

*Edited by Susanne Scholz*

## **Feminist Commentary upon Feminist Commentary. A Report from the Feminist Biblical Trenches**

.....

Zusammenfassung:

Für das Treffen der nordamerikanischen Sektion der ESWTR im November 2013 wurden die Podiumsteilnehmerinnen und -teilnehmer gebeten, die englische Übersetzung *des Kompendium: Feministische Bibelauslegung* (engl. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*) zu kommentieren, die im Jahr 2012 erschienen ist. In diesem Artikel werden nun ein Teil dieser Kommentare und die damit einhergehenden Diskussionen sowie kritische Anfragen an das Kompendium schriftlich zugänglich gemacht. Die Beiträge der folgenden Autorinnen und Autoren sind hier veröffentlicht: Robert Wafawanaka, Martin Rumscheidt, Helen Leneman, Deborah Rooke, Dora R. Mbuwayesango, Johanna Erzberger und Marie-Theres Wacker.<sup>1</sup>

.....

Every year in November on the weekend just prior to the US-American holiday of Thanksgiving, the scholarly society of the American Academy of Religion gathers in a major city on the North American continent. Eight years ago the North American Chapter of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (NA ESWTR) applied successfully to have the ESWTR accepted as a “Related Scholarly Organization”<sup>2</sup> of the AAR, and since then the NA ESWTR has regularly sponsored panel discussions during the AAR’s annual meetings. As the chairwoman of the NA ESWTR, I had the pleasure of inviting colleagues to a panel discussion during the 2013 annual meeting. The panelists were asked to comment on the newly published translation of *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, originally published in German in 1998 and edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker. The translation was prepared by a team that included Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner. The English translation was published in 2012.<sup>3</sup>

This essay makes accessible some of the commentary presented at our panel discussion in November. Not every panelist had the time to be included and two audience members volunteered to contribute their views after a lively panel discussion. I thank the contributing panelists, Helen Leneman, Deborah Rooke, Dora Mbuwayesango, Johanna Erzberger, and Marie-Theres Wacker for their participation at the original panel and for preparing publishable versions of their statements. I would like to thank Martin Rumscheidt and Robert Wafawanaka for making their post-panel comments accessible by writing them up and sending them to me for inclusion in this essay. One of the panelists, Caroline Vander Stichele, is sending regrets as her schedule did not allow her to prepare the statement for publications. I also would like to express my gratitude to Sheila Briggs for serving as the presider of the panel. It is always good to count on NA ESWTR members to fulfill our ESWTR duties at the AAR. Thanks to all of you.

I also would like to emphasize that the following comments are meant as constructive criticism and appreciative evaluation of the tremendous feminist biblical scholarship made visible in the German and now English publication. Some of the criticism articulates serious challenges. For instance, one concern relates to the fact that the English translation appeared more than ten years after the appearance of the original German volume, yet no further additions or modifications were made in the English translation. Of course, good reasons led to this decision and one of the translators, Martin Rumscheidt, explains some of them. It is also important to remind ourselves of the fact that German feminist Bible scholarship is not often referenced in today's English-speaking academia. Very few of our non-German speaking colleagues even knew of the German *Kompendium* until the English translation was published in 2012. This lack of scholarly engagement across the Atlantic Ocean is indeed remarkable in light of the almost imperial status of German Bible scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Obviously these days are gone, which is for the better, but feminist biblical studies made in Germany have almost vanished from English-language scholarship in biblical studies. Yet be that as it may, I would like to remind us that any criticism is always "good," especially when it is right on target. It strengthens and improves our feminist discussions, and it gives visibility to our work. Another point to remember: Most of the *Kompendium* and its translation into the *Compendium* was done by women and some men who did not have full-time paid positions at German universities. Outside of Germany, scholars often believe that German scholars are well-situated in departments of theology and religious studies but this is actually a mistaken idea, especially when the research focuses on feminist biblical studies. Much of feminist biblical scholarship in German-speaking countries is done on a volunteer basis by

highly educated women and some men who often work outside university settings or are only loosely affiliated with one. Some of them do not write in English and find it difficult to follow debates in a foreign language. As we all know, every interpretation is always contextual, and this is also the case for German feminist scholarship on the Christian canon of the Bible. It is thus a great privilege for those of us who move from one language context to another or perhaps even live in several language contexts to build bridges that nurture international scholarly exchange.

