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Review of Peggy Day, Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel

Daniel L. Smith-Christopher
Loyola Marymount University, dchristopher@lmu.edu

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Genre of a Pauline Letter,” by John T. Fitzgerald (pp. 190-200); “Morality between Two Worlds: A Paradigm of Friendship in Philippians,” by L. Michael White (pp. 201-15); “An Aristotelian Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Thessalonians,” by Thomas H. Olbricht (pp. 216-36); and “The Beginnings of the Church at Thessalonica,” by Dieter Lührmann (pp. 237-49).


True to the tradition of the man they honor, these essays “focus on the interaction between Greco-Roman culture and early Christianity, especially as this involves Hellenistic philosophy, literature, rhetoric, anthropology, ethics, and urban life” (p. xiii). There is a marked exegetical focus centering on studies of specific NT texts in comparison with specific Hellenistic texts. There is also an emphasis on strict historical methodology and on conclusions carefully and concisely drawn. Such emphases represent accurately the substantial legacy of Abraham J. Malherbe, whose influence in the discipline of NT studies is considerable and is especially to be found among former students and colleagues such as are represented here.

Dennis E. Smith, Phillips Graduate Seminary, Enid, OK 73702


The twelve essays in this volume are a welcome addition to the growing literature on feminist analysis of the Bible.

In “Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern” (pp. 12-27), Jo Ann Hackett associates an ancient Near Eastern literary motif (from sources such as the Gilgamesh epic and Canaanite poetic narratives) with a similar biblical motif found in the story of the banishment of Hagar. Hackett argues that this motif focuses on the abuse of power and thus the sympathetic reader is drawn to Ishmael and Hagar as the suffering protagonists of the story.

Susan Hollis’s article, “The Woman in Ancient Examples of the Potiphar’s Wife Motif, K2111’” (pp. 28-42), offers the somewhat strained argument that the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar’s wife began a chain of events that led to Joseph’s rise to power and “thus, one can see the apparently destructive female in fact effects
long-term positive results" (p. 38). While questions can always be asked about the portrayal of women in the role of "seductress" (especially by men), does Hollis's interesting argument stretch a bit toward a more positive view of Potiphar's wife?

In "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael" (pp. 43-57), Susan Niditch comments on the interplay of eroticism and death in Judges 4 and 5 and argues that Jael represents a powerful symbol of the reversal of low and high status persons—thus representing the victory of the weak over the strong.

Peggy Day's contribution, "From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughters" (pp. 58-74) is a suggestive cross-cultural analysis of ancient Greek rituals of female adolescence compared with the "mourning" of women in Judges 11. Day argues that "the cross-cultural stability of both the structure and symbolism of life-cycle rituals provides some common ground for comparison" (p. 65).

Phyllis Bird takes up the debate about the meaning of the Hebrew root znh in Hosea in her essay, "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor" (pp. 75-94). Her analysis concludes with emphasis on understanding the metaphor of a sexually promiscuous woman applied to Israel as a whole.

Mary Joan Winn Leith, in "Verse and Reverse: The Transformation of the Woman, Israel, in Hosea 1-3" (pp. 95-108), argues that the cumulative effect of Hosea's female imagery in Hosea 1-3 is best seen as stages of development, or rites of passage, in the life of a person (Israel), described in consistently (positive as well as negative) female imagery and language.

Susan Ackerman's main task in "'And the Women Knead Dough': The Worship of the Queen of Heaven in Sixth-Century Judah" (pp. 109-24) is to establish that Astarte was in fact the "Queen of Heaven" whose cult had a place in predeuteronomistic Israelite worship.

Paula S. Hiebert provides an interesting analysis of the socioeconomic basis for the problems of widowhood in ancient Israel in "Whence Shall Help Come to Me? The Biblical Widow" (pp. 125-41), particularly noting the absence of significant dowry funds for the continued support of women in the case of the death of the spouse.

Carol A. Newsom, in "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9" (pp. 142-60), offers a general survey of the patriarchal character of "wisdom" in Proverbs. It is unfortunate that Bernhard Lang's recent work on possible references to a goddess of wisdom (Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined [New York: Pilgrim, 1986]) appeared too late to be taken into consideration.

In "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora" (pp. 161-77), Sidnie Ann White surveys the ways in which Esther stands as symbolic of Jews in exile. This is well established for Esther, Daniel, and the Joseph stories, of course; but the Esther "model" is even more suggestive when Esther is portrayed from the perspective of feminist avoidance of what E. Schussler Fiorenza has called an androcentric reading of the biblical material.

Finally, Eileen Schuller describes the interesting way in which the prominent role of women in the Exodus material was muted in late Jewish description in the Greek and Roman periods in "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period" (pp. 178-94). This essay proves the value of a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion.
In her introduction (pp. 1-11), editor Peggy L. Day states that, although there is no common methodological or theological orientation shared by all the articles in Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel, the "focus of the collection is on adopting and applying feminist critical approaches developed in the secular humanities and social sciences to the field of biblical studies" (p. 1). These collected articles certainly illustrate the variety of approaches within feminist analyses of the Bible. At the same time, the very diversity itself leaves the reader with questions about not only the nature of feminist methodology but also the meaning of the term feminist. The study of subjects of interest to feminists using conventional methodologies seems the goal of some of these essays; others propose a "value-oriented" reading of texts, focusing on the values of the reader as much as the values of the texts. Although both approaches are valid, the latter is more clearly a feminist methodology.

Daniel L. Smith, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 90045


This fine collection of several of de Jonge's previously published essays marks both his sixty-fifth birthday and his retirement as professor of NT and early Christian literature at Leiden University. The essays appear as they were originally published, although de J. does provide an introduction to them which traces the evolution of his work from his doctoral dissertation (under the direction of J. de Zwaan and T. W. Manson) to his retirement at the end of 1990. Prominent in this discussion is his well-known and distinctive view of the T. 12 Patr.: "whether or not Jewish 'Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs' ever existed (and in whatever form), they cannot be reconstructed on the basis of the Christian Testaments of the end of the second century A.D. that have been handed down to us" (pp. xiii-xiv). Though not all share his view of the Testaments, his work has provoked many to serious study of the Testaments and other so-called OT Pseudepigrapha in light of their transmission (and often authorship) within Christian circles. He rightly notes that scholars must take seriously that early Christian readers found much that was relevant in these "Jewish" documents, and that any study must take account of the "life" of the text in a Christian context. De J. also traces his work on christology, both the variety of Jewish expectations of (an) "Anointed One(s)" and early Christian uses of the term christos. These studies represent the thirty years of work which culminated in the publication of Christology in Context: The Earliest Christian Response to Jesus (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) and Jesus, the Servant Messiah (New Haven: Yale University, 1991).

Part I: Eschatology and Christology, includes the following eight essays: "The Expectation of the Future in the Psalms of Solomon" (pp. 3-27); "The Role of Intermediaries in God's Final Intervention in the Future According to the Qumran Scrolls" (pp. 28-47); "Josephus und die Zukunftserwartungen seines Volkes" (pp. 48-62); "The Use of ho Christos in the Passion Narratives" (pp. 63-86); "The Use of