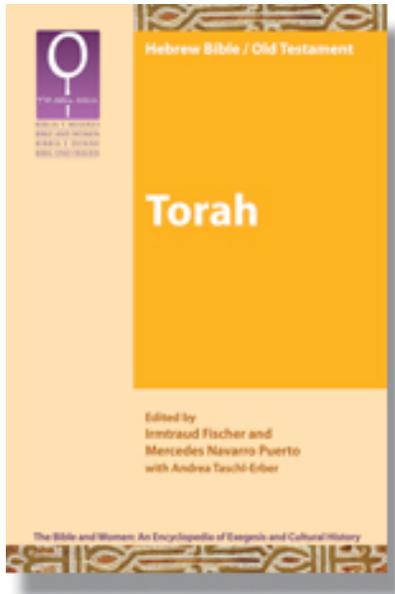


RBL 11/2014



**Irmtraud Fischer and Mercedes Navarro Puerto, eds.,
with Andrea Taschl-Erber**

Torah

The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis
and Cultural History

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011. Pp. viii +
490. Paper. \$59.95. ISBN 1589835646.

Elaine T. James
St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota

Torah is the first of a twenty-one volume encyclopedia project on the Bible, women, and reception history. It encompasses a variety of methodologies, is authored by scholars from different continents, and will ultimately cover the history of interpretation from the Hebrew Bible through the contemporary period. It is being released simultaneously in Spanish, Italian, German, and English, partly to foster the breadth it values, as well as to make it available to general readership in those four linguistic areas. The first three volumes will focus on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; after the *Torah* volume, we anticipate volumes on Prophecy and Writings. In their introduction the general editors, Jorunn Økland, Irmtraud Fischer, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Adriana Valerio, rightly argue that no such large-scale analysis of both the Bible and reception history has been undertaken from the perspective of gender. This is “feminist-exegesis-*cum*-reception history” (2). Nor has there been one with such an international profile (although the authors are self-aware of the still largely Western, and largely European, pitch). This is an ambitious project, and its commitment to international and interdisciplinary scholarship will hopefully broaden both the scope and reach of gender-critical Bible scholarship.

This volume includes two parts. Part 1, “The Bible as a Document Arising within a Historical Epoch,” comprises essays in iconography, archaeology, ancient Near Eastern law, and canon. I will not treat them in the exact order in which they appear.

Two of these essays use comparative methods to situate biblical texts in their ancient Near Eastern contexts. In “Ancient Near Eastern Pictures as Keys to Biblical Texts,” Silvia Schroer offers synopses of seventeen texts from the Torah, paired with iconographic representations from across the ancient Near East. Her focus is on texts that relate to “the lost heritage of the goddesses and pictures of feminine deities” (60). Sophie Démare-Lafont’s “The Status of Women in the Legal Texts of the Ancient Near East” organizes her discussion by theme, such as “The Social Status of Women” and “Laws for the Regulation of Family Life.” She concludes that, despite considerable variability in ancient legal codes, women in general “had to be submitted to a male authority.” Their actions were understood in relation to their family group, such that they were perceived “as appendages of their fathers and husbands” (132). This phrasing implies that women are extraneous limbs of male *individuals*; the fact that the family unit is the central legal unit might instead suggest that women are members of households.

Carol Meyers’s “Archaeology—A Window To The Lives of Israelite Women” describes the lives of everyday women in ancient Israel. Producing pottery and textiles, purveying healing arts, and transforming raw materials into edible food, women had enormous responsibility for the survival of the ancient Israelites. Epigraphic materials receive attention here: ostraca, seals such as the Shelomith seal, and the Elephantine papyri point to women’s involvement in supra-household activities and offer a fuller picture of women’s inheritance rights than the Bible affords. This is a clear and helpful orientation to archaeology and gender in ancient Israel.

On a different note, Donatella Scaiolò’s “Torah and Canon: Challenges and Perspectives” reviews the conceptual and theological challenges in considering the text as normative in communities. She shows how feminist considerations of canon (exemplified especially in the work of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza) have emphasized the texts’ adaptability to new contexts, their polyvalence, as well as their questionable ability to function as a “mirror,” to women’s experiences.

Part 2, “Women Texts and Gender-Relevant issues in the Torah,” comprises essays on women in various texts from the Torah. Here the eclecticism of the volume is especially visible.