With this kind of understanding about the significance, limitations, and the promise of feminist commentary upon feminist commentary, I present the following contributions. They offer valuable and valid criticism. They engage a feminist publication of immense historical, cultural, exegetical, and scholarly significance. All of us are glad and proud to be part of this conversation. In this spirit, then, the following pages offer feminist commentary and critique of the *Compendium*, beginning with Robert Wafawanaka, moving on to Martin Rumscheidt, Helen Leneman, Deborah Rooke, Dora R. Mbuwayesango, and Johanna Erzberger, and ending with a response from Marie-Theres Wacker who, as one of the editors of the German *Kompendium*, evaluates where German feminist biblical studies stands today. All of us know that this panel discussion is only one piece of a much larger puzzle of our ongoing feminist conversations across continents, languages, and contexts.

### **Robert Wafawanaka (Virginia Union University, VA, USA)**

I was in the audience when the panel took place, as a friend of mine was a panelist. Considering the obstacles the authors encountered, the English translation of the original German publication, despite its lateness, is in itself a milestone. As I listened to the conversation, I was struck by the complexity of the issues and the passion of the presenters and the international flavor of the contributors. Each panelist enriched the discussion uniquely. One panelist took issue with the fact that the *Compendium*, though just published, was already in need of revision in order to take into account the work that has been done since the early 2000s. Of course, feminist interpretation is a work in progress, as is this volume originally published in 1998, but the *Compendium*'s impact is notable. It exposes readers to feminist scholarship that has been done primarily in the German-language context, and surely it lays the groundwork for future updates.

Although I am a male biblical scholar, my interest in feminist biblical interpretation was sparked during my studies at Harvard University and Boston University. Through various courses and readings, I was introduced to feminist theory and methodology in graduate

school. My teachers and mentors were Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Bernadette Brooten, and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr. They raised interesting questions that my other professors did not. Even after my graduate studies were over, I continued to read as much of their publications as possible. Through their teaching and writing, I learned a great deal about feminist issues, concerns, and scholarship. I vividly remember being one of only two men in Darr's course on "Women in the Bible." I learned a lot from the issues and concerns raised by my mostly female classmates.

My foray into feminist scholarship opened my eyes to the patriarchal context of the biblical text. Prior to my studies, not only was I unaware of the marginal role of women in the Bible, but I also had an uncritical acceptance of the Bible as the word of God. With that mindset, I did not question the writers or interpreters of the Bible in terms of their identity, intentions, historical contexts, or if they had any axes to grind. My teachers enabled me to recognize the patriarchal nature of the biblical world which is evident, for example, in the language of the text and the privileging of the male perspective. It was at Harvard that I learned to call God "God" rather than "he" as I had been accustomed to. By delving into the problem of patriarchy, I learned about sexism, classism, inequality, injustice, and the need for inclusive language in speaking and writing. I also learned to appreciate female imagery about God, especially from Darr's critical work on Isaiah. Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstruction of early Christian origins enabled me to fully appreciate the marginalization of women in antiquity and the need for reconstructing their lives and contributions. I was impressed by Schüssler Fiorenza's focus on the nameless woman who anointed Jesus as a lens for many such women whose lives existed on the margins. I began to understand how women's contributions were often marginalized due to the androcentric worldview of the Bible.

My attendance at the panel discussion gave me the impression that the *Compendium* was a significant publication. Of course, I could not adequately capture the essence of this publication without reading it. Thus, when I finally laid my hands on the 1,030-page tome, I could fully appreciate the work that had gone into its production. The following remarks are based on excerpts from the content of this immense publication.

