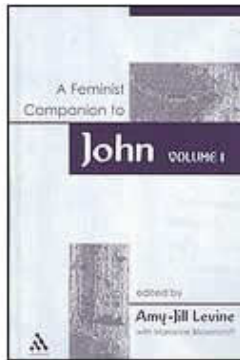


## ○ REVIEW OF *A FEMINIST COMPANION TO JOHN I-II*, EDITED BY AMY JILL LEVINE WITH MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

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Christina Petterson reviews *A Feminist Companion to John I-II*, edited by Amy Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press 2003).



*A Feminist Companion to John* consists of 16 articles divided into two volumes. According to the preface, the contributors range from established scholars as well as beginning scholars, previously printed work and fresh essays. The series sees itself as a sister series to *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* edited by Athalya Brenner. This little sister strives to follow in the footsteps of two very popular and successful older sisters, without perhaps fighting the same battles, since the path seemingly has been cleared. This is not to say that feminist issues are a thing of the past but that the need to explain what is meant and what is not meant by the term ‘feminist criticism’ has not been deemed necessary to clarify in this volume. And perhaps at a time when feminist biblical criticism is a somewhat prolific enterprise, some clarifications and precisions would have been helpful.

After reading these 16 articles, I was very confused as to what the *Feminist* in the title referred to. I understand feminism as a political movement, breaking down the universal male subject and placing or replacing women as subjects. One of the key issues is not to perpetuate these male power structures but to spot them, reveal them and contest them. The site of this struggle may be a biblical text, its theological tradition and / or a contemporary social structure. The category of feminism in this collection of articles seems to have expanded into generally being about, for or by women and the number of articles critically voicing or addressing feminist concerns are not many. The introduction states that ‘The essays... begin with the recognition of women’s presence and female imagery and then take the next steps by interrogating its implications’ (1). This sounds like a diachronic survey of feminist biblical criticism from the early stage, where first women’s presence was called upon then through to discussing and critiquing the symbolic and figurative use of women, leading on to the last ten years evaluating the implications and marking out future trajectories (very roughly speaking). And the articles (published between

1991 and 2003) do place themselves on this chronological line, although most of the articles lie comfortably between the first and the second base. I have selected a couple of articles from the final and ongoing stage of feminist biblical criticism, which I enjoyed and found informing and engaging and seek to move beyond the Man / Woman divide that unfortunately and maybe unintentionally pervades several articles in this collection.

Stephen Moore's brilliant article from 1993, 'Are There Impurities in the Living Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses?' is reprinted in this collection and although I have read this article many times, it does not cease to please me in terms of its clarity, humour, sharpness and implications for Johannine scholarship, biblical and contemporary politics and theology and you would think, that after this, the Samaritan woman will never again be the same. But in *A Feminist Companion to John*, of all places (apart from Spencer's article 'You Just Don't Understand (or Do You?)'), she remains an outsider, an un-knowing, adulterous and sex-craving woman. Her astuteness, which Moore showed us, is already forgotten.

Mona West's article, 'The Raising of Lazarus: A Lesbian Coming Out Story' is an autobiographical queer reading of John 11, and moves between feminist criticism, autobiography and the Lazarus text, articulating where queer hermeneutics can draw upon feminist issues and concerns, but also showing the limitations of this collaboration through the autobiographical engagement with the text and what it can mean. As Schottroff, McKinlay and Dube remind us, hierarchies of oppression exist within feminism, in that certain feminist groups (white Western, the coloniser) are more privileged than others (everyone else, the colonised). West shows us that to these categories may also be added sexual preference as a factor, which constitutes a major difference of experience within feminism.

Holly Toensing's 'Divine Intervention or Divine Intrusion? Jesus and the Adulteress in John's Gospel' gives a very detailed reading of the adulteress pericope in John 7:53-8,11, while taking into account and challenging several feminist exegetes' liberating readings of the text. She argues that Jesus remains within the system of male power in that he does not challenge the male defined notion of sexual sin operative in this pericope. He lets the Jewish leaders reflect on their sinfulness, while commanding the woman to take responsibility and to live without sin. Finally, the woman made free will not escape the divine male eyes, in that the Johannine Jesus is a divine omniscient man, given the right to judge by God. Toensing's article takes into account that Jesus is a male and operates within a male world, a presupposition that a couple of the articles wish to avoid by arguing that Jesus exhibits both male and female characteristics.

