Women Interpreters of the Bible

recovering our heritage

By Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir

"Can I write a paper on a woman interpreter?" asked a student in Marion’s class in the history of the interpretation of the Old Testament. This question opened the door to the world of women interpreters of the Bible from the past. We have discovered thousands of unremembered published works on the Bible written by women, from the period of the early church to the present.

Many writers in the last twenty years have noted that each generation of women interpreters of the Bible asked similar questions of the text. Because the memory of the previous generations of women interpreters was not retained, women did the same interpretive work again and again. Recovering our heritage from women interpreters of the past is an important part of breaking the cycle of forgetfulness. These women are our foremothers of faith: we need to listen to them, learn from them, and pass on their memory to future generations.

Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896), and Elizabeth Baxter (1837–1926) are three foremothers of faith who have left us an extensive legacy of published works. While Stowe’s name is well known for her novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Trimmer and Baxter are not widely known. Stowe is remembered for her novels, and the social impact of these works; she also wrote on the Bible and its interpretation. Trimmer is remembered by specialists in children’s literature for her educational works, but not for her Bible commentaries and teaching aids. Baxter is not remembered, though she published over forty books and preached to thousands of women during Moody and Sankey’s British crusades in the 1870s. These women’s writings on the Bible are part of their legacy to us. We have forgotten this legacy, and need to recover and remember it.

Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810)

Sarah Trimmer, the daughter of artist and architect Joshua Kirby, was an English educator and author. She began her writing career when she was 39, after the birth of her twelfth child. Her books on teaching the Christian faith draw on the educational experience she gained while teaching her own children at home. Her works, which included a commentary on the whole Bible, were very popular in her own lifetime
and continued to be reprinted in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Sarah Trimmer provides us with a model of a woman who took her call to educate the next generation seriously. Her program of Christian education for the home, outlined in An Essay on Christian Education (1812), began when children were born and continued until children were confirmed in their teens. Children were to read the Bible as soon as they were able. Trimmer published works such as Sacred History (1782–5) to assist children and their parents in understanding what they read.

Trimmer was also involved in the early Sunday School movement. One of her published works, The Economy of Charity (1786), was written to encourage women to found and volunteer in Sunday Schools in their own congregations. Trimmer’s teachers’ aids, catechisms, and abridgements of the Bible were all written to assist teachers and students in Sunday School settings.

Trimmer faithfully taught and wrote about the Bible. Despite her busy, devoted life of service, hidden in her journals is an indication that she longed to be able to work for God in a different way, as an ordained priest. Trimmer could not imagine ordination for women as a real possibility. Instead of being God’s minister, she noted that she was God’s handmaid. As God’s handmaid she served faithfully, proclaiming the gospel to her own family and in Sunday School classes. Through her published works she continues to speak today.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)**

Harriet Beecher Stowe was the daughter of Lyman Beecher, noted Congregational minister, theologian, and seminary president. All of Lyman Beecher’s sons became preachers. When Stowe was nineteen, she claimed that it was as much her vocation to preach on paper as it was her brothers’ vocation to preach from the pulpit.

Harriet married Calvin Ellis Stowe (1820–86), an Old Testament scholar. Calvin Stowe encouraged his wife’s study, arguing that she should learn Greek to benefit both her own work and his. Although she refused to study Greek, she did take seriously the many suggestions and ideas offered by her husband, whom she affectionately called “Rabbi.” Calvin tended to be impulsive and procrastinate, so Harriet encouraged him to get his own work published. The Stowes certainly did not have a perfect marriage, but their mutual exchange of ideas and professional support of one another benefited them both.

Stowe’s Woman of Sacred History (1873) begins with Sarah, the matriarch of the covenant family. Stowe noted that Sarah is cited in the New Testament as a model of submission to her husband (1 Pet. 3:6). Stowe immediately suggested that according to the Old Testament story, Sarah’s example implies no “alarming amount of subjection or submission.” Sarah the Princess, Stowe wrote, was in reality the sovereign over Abraham’s household, even if she called her husband “lord.” This reading of Sarah shows Stowe wrestling with the idea of a wife’s submission to her husband. In comparing the Old and New Testament, she found that submission might not be as oppressive as her nineteenth-century culture assumed. After Calvin Stowe made some foolish decisions, Harriet Stowe, like Sarah, ruled her household.