With four different prefaces, it is evident that this work has undergone much engagement, though still more is needed. The logistics of assembling more than sixty contributors, translators, and editors for this task is evidenced by the eight articles written by the editors themselves.

The *Compendium* is impressive because it addresses all the books of the Hebrew and Christian canons under the inclusive rubric of First and Second Testament respectively. In

addition, it also addresses the seven extra books in the Catholic canon plus a few early Jewish writings. Finally, it concludes with several early Christian writings. Thus, the breadth and scope of this publication is impressive and inclusive. The commentary runs seamlessly from one section to another without any divisions. Perhaps this reflects the unity and pervasiveness of issues that require the engagement of feminist biblical scholarship. In its final form, this publication is unified by the various feminist perspectives of the authors. While many of the scholars have noted the androcentric nature of biblical texts or the marginal references to women, if not lack of mention, their task is distinguished by a feminist analysis of every text. This task includes engaging female themes, tracing where women are mentioned in the text, studying the role and contributions of women, critiquing women's marginalization or lack of mention in the text, or reconstructing their lives. Some approaches also challenge reception history and theory which popularized certain types of interpretations that have long marginalized women. Other writers seek to combat Western colonialism, misogyny, and Christian anti-Semitism (xx).

While some contributors engage historical-critical methods or even chapter-by-chapter analysis, their insights are “sharpened with a specifically feminist perspective” (1). With such focus, Schüngel-Straumann explains that the primordial history of Genesis does not identify woman with sin but that such an interpretation is a function of later “tendentious interpreters,” as for instance Sirach and Paul. Also the misinterpretation of Genesis 6 eventually led to the “witch hunts” (8) in the fifteenth-century C.E. when women were blamed for the fall of man and the spread of evil in the world. Similarly, Schüngel-Straumann demonstrates that Genesis 1:27 asserts the equality of both male and female in the image of God while later misogynistic interpreters associated the word *'ādām* only with males. Moreover, Fischer's investigation of Israelite ancestral traditions shows that “the mothers of Israel are no ‘little matrons’. They are the founders of Israel” (30). In her feminist analysis of the book of Exodus, Scholz demonstrates that women were so central to the narrative that “without the women, there would not have been an exodus from Egypt” (37). Due to the “androcentric outlook” of the book of Exodus according to which God only speaks to men like Moses and “commands, decides, becomes angry, [and] punishes” (47), Scholz questions the liberatory praxis of this influential book.

Feminist critique extends to other biblical books such as Leviticus, described as “a violent, even bloodthirsty book” which is “unattractive” and may be “unredeemable” (51). It mentions only one woman by name. Despite the humanitarianism of the legal texts of the book of Deuteronomy, women are shown to be dependent on men. In addition, they are legitimate spoils of war along with their children – as gifts of YHWH. The few women

named in the book of Joshua and many invisible others “remain tied to the patriarchal structures” although they may receive land (109). Even the women described in the book of Judges “almost always play a subordinate role.” They are “male constructs” or “creations of an androcentric [...] narrator” who “reflects male ideas about women” (113). Even in death, male interests supersede – the dying illegitimate king Abimelech asks a male to finish him off in order to avoid the stigma of having been killed by a woman. Interestingly, Samson’s women are stereotyped while he is not. Thus the stories of the book of Judges “justify and inscribe women’s subordination to male authority” (126). Although in the book of Ruth two women survive in a patriarchal context, the text questions male assumptions about outsiders and wrestles with the universality of God, for Ruth emerges as “another David” (138).

