The Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters

Edited by Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi | Reviewed by Christine Cos

“Woman’s sphere is wider than we think and women’s influence is perhaps stronger than we like to allow.”—F. Digby Legard

The Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters is a long-awaited resource for those who want to engage in a more thorough analysis of Scripture by means of reception history (also technically known as Wirkungsgeschichte or “history of interpretation”). While this methodology of biblical scholarship is still developing, resources such as this will enable its advancement while also creating a more level playing field for biblical interpretations from both genders.

The title of Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi’s newly published reference work says it all. This is the first reference volume specifically devoted to women interpreters of the Bible for whom there are extant written works from which modern-day biblical scholars, pastors, and seminarians may glean great insights previously unavailable to a mass audience. While this volume is by no means exhaustive, it brings to the table 180 new voices to add to those who have dedicated their lives to the study and practice of Scripture.

The book’s purpose and structure are outlined in a thorough and lucid introduction by Marion Ann Taylor. This substantial work, consisting of essays written by scholars predominantly from North America and Great Britain, is designed to be a foundation and launching pad for further studies in the history of interpretation. The entries span nearly two millennia, from the fourth century up to the twentieth. Post-nineteenth-century women were specifically limited to those who are deceased (so that a woman’s full life’s work could be analyzed) and to those whose work predated the “globalization of the profession of biblical studies and the significant expansion in the involvement of women and ethnic minorities with professional biblical studies in the 1970s and ’80s” (21–22).

Taylor takes the reader through all of the influences and subsequent biblical foci for each of the women analyzed within this volume. Since Taylor’s own research has focused mainly, though not exclusively, on nineteenth-century women biblical interpreters, the issues of slavery, abolition, temperance, and the suffrage movement (women’s rights) are addressed either directly or indirectly by women interpreters of the period. It should not be surprising that many women of this period were also social activists.

The book is comprised of biographical and analytical synopses of the women included in this volume, written by different contributing scholars, including the editors themselves. Entries are organized alphabetically, with a chronological list of interpreters at the back of the book for
reference. Each entry includes key factual detail about each woman interpreter, including bibliographical references, so the length of each entry varies. Each contributor takes into account the fact that a woman’s familial and educational influences naturally provide the context for her interpretive work.

Each woman interpreter’s work included in this volume was analyzed, focusing on (1) her approach and methods of biblical interpretation, with particular attention given to “gendered exegesis” when addressing problematic passages; (2) the key themes that flow out of her work, and (3) examples as illustrations of the former. Following the biographical and analytical entries that make up the bulk of the book, Taylor and Choi include a series of indices to aid biblical scholars who may choose to use this book as part of their research.

Some of the women highlighted in this book are well known to us from church history, including mystics Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila. Others are known to us from American history, such as Anne Bradstreet, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Florence Nightingale. Aside from their influence on American society, they were engaged in interpreting the Bible as part of their social missions.

The majority of the book includes many familiar orthodox biblical interpretive voices known to CBE members. For example, Margery Kempe’s (1373–1438) sole work, The Book of Margery Kempe, gives a unique insight into the public and private religious life of a Catholic woman in medieval England, where unauthorized writing and preaching was forbidden by the church. Hannah More (1745–1833) was an “evangelical bluestocking” who championed many radical social causes, most notably the abolition of slavery in Britain, working closely with William Wilberforce (373).³

Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874), the first successful American woman revivalist of the Holiness movement, is known for starting the “Tuesday Meetings,” where people of all ages, gender, and, more notably, denomination, could meet to study the Bible and promote Holiness. Palmer also practiced her faith by engaging in humanitarian work to improve living conditions in the slums of New York City. Deeply influenced by Palmer’s work, Catherine Booth (1829–1890), cofounder of the Salvation Army along with her husband William Booth, became an influential British Holiness preacher and evangelist in her own right. Another “disciple” of Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard (1839–1898), became the first woman college president to confer degrees, becoming president of the Evanston College for Ladies in 1870. Later, she found her calling in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and was also an ardent advocate of women’s suffrage.

Katherine Bushnell (1855–1946) served as a missionary doctor in China for several years. As part of the WCTU, she set up a home for “fallen women” in Chicago in addition to investigating rampant prostitution in the lumber and mining camps of northern Wisconsin and Michigan. Bushnell firmly believed that male-biased biblical translations and interpretations were
responsible for the subjugation of women. She developed a correspondence course for women on the teachings of the Bible which was ultimately published as *God’s Word to Women* in 1923.

