

# Book Review:

## *Voices Long Silenced: Women Biblical Interpreters through the Centuries*

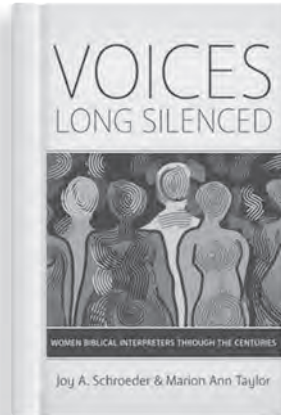
By Joy A. Schroeder & Marion Ann Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2022)

Reviewed by Kimberly Dickson

Though my bookcase is lined with collections highlighting women leaders, interpreters, and scholars from ancient Israel through to the 21st century, I had yet to come upon such a well-researched, dense-yet-readable volume as *Voices Long Silenced: Women Biblical Interpreters Through the Centuries*. Joy Schroeder and Marion Ann Taylor have meticulously researched each woman, mining primary sources to allow the women, when possible, to make their own interpretive arguments in their own voice. And not only do Schroeder and Taylor cover the Western church, but they also cover Latin American interpreters, Native Americans, slaves and freed-women. These unique voices deepen and expand scriptural understanding. Predictably, the reception of each woman's work depended on her historical context, of which Schroeder and Taylor provide detailed descriptions. These ranged from enthusiasm, to male allies promoting the women's work, to resistance, to confiscation of libraries and all written works, to persecution, to burning at the stake.

As a reader, I could not help but be impressed by the many accounts of women's courage as they defied traditional male interpretations to defend the inherent value of women, women's intellect, and their contributions to theology. Schroeder and Taylor trace many women who saw the link between biblical patriarchy and slavery, and who thus became outspoken abolitionists. That said, hypocritical racism and unanalyzed cultural biases remained in many of these same women interpreters, and Taylor and Schroeder do not hide it. They comment on the hypocrisy in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's racism. They show how Spanish nuns in Latin America opposed slavery, not because they rejected the idea of treating slaves as property, but because they rejected the idea of owning property at all. They point out the outright antisemitism embraced by European women interpreters even while they themselves were being persecuted. Schroeder and Taylor's inclusion of the interpretive voices of Black women who had been enslaved in America provide welcome voices and corrections to the western church's racism and antisemitism—Sojourner Truth and Amanda Berry Smith, Jewish interpreters, and women enslaved in the Latin American convents,.

In covering such a vast time period and number of women, Schroeder and Taylor identify recurrent patterns of interpretation over the centuries. Throughout history, the distribution of women's work was so minimal that most women believed they were the first or only women to interpret scripture. Ignorance of their contributions persists. For instance, I was surprised to see that Elizabeth Smith (1776–1806) had already corrected Augustine's interpretation of Job's wife, where he translated the Hebrew word "blessing" as "curse," reading the Hebrew as a euphemism. Prior to reading this book, I believed that CBE



International's translation team was the first to make this correction. I recognized many other patterns that persist today. Across time, women have taken pains to make their works palatable to a general audience that believes women should not teach men. And often, across time, men have made women's words their own, only after which other men are able to hear the women's words. I laughed as I related to women who lived over 500 years ago, as they considered the Reformation's implications for women leaving the convents, marrying, and raising children. Ultimately these women used similar exegetical methods to those we use today, studying the many women of Scripture and identifying their God-given gifts to lead, preach, judge, fight, heal, and serve. They learned the ancient languages to better understand and correct

translations. And they asked hard and probing questions. They may have felt they were the only ones, but in reading this text, I was encouraged to see the long line of women who have been called to better understand, translate, and teach the Bible.

This book deserves to be used as a master's level textbook. However, its very thorough nature is also what makes it a daunting book to read. The print was small and tightly spaced, with no word wasted. Thus, the reader will need to be fully attentive. While the main historical periods are divided by subheadings, the narrative moves from a lengthy discussion of one interpreter onto the next without warning, often causing me to back up and make sure I hadn't missed a transition. Further, though I was surprised at the depth and detail it provided on so many women—Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz providing one such example—I was disappointed that certain other women barely received a mention, such as Katharine Bushnell. Likewise, Hannah Moore was mentioned but, considering Schroeder and Taylor's intentional discussion of racism, slavery, and the abolitionist movements, I was surprised that her deep dedication to abolition and her work with William Wilberforce was not discussed. However, the authors do expressly say that this type of work could not possibly cover every aspect of every woman featured. Rather, they hope it will motivate more work like their own. Overall, I give the book five stars, knowing it will be my go-to each time I write about or research a woman from our faith history.



**Kimberly Dickson** has worked in the Middle East, East Africa, India, and in her home state of California, working with communities and families to bring the marginalized, especially women, into the center of decision making. She is studying an MA in Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary to better understand the Judeo-Christian faith's perspectives on women. Kimberly is co-host of CBE International's *Mutuality Matters* podcast segment, "Global Impact: Egalitarian Activism and Human Flourishing."