianity. Restoring women's history to the hands of Christian women is a challenge for the modern-day church and not a struggle for women alone. **In Memory of Her** helps to revive the place of women in Christian history and forces us to look at the texts in newfound ways.

Christy Atler, a religion major, graduated from Seaver College, Pepperdine University in April. She begins graduate study this fall at Harvard Divinity School.

(Editor's Note): A tenth anniversary edition of **In Memory of Her** was published in 1993. This review of her earlier work underscores the importance of Schüssler Fiorenza's place in New Testament studies as well as the debate surrounding this crucial but debatable study.