Women are not only central in the stories of Israel’s origins but they are also central in Israel’s actual history. Müllner shows that women’s stories not only frame the books of Samuel but they also serve in public spaces. Yet women are also victimized by childlessness and the abuse of male power, as in the case of Bathsheba and David. By contrast, the women of the books of Kings are very poor, helpless, or extremely cruel and vengeful (163). Mothers of kings are named and respected while Jezebel and Athaliah are vilified, degraded, and demonized. In fact one may conclude that characters described as bad women are also identified by name precisely because of their notoriety. Lee concludes that the Deuteronomistic editors of the books of Kings are “one-sided” and have “little interest in women,” and the negative portrayals of other women are “phantoms that have little to do with reality” (175-176). While the books of Chronicles have “the most names of women and notes about women,” primarily found in the genealogy, they have to be read “against-the-grain” (178). Such a reading highlights the various functions performed by women in the royal history and its concern for boundary marking. In the continuing history described by Ezra and Nehemiah, Karrer-Grube asserts that “women are almost invisible” through the use of masculine designations such as elders and nobles (194). In the postexilic community, foreign women and outsiders are objects of men’s interests but also associated with danger. In the context of the diaspora, a feminist reading of Esther exposes the book’s anti-Semitism and sexism through “totalitarian sexist power structures” in the narrative (208).

Feminist interpretation continues to expose the patriarchy of the biblical world in wisdom literature. In the book of Job women are marginalized, and it is interesting to discover that not one woman speaks in the dialogues. While Job’s wife suffers the same loss of family as Job, we do not know her name or feelings. Although the Psalms were written by men,

feminist exegetes creatively shed new light on these texts, reading from the perspectives of women who might have occasioned them. In the book of Proverbs, women are portrayed in traditional roles and in their relationships with men, so much so that the ideal woman might become an unattainable goal in life. In her treatment of the Song of Songs, Brenner suggests female authorship of the book based on its “gynocentrism” (296). The book does not gloss over its collection of colorful and unconventional love poetry. She argues that women initiate love without being called names (300) and they do not adapt to some male fantasy of them. Brenner’s interpretation is a refreshing and liberating alternative to traditional allegorical interpretations.

Another refreshing perspective of feminist exegesis is the identification of the book of Isaiah as a “Book of Female Metaphors” (303). Cities are imaged as women and Isaiah uses female images of YHWH relating to birth, marriage, or feeding. Such interpretation is a departure from the traditional conception of a male and often belligerent God. Similarly, the book of Jeremiah is also “a storehouse of literary metaphors of femininity” giving glimpse into women’s lives shortly before the exile (323). The metaphor of a woman in labor describes Jerusalem’s distress and the suffering of the Israelites, and the destroyed city of Jerusalem uses images of women who experience the ravages of war. Use of female imagery continues even in the book of Ezekiel, described as “male prophecy with female imagery” (345). Ezekiel uses feminine metaphors in the descriptions of the city as a woman, a daughter, or a wife. Similarly, Jerusalem’s fate is depicted with female imagery of sexual depravity.

It is quite revealing to learn that not a single woman is mentioned in the book of Daniel, and King Belshazzar’s queen who identifies Daniel is not identified by name. However, in the additions to Daniel, Susanna features prominently though as an object of male lust. In the book of Joel, the prophetic role is democratized as both sons and daughters shall prophesy. Wacker captures this egalitarian spirit stating: “Like rain falling upon the earth, the spirit of God knows no gender and class distinction” (390). Though Amos has often been described as an advocate for the poor, Wacker approaches this book with “hermeneutical suspicion” about the condition of women. She points to Amos’ lack of sensitivity to the potential for sexual abuse for conquered women by their conquerors (399). Micah too highlights the suffering of victims of violence in war in his most unrelenting attack on Jerusalem. Baumann explores the book of Nahum from the oxymoronic perspective of “The Just God as Sexual Predator” (433). She highlights images of war, horror, violence, and destruction against women and men. Disturbingly, YHWH is described as punishing the woman-personified city of Nineveh with sexual violence. For

Baumann, feminist theological interpretation argues that “sexual violence and rape are genuinely misogynous acts of violence whose purpose is to injure or destroy the body and soul, the dignity and integrity of a woman” (438). Her reading counters and resists such violent metaphors, and she rejects a god committing sexual violence. Similarly, Bail’s reading of Habakkuk rejects violence. Schmidtgen notes that women barely appear in the oracles of Haggai and Zechariah and are often bypassed by commentators. YHWH who punishes bad behavior and rewards good behavior is described with male images. Similarly, the book of Malachi portrays God in male language as ruler, governor, Lord, king, or father.