In “Genealogy as a Means of Historical Representation in the Torah and the Role of Women in the Genealogical System,” Thomas Hieke argues that women play significant

and leadership roles in the genealogical system of Genesis (compared to Egyptian genealogies; and with glances at Exod 6, Num 3, and Ruth 4). He effectively examines the connections between the personalities and roles of women in the narrative and their appearances in genealogies. This is followed by a somewhat idiosyncratic study of women in Gen 1–11, “Divine Images and Likeness: Women and Men in Genesis 1–3 as an Open System in the Context of Genesis 1–11,” by Mercedes Navarro Puerto. Her approach is “narrative analysis, psychological hermeneutics, and a gender perspective,” which lingers with many details of the text. She argues, for example, that the creation accounts show a “demystification” of Mother Earth and a “demythologization” of time and traces the progressive development of gender differences through Gen 1–11.

Irmtraud Fischer’s “On the Significance of The ‘Women Texts’ in the Ancestral Narratives” draws from significant contributions she has made elsewhere and includes moments of great insight in her detailed summary of the narrative arc of Gen 12–50. She makes elegant connections among texts, for example, drawing out connections between the Hagar materials and Gen 22 (272). Jopie Siebert-Hommes offers a clever twist on a familiar theme: she argues that twelve women in Exod 1–2 play a crucial role as salvific agents, specifically as counterparts to the “twelve sons [who] do *not* resist the measures of the pharaoh and allow themselves to be made into slaves” (298, emphasis original). This piece is full of fresh insights. It is a bit puzzling, though, why this essay focuses on only two chapters of Exodus, while all of the thirty-eight chapters of the ancestral narratives are covered in a single essay.

The next two chapters are devoted to the analysis of individual biblical characters. First is “Zipporah: The Vanishing of a Wife,” by Ursula Rapp. Rapp highlights the symbolic power of Zipporah (in Exodus, as well as Num 12:1–2): “The image of Moses’ mixed marriage is a standing criticism against a total seclusion over against the outside” (327). Mercedes García Bachmann examines Miriam from an “ideological” and “liberation-theological” approach in “Miriam, Primordial Political Figure in the Exodus.” She concludes that there is a notable coherence among the biblical representations of Miriam (in Exodus and Numbers, Mic 6, Deut 24:8–9, and Numbers and 1 Chronicles), namely, that she is a prominent prophet who is not defined by any role as a mother or wife.

The final two chapters deal with the status of women in the legal texts. Dorothea Erbele-Küster’s “Gender and Cult: ‘Pure’ and ‘Impure’ as Gender-Relevant Categories” examines the “purity” regulations of Lev 12 and 15, comparing what the regulations reveal about both the female and male bodies. She notes that the text assumes women are participants in the cult and makes the case that “pure” and “impure” are misleading translations of טהר and טמא; the latter might rather be translated “in conflict with the cult” (397). She challenges the supposition that menstruation rendered women “ritually impure ... during

the majority of their life” (403), as readers of Lev 11–15 have sometimes emphasized, postulating that due to a low-protein diet, frequent pregnancies, and extended breastfeeding, ancient women might not have experienced a regular period, perhaps even for years at a time.

Finally, Karin Finsterbusch’s essay, “Women between Subordination and Independence: Reflections on Gender-Related Legal Texts of the Torah,” is a well-argued examination of laws *about* women and laws that *address* women. She finds that, although women are under the purview of a male-centered household (411–12), this “basic consensus” is not invariable. Moreover, women are *subjects* addressed in the “you” of both the Deuteronomic Code and the Holiness Code (e.g., Deut 31:9–13). Finsterbusch highlights the divergent textures of the law codes, suggesting they are less “exclusive” than they first appear.

This project is intriguing and important, if difficult to pin down. The length of the essays (about fifty pages each), the price of the volume (\$59.95), and the previous knowledge assumed (vocabulary, history of the discipline) put it slightly out of reach for undergraduates or generalist readers. As an “encyclopedia,” it diverges from the genre, not organized by text, character, or issue but ranging through texts, time, and theme; neither is it structured by indexes or alphabetized entries that would make it a reference volume one could easily consult. Indeed, the volume does not purport to be encyclopedic in the traditional sense (see “Without the Pretension of Encyclopedic Exhaustiveness,” section 1.2.5, 6–7). Rather, this encyclopedia “intends to present in an *exemplary way* the entire history of the Bible and its interpretation with regard to women and gender-relevant questions” (7). The examples provided in these essays are a welcome contribution to the ongoing conversation about the role and status of women in the biblical text and world, and I look forward to the publication of the remaining volumes.