

## ○ REVIEW OF *ON THE CUTTING EDGE: THE STUDY OF WOMEN IN BIBLICAL WORLDS*, EDITED BY JANE SCHABERG ET AL.

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Gerald West reviews *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds*, edited by Jane Schaberg, Alice Bach and Esther Fuchs (New York and London: Continuum, 2003).



This collection of essays in honour of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers the reader a sense of the kind of work that is currently being done by feminist, mainly biblical, scholars. In so doing the book is a display of cutting edge feminist scholarship in as much as it is also an honouring of Schüssler Fiorenza's cutting edge scholarship (viii).

The essays are by no means only an exegesis of Schüssler Fiorenza's work. Indeed, though all the essays pay tribute to her work and find some association with it, many of the essays make their own particular contributions. The brief Preface, written by the editors, provides a guide to how the essays might be clustered in terms of their contributions. Those most closely related to Schüssler Fiorenza's preferred socio-historical reconstructionist reading methodology draw most on her work, but extend it into other domains, including Tal Ilan's reconstruction of the Pharisee *havura* and its egalitarian ethos, Joan E. Taylor's reconstruction of the place of women in the Therapeutae, Sheila Briggs' socio-historical reconstruction of the complex interrelationships between slavery and gender in the world behind Paul's texts, Jane Schaberg's reconstruction of what she calls Magdalene christianity, and Antoinette Clark Wire's reconstruction of the oral resurrection stories of the non-writers whose tales were appropriated by biblical texts.

Around these essays are a range of other, less socio-historically orientated essays. Alice Bach does some socio-historical reconstruction of ancient women's altars, but does not restrict herself to the 'biblical' past. She roams about in time and space, bringing a whole variety of women's altars into juxtaposition. Daringly – and I will return to this below – she even includes the altars evoked by the so-called 9/11 attacks on the USA. Elizabeth A. Castelli brings aspects of Schüssler Fiorenza's work into dialogue with European and North American feminist utopian thought. Pushpa Joseph, the only contributor from the margins of empire, compares the work of Schüssler Fiorenza and the Indian liberation theologian George M. Soares-Prabhu. Athalya Brenner inter-

rogates the violence integral to the marriage metaphors used by the prophetic books. Adele Reinhartz explores how Jesus films appropriate the biblical material in constructing the happy holy family. Tina Pippin adopts an overtly postmodern approach to reading the biblical story of the woman anointing Jesus. Ute E. Eisen uses semiotic methodology to interpret the boundary transgressions in Acts 10:1-11:18, and Alicia Ostriker composes a lament in solidarity with Jephthah's daughter.

However, what all the essays share, as the opening essay by Esther Fuchs indicates, is a concern with feminist hermeneutics. In the words of Sheila Briggs, 'The publication of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In memory of her* in 1983 changed the terms of the debate by prioritizing hermeneutics over historical reconstruction in feminist biblical interpretation' (173). Central to her hermeneutics of suspicion is that the 'New Testament writings were *constituted* as the ideological suppression of women in the Christian communities' (174). For Schüssler Fiorenza, with her socio-historical emphasis, the 'normative emancipatory core was to be found not in the texts but in the resistance of women to the ideology of the texts' (174). A related element of this feminist hermeneutics was a direct link between an ideological suspicion of the received text, the socio-historical reconstruction of a more egalitarian reality, and present-day reform. The hermeneutical moves involved in linking reconstructed past with present, though implicit in many of the essays, are overtly discussed by Briggs and Schaberg.

For those of us who do our biblical scholarship on the edges of empire, there is much in this collection of value and use, particularly the more overt hermeneutical reflections. Though the essays are rather restricted in terms of the social locations of the contributors, there is plenty of resonance. In contexts like my own, South Africa, the Bible is deeply imbedded in the lives of the vast majority of our people, particularly the poor, working-class, and marginalised. How our work as scholars relates to such communities of faith is therefore a central question in our hermeneutics. Though I would have liked to have found more of this kind of reflection in this book, what is there is significant. I would also have hoped to have found more sensitivity to our global neo-liberal capitalist and neo-colonial context. The scholarship in this volume is being done, almost entirely, within the empire. What are the resonances with the work being done elsewhere by others? The attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001, incorporated into the discourse of this book by Bach, were a crude but articulate reply to empire. Surely we should not have to wait for such eruptions to draw attention to our systemic connectedness? Would that the sensitivity shown in these essays to androcentric and anti-Semitic tendencies in biblical scholarship was extended to other discriminatory discourses and other crimes against humanity in this age of empire.

This volume would have benefited from a general index and an index of biblical texts. Such indices would assist the reader in finding the numerous connections that there are among the essays. For example, a number of the essays engage with Galatians 3:28, just as number deal with the issue of anti-Semitism. Most readers will probably dip into this collection rather than read it as a book, so such indices would have been helpful.