Calvin Stowe was very involved in his wife’s writing projects. He drew his wife’s attention to the Rabbinic traditions surrounding Abraham and Sarah’s visit to Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20). Although Harriet Stowe did not give much weight to these ‘fantastic’ traditional stories, she included them in her chapter on Sarah. Stowe noted that these traditions showed the influence of Bible characters through history. Stowe herself was influenced by the women of the Bible, as is evident from her treatment of them in Woman of Sacred History.

**Elizabeth Baxter (1837–1926)**

Elizabeth Baxter is the most eccentric of these three women. She was the daughter of Thomas Nelson Foster, a Quaker manufacturer of agricultural fertilizers. She married the Reverend Michael Paget Baxter (1814–1910), an Anglican end-times preacher. The Baxters worked together as itinerant preachers, living in tents as they traveled through Great Britain for fifteen years. They became involved in the Moody-Sankey crusades. Michael Baxter acquired a publishing house, and the Baxters shifted to preaching through the printed word. Baxter’s publishing business gave her the opportunity to write and publish works on the Bible.
Like many female interpreters, Baxter had a particular interest in the Bible's message for women. However, like a number of her contemporaries, she was a conflicted interpreter of Scripture. On the one hand, she came to the text with clear ideas of women’s place in the home and society as men’s “helpmates.” On the other hand, her own sense of call to prophetic ministry and her experiences in public ministry pushed her to empower women to use their spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy, which she understood to include proclamation, evangelism, and preaching. Her treatment of the false prophetesses in Ezekiel shows Baxter’s understanding of women’s spiritual strengths and gifts alongside her traditional understanding of women’s weaknesses. The presence of false prophetesses in Ezekiel 13, Baxter argued, shows that true prophetesses also existed. She cited the examples of Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Huldah, Mary the mother of Jesus, Anna, the daughters of Philip, and the women who worked with Paul as true prophetesses. While God honors the ministry of women, Baxter notes, women are often “in greater danger than men whenever they are pushed forward...into publicity.” She felt that a gifted woman could easily rely on her natural gifts, spiritual knowledge, and religious experience instead of God, and thus become a false prophetess.

Conclusion

Trimmer, Stowe, and Baxter are only three of many women of faith who wrote on the Bible throughout history. They call us to study the Bible seriously, and to think about the way our culture influences the way we read the biblical text. They remind us that variety in the understandings of the roles of women and men in family, church, and society are not new.

Women interpreters took the Bible seriously as a resource for their lives. They were concerned to read it accurately and understand it deeply. They used a variety of resources to help them do this. Their commitment to study challenges us to study; their faithful lives and service challenge our own lives and work. Their own writings are now a resource for us as we work to study, understand, interpret, and live the Scriptures.

Reading Bible interpreters of the past makes us better interpreters. To us, living in the twenty-first century, it is obvious that culture influenced women interpreting in the past. As we see the culturally specific lenses through which past interpreters read the biblical text, we can become better interpreters by asking what cultural lenses of our own we use as we read scripture. Reading women interpreters of the past helps us break out of what C. S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery” — the idea that we understand the Bible better now than anyone has before.

Women of the past wrote for a variety of audiences and purposes. Most of them commented somewhere in their works on the place of women in the family, church, and society. Some women interpreters upheld traditional understandings of difficult texts like Genesis 1–3, 1 Corinthians 14, or 1 Timothy 2. Other women challenged the traditional interpretation of these passages. Some of the ways women interpreted the hard texts seem remarkably contemporary. It is often tempting to focus recovery of women interpreters of the past on those who read the Bible in a feminist or proto-feminist way. However, to ignore the more traditional-sounding women interpreters is to continue to reject a diversity of voices. Women were often forgotten because they spoke with a different voice; in recovering women interpreters, we cannot include some and exclude others. All their voices should be heard as we seek a balanced understanding of the history of the church.

A rich heritage of women’s biblical interpretation was once forgotten; we are beginning to recover it. This heritage gives us a foundation to build on for the future. The present generation of interpreters of the Bible, both women and men, need to continue the work of recovering the voices of women interpreters and integrating them into our understanding of the Bible and church history. This heritage must then become our legacy to future generations of Bible readers.