

A Feminist Companion to John, Volumes 1 and 2. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003. xiv + 246 pp.; xiii + 226 pp. \$21 each.

The two volumes on John reviewed here are part of the Feminist Companion series, which covers the entire New Testament and for the most part features original material. The collections include essays by established as well as previously unpublished scholars. The editor is professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt University. The authors are predominantly female (12 out of 16). After a helpful introductory essay by the editor, Volume 1 commences with a piece entitled “‘You Just Don’t Understand’ (Or Do You?): Jesus, Women, and Conversation in the Fourth Gospel” by F. Scott Spencer, an attempt at applying Deborah Tannen’s work on gender communication to John’s Gospel. Spencer finds that the conversational patterns in the Fourth Gospel support Tannen’s findings and concludes that Jesus was possibly rude to women, a hierarchical male.

The second essay, “The Divine Trickster: A Tale of Two Weddings in John” by Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, views the portrayal of Jesus in John’s Gospel from the vantage point of the “untricked trickster” in keeping with, and yet transcending, the Old Testament portrayal of Jacob. As the editor notes, Berenson’s feminist-liberationist perspective requires her not to stop with the study of literary connections and cross-cultural motifs but to proceed to explore, “and sometimes condemn,” the implications of these connections (p. 6).

The next set of articles deals with Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4. In a piece entitled, “Are There Impurities in the Living Water That the Johannine Jesus Dispenses?” Stephen D. Moore deconstructs traditional readings of John 4, concluding that the Samaritan woman is the “more enlightened of the pair” (Levine’s paraphrase, p. 10; cf. p. 95) and argues that Jesus’, rather than the woman’s, desire is central to the narrative. According to Moore, this encompasses not only Jesus’ literal thirst but extends also to his desire to be desired by the woman.

The following essay, “What’s Wrong with this Picture? John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space” by Jerome H. Neyrey, engages in a reader-response analysis of John 4 employing the tools of social science and cultural anthropology. Neyrey’s analysis is subjected to a (not always sympathetic) critique even by the editor (p. 8). Neyrey argues that the narrative subverts gender expectations concerning men in that the woman frequently disobeys Jesus: she does not call her husband; does not give him a drink; and does not go “home” but returns to the public square. Both Moore’s and Neyrey’s essays were previously published.

The next essay, “Transcending Alterity: Strange Woman to Samaritan Woman” by Jane S. Webster, taking its point of departure from M. Scott’s *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, explores perceived connections between the portrayal of the Samaritan woman in John 4 and the Strange Woman of Proverbs turned into Lady Wisdom. However, the choice of the Wisdom tradition as the interpretive grid through which John 4 is to be read is open to question. More specifically, some of the connections Webster adduces, such as the references to a well in Proverbs 23:27 or to stolen water in Proverbs 9:17, seem tenuous at best.

Clearly the most unusual, and radical, essay in Volume 1 is “The Raising of Lazarus: A Lesbian Coming Out Story” by Mona West (even the editor calls this “somewhat of a departure from the Feminist Companion series,” p. 11). West’s contribution is the application of “queer theory” to John 11, the account of the raising of Lazarus. Noting similarities between queer and feminist reading strategies, West construes the raising of Lazarus as a “coming out” story. Yet

the primary “coming out,” according to West, is not Lazarus’s, who, she notes, never says a word, but that of Martha, who West claims is the narrative’s central character. Read in context (that is, in light of the recorded aftermath of the event), West contends that Martha’s “coming out” as a believer in Jesus can lead to anointing, that is, “a preparation for ministry, a setting aside for the work of God in the world” (p. 157).

Presumably owing to the debated status of the pericope of the adulterous woman in John’s Gospel, the essay entitled “Divine Intervention or Divine Intrusion? Jesus and the Adulteress in John’s Gospel” by Holly J. Toensing follows, rather than precedes, the treatment of John 11. Toensing notes that Jesus seems to presume that he alone is without sin and claims he imposes an impossible demand on the woman by commanding her not to sin any longer. According to Toensing, Jesus here perpetrates patriarchal culture by placing on women a burden that is defined by men. Not only this, Jesus is guilty of applying a double standard by holding women to a higher code of ethics than men.