On the continent, Jesse Penn-Lewis (1861–1927), through her work with young women at the YWCA, became an ardent evangelist, speaking all over Britain, continental Europe, North America, India, and Egypt. She published more than eighty booklets, most notably *The Magna Charta of Woman*. In India, Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) established institutions that would shelter and promote the welfare and education of young girls and translated the Bible into the local Marathi dialect. Other interpreters profiled include writer Dorothy Sayers (1893–1957), archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon (1906–1978), scholar Joyce Baldwin (1921–1995), and homiletician Elizabeth R. Achtemeier (1926–2002).

In addition, the volume also features some unknown and even forgotten women whose lives and work are only now being brought out of the shadows so their voices may be added to the conversation. Taylor notes the purposeful inclusion of “various non-Christian and sectarian groups, and idiosyncratic writers” (6). For example, Jewish theologian and writer Grace Aguilar (1816–1847) believed that the Bible spoke directly to Jewish women. Despite Christian interpretations—that women were only deemed spiritually equal to men after the coming of Christ—Aguilar insisted that the Hebrew Bible did not “degrade” women.⁵

Annie Besant (1847–1933), having grown up in a traditional Anglican family, became a freethinker, theosophist, social activist, and eventually a secularist. Besant claimed that the triumph of civilization, not religion, was responsible for the improved status of women in the Western world at that time and urged individuals who supported equality of the genders to abandon the Bible, and Christianity, because she considered them thoroughly patriarchal and irredeemable.

An example of an idiosyncratic interpreter is Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), who grew up poor with very little education. She claimed to have had a revelation from the Holy Spirit in 1792 that Christ’s second coming was approaching. Based on her interpretation of Genesis 3:15, Southcott considered herself the “second Eve,” who, together with her followers, would bring about the final downfall of Satan. In her interpretation of Genesis, Southcott claimed Eve told the truth by blaming the serpent and Adam was in the wrong by blaming the woman (462). This idea has become part of the foundation for modern feminist thinking. Southcott is a prime example of the deadly consequence of a lack of education, both secular and religious, on the interpretation of the Bible. Many heretical women interpreters, had they been well trained, might have made greater contributions.

Like their male counterparts, women biblical interpreters can also depart from orthodoxy. However, their inclusion in the handbook alludes to the fact that there are more women biblical interpreters to be “resurrected,” including those who are non-Christian (including Jewish), nonwhite, and non-Western. The voices of women who do not fit into the Western, orthodox
Christian norm are also worthy of study if the church is to understand fully its own history and the role of women within it, for good or for ill.

The *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters* is a groundbreaking resource for CBE members, fitting perfectly into the trajectory of CBE’s mission to enable women and men to minister in the church together as equals. Throughout history, the church has benefitted from the teachings and writings of many great luminaries, from Augustine to Dietrich Bonhoeffer—men who devoted and even risked their lives pursuing understanding, teaching, and living out God’s word. Taylor and Choi’s book clearly illustrates that women also have been reading, studying, writing, and teaching the Bible all throughout the church’s history. Sadly, lack of education, coupled with the suppression of women by church authority, means that much of what women thought and taught throughout church history is now lost to us.

Twenty-first century women biblical scholars have more opportunities to express and transmit their voices than did their foremothers of the faith. Through today’s technology, the works of women biblical interpreters can be made available to all through the internet (such as [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)), and scholars can travel the globe in a matter of hours to find original manuscripts so that these women’s voices can be resurrected. No longer will the next generation of women biblical interpreters be ignorant of the work of past generations. As modern scholars turn back to their forbears to see how they read the biblical text and struggled with difficult and controversial passages, this volume offers a new tool to aid them in their pursuit of clarity and understanding.

Notes

3. Catholic women biblical interpreters predominate in Western Europe until the Reformation, after which the voices of Protestant women are heard as Protestantism spread in Western Europe and America.
4. The term “gendered exegesis” refers to the degree to which a woman’s experience shaped her perspective and interpretation of a particular passage. This was most prevalent in difficult and controversial passages of the Bible.

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