Another article which takes Jesus male-ness seriously is Colleen Conway's 'Gender Matters in John'. Following analyses of the male and female figures in the gospel, she first goes along with interpreters, who maintain that the Johannine women represent a critique of human institutional authority. But then Conway points to the underside of this interpretation in that the implications of this understanding are that the women are outside human institutional authority and posit no threat to this authority. Then she goes on to argue that the relationships between Jesus and the women are examples of the proper relationship between the human and the divine. Jesus is cast as the ideal male subject and masculine image, which the women are devoted to. So what on the earthly level looks like a challenge to authority structures is re-inscribed in the heavenly realm as the universal male subject, confirmed as such by the women in the gospel narrative.

Harold W. Attridge's survey article "'Don't be touching me': Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene' provides a broad and critical assessment on very varying feminist interpretations of the meeting between the resurrected Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the problematic statement: Don't touch, hold on or cling to me. Since Attridge has plucked out interpretations from several of the contributors in these volumes, this does provide the reader with a very helpful article for perusing the field of feminist scholarship and situating these contributors within a larger scholarly field. Attridge is not aiming to please, and he does unravel problematic readings and highlights the log-in-eye kind of biases which govern some interpretations.

I found Jane Schaberg's article 'Thinking back through Mary Magdalene' from 1991 absolutely stunning. It is a tracing of Mary Magdalene and her relationship to Jesus and subsequent clerical, patriarchal power structures. This journey takes us through architectural politics in Galilee, into the Gnostic literature and ending Mary's career in the Provençal legend, its ramifications resonating in contemporary patriarchal structures. Mary the whore, the chaste penitent shows that we women can be saved from our female sexuality and will be protected by the male. This tour is interwoven with quotations from Virginia Woolf, which illuminate the Mary figure through a second feminist lens.

Finally I would like to address the 'gestational paradigm',<sup>1</sup> which pervades a couple of the feminist readings in this collection (and others outside it). This paradigm associates giving birth as a central feature of being a woman.<sup>2</sup> It would be foolish to deny that giving birth is not a woman's prerogative, but I would like to question the notion of birthing as *the* central figure of womanhood, as every woman's prerogative, an assumption that several of the articles seem to exhibit. Solely focussing on birthing metaphors and images in the gospels as a feminist reading, *reduces* woman to a womb,<sup>3</sup> which has two consequences: i) women who for various reasons do not bear children are effectively excluded from the category of the female<sup>4</sup> and ii) woman is re-inscribed into the very traditional and conservative role of the mother<sup>5</sup> or, in a term borrowed from Deryn Guest (2005: 31), the heterosexual imperative.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term is coined (to my knowledge) by Anne Elvey (2005).
- <sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Gillian Townsley for pointing this out in a discussion of the term gestational paradigm at 'The Bible and Critical Theory' seminar in Melbourne this year (2006).
- <sup>3</sup> *Tota mulier in utero*, which appears everywhere as a quote from an unnamed source (beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* from 1949, translated from the French *Le Deuxieme Sexe* by H.M. Parshley, London: Jonathan Cape, 1953, p. 13: 'Tota muliere in uterus' says one) and somehow associated with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, although this I have not been able to verify.
- <sup>4</sup> To quote Judith Butler: 'Now it seems to me that, although women's bodies generally speaking are understood as capable of impregnation, the fact of the matter is that there are female infants and children, who cannot be impregnated, there are older women who cannot be impregnated, there are women of all ages who cannot be impregnated, and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women. What the question does is try to make the problematic of reproduction central to the sexing of the body. But I am not sure that is, or ought to be, what is absolute salient or primary in the sexing of the body. If it is, I think it's the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints' (Osborne and Segal 1994: 33).
- <sup>5</sup> I am not claiming that being a mother is traditional and conservative, I am stating that viewing this as the central and natural feature of womanhood, and so women's and nature's true calling are conservative, constraining and limited views of what woman is.

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## REFERENCES

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