The last piece in Volume 1, “Transcending Gender Boundaries in John” by Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, constitutes an exercise in “post-feminist interpretation” that engages in a form of reader-response criticism. Kitzberger relates some of John’s to Synoptic characters (such as the Mary of Bethany and the “sinful woman” in Luke 7:36–50) and seeks to show that these regularly transcend gender roles. According to Kitzberger, Mary, by washing Jesus’ feet, becomes a role model for Jesus’ footwashing later in the Gospel. Kitzberger also enlists Lazarus in support of her feminist convictions in that he is presented as a model of “untying and the empowering of the silenced and marginalized” so they can “speak up for” themselves (p. 177).

Volume 2, again after an introduction by the editor, contains various essays on Johannine topics written from a feminist perspective. One set of pieces explores connections between John’s portrayal of women and the “Johannine community.” Another group of essays is devoted to Christological language and theological categories in the search for alternatives to the perceived androcentrism of John. Yet other contributions explore the function of feminine imagery and deal with a variety of other issues.

In the first essay, “Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination,” Adele Reinhartz argues that women held central roles in the “Johannine Community” as leaders, representatives, and prophets. Jesus’ mother is viewed as knowledgeable prophet and authoritative teacher; the Samaritan woman as evangelist; Martha as deacon and Mary as prophet, and both as co-workers; and Mary Magdalene as “apostle to the apostles,” though excluded from Jesus’ inner circle of leadership. Engaging in “imaginative sociohistorical exploration,” Reinhartz asks how those women would have perceived their own experience of following Jesus, in an effort to “construct plausible models” prompting “new insights into both text and sociological context” (Levine’s words, Vol. 2, p. 3).

Considerably more radical is the next, previously published, essay, “‘I Am’ Sayings and Women in Context” by Satoko Yamaguchi. This writer alleges John’s complicity in the perpetuation of women’s oppression, racism, and colonialism. Claiming that the conventional understanding of Jesus’ “I am” sayings represents an “imperialistic Christology,” Yamaguchi views these statements in terms of mystical expression and corporate personality. According to Yamaguchi, the form of “I am” saying is not exclusively male but includes Isis aretologies, Sibylline Oracles, Wisdom, and El-Shadday (whereby “Shadday” is rendered as “my breasts”).

Hence both men and women, not merely men, are included in Jesus' "I am" sayings. At the same time, according to Yamaguchi, "The Johannine Jesus' 'I am' sayings do not offer a firm grounding for later exclusivist, absolutist, and universalist christology" (p. 62).

Complementing Yamaguchi's essay is Dorothy Lee's, also previously published, "Abiding in the Fourth Gospel: A Case Study in Feminist Biblical Theology." Lee contends that, for John, "indwelling" conveys the notion of mutuality between human and divine, with the result that alienation, competition, and hierarchy are overcome. In feminist terms, "abiding" as a relational category provides liberation and forges the pathway for achieving authenticity and self-realization.

Colleen Conway's "Gender Matters in John" explores contrasting male-female characterization, not only in the case of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, but also in the case of John's Martha and the Synoptic Peter. Further contrasts are discerned between Mary of Bethany and Judas; and Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple. Lee contends that, for John, women are superior to men, for while Jesus frequently corrects men, he reveals himself to women and commissions them. In the process, Lee challenges the notion that the Beloved Disciple serves as the paradigmatic "ideal" disciple in John. Despite her feminist findings, however, in the end Conway concludes that Jesus is portrayed as the ideal male who supplants Sophia. Hence, the Fourth Gospel is found to articulate a traditional view of gender roles.

An alternative to Conway's view is offered by Adeline Fehribach's "The 'Birthing' Bridegroom: The Portrayal of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," another fairly radical contribution. According to this writer, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is featured, not only as the bridegroom (Cana wedding, Samaritan woman, Mary and Mary Magdalene), but also as the bride and mother (at the cross: penetrated by a spear, birthing the new messianic community). Fehribach sees sexual imagery in the most unusual places, such as when she interprets the spear by which Jesus is pierced subsequent to his death in phallic terms. Even editor Levine remarks, "Sometimes, however, a spear is just a spear" (Vol. 2, p. 8).

The next essay, Deborah Sawyer's "John 19.34: From Crucifixion to Birth, or Creation?" takes its point of departure from passages in the Church Fathers and medieval theologians that view Jesus' wound as a womb. However, in contrast to the preceding essay, this author places the emphasis not on birth, but on creation, viewing the crucifixion as the place where God, through Christ, creates a new humanity. Hence gender is transcended.

The final two essays are Harold W. Attridge's "'Don't Be Touching Me': Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene" and Jane Schaberg's "Thinking Back through Mary Magdalene." The former essay, the only one by a male contributor in Volume 2, provides a systematic investigation of feminist approaches to Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene in John 20:11-18. Attridge's survey shows how feminists have used a bewildering array of methods in their interpretation of Scripture.

Schaberg's essay, finally, surveys interpretations of Mary Magdalene through the centuries. Schaberg notes Mary's association with sexual sin but also points to a 13th-century portrayal of Mary as a successful evangelist.

By way of evaluation, the present volumes (presumably indicative of the series as a whole) represent a mixed bag of contributions that, despite the overall label "feminist," reflect a spectrum of approaches. As the editor notes in her introduction to Volume 2, "Feminist biblical

commentary is remarkably diverse in its practitioners, its methods, its subjects, and its results” (p. 1). Unfortunately, certain conversation partners are privileged; the author index does not include noted conservative evangelical scholars on John’s Gospel such as D. A. Carson or Herman Ridderbos; there is only a single reference to Leon Morris.

Despite the editor’s claim that what is found in these pages is “new readings” that “cast doubt on received interpretations” (Vol. 1, p. 14), a considerable amount of material is standard exegetical fare in many recent commentaries (including my own). What is different is that the authors, looking to biblical women as “their forefathers and their inspiration” (Vol. 2, p. 1), proceed to appropriate and utilize these insights to argue for a variety of feminist-type models and conclusions, in order to engender “the narrative’s potential both for liberation, not just for women, but for anyone denied rights, denied voice, denied authenticity” (ibid.). In some cases, this is carried out in more restrained fashion (Neyrey, Attridge), in other instances, the approach is fairly radical (West, Fehribach).

My major concern with a volume such as this (which doubtless provides a useful service by collecting essays on a particular biblical book written from a particular, feminist, perspective) are not so much exegetical as they are hermeneutical (while the above comments were for the most part descriptive, the implausibility of some of the authors’ argumentation will be self-evident). Where, in these “conversations” (as the editor calls the various essays), does the authority of Scripture come into play? Is it on the level of the individual readings that are often mutually contradictory (as Levine herself acknowledges, e.g. Vol. 2, p. 13)? If so, how does this state of affairs lead to “freedom” rather than “chaos” as one of the contributors alleges (Vol. 1, p. 14)?

Jesus taught that it is the truth that sets people free (John 8:32), not individual readings of Scripture offered in the spirit of a postmodernism that is tolerant of all truths except that there is truth in an objective, absolute sense (as Levine and the contributors to this collection continually assert, “truth” lies entirely in the eye of the individual reader). Despite some helpful exegetical insights (which, as mentioned, are often not as original as is claimed), on a larger hermeneutical scale, the perspective presented by the present volume is therefore ultimately inadequate, if not positively misleading and distorting of the larger Johannine message that grace and truth appeared definitively (John 1:14, 16-17), and intelligibly (John 7:17), in Jesus.

Andreas J. Köstenberger