In the apocryphal texts, women exist on the margins of text and society. In 1 Maccabees women occupy marginal status and appear as victims of Seleucid wars, indeed victims of colonialism and imperialism. Apparently, women opposed their occupiers by supporting the Jewish fighters. In 2 Maccabees, Gerber notes how only one woman is mentioned because she is the king’s concubine. Men are named as soldiers and winners; women play minor roles and appear in stereotypical fashion as wives, mothers, widows, virgins, or victims of war. Thus she concludes that the book presents “an androcentric view of history” (495). Gerber, rejecting this one-sided presentation of women, advocates writing women back into the narrative (501). Similarly, the books of Tobit and Sirach describe women in stereotypical fashion. They are expected to maintain traditional roles, even as objects of men’s sexual desire. While the book of Judith presents a female figure triumphing over sexist and imperialistic oppression, this figure retains the traditional patriarchal identity of a widow. Images of women prevail in the book of Baruch. Contrary to many books that marginalize women, the book of Wisdom personifies wisdom as a female figure, and so it mitigates androcentric language for God. Sophia is Israel’s God depicted as a woman or goddess.

The *Compendium* seamlessly transitions into the Second Testament. Matthew is subjected to a sustained exegesis as a counter-imperial document. Though Mark’s portrayal of women is androcentric, women are the true disciples of Jesus who exhibit “the discipleship of suffering and the discipleship of servicing” (641) in the passion narratives. The Gospel of Luke also emphasizes the centrality of women in Israel’s salvation history. In the book of Acts, Reimer states that women always appear in relationship to others. Although women held important positions, they are affected by the writer’s “androcentric historiography” (696), Reimer argues that Luke suppresses the role of women which resulted in their exclusion from serving as apostles or preachers. Tamez’s feminist reading of Romans highlights the high status of women like Phoebe (a deacon), and Junia (an

apostle). She shows that translators have robbed these women leaders of titles and functions because they were women (701). In the letters to the Corinthians, Schottroff and Stichele explore issues of freedom, diversity, difference, and unity in the Pauline churches. Briggs' analysis of Philippians shows that there were many women in leadership positions in the early church. She argues that women, wanting to abandon gender roles, were forced to become "a man" (791). Colossians demonstrates that household duties do not overthrow but reinforce patriarchal social structures (807). As typical of other books, 2 Thessalonians has no clear mention of women other than a reference to "brothers." The Pastoral Epistles, grounded in a hierarchical worldview, present women as domesticated individuals. Powerful women were valued for publicly displaying their wealth, yet church leaders attacked their ostentation. The attack on women's social status was an attempt to force them into restrictive and domestic roles as wives (838). The letters of Peter deal with women who created survival strategies in oppressive contexts. Due to men's treatment of women as sex objects, Foulkes suggests that women demanded and practiced the right to define themselves (886). The book of Revelation is "misogynistic" because the author divides women into good and bad categories.

Early Christian texts also depict women in patriarchal contexts. While the Gospel of Thomas features Mary Magdalene as one of the disciples of Jesus who had a special relationship with him, Hartenstein and Petersen point to several interpretations of Jesus' requirement that she turn herself into a man in order to enter Heaven. Hartenstein and Petersen conclude that as the leading disciple, Peter was part of the tradition that rejected women in early Christianity. While the women described in the Protevangelium of James occupy traditional roles, Eltrop and Janssen show that the tradition about Mary is further developed. As a result, this text "has a decisive role in the development of a tradition that exalts Mary over all other women and their sexuality" (995).

All of the authors of the *Compendium* have engaged in feminist hermeneutics, exploring themes about women, reconstructing the lives and contributions of women, and addressing issues of patriarchy, sexism, or imperialism. Whether women are mentioned directly or indirectly, or not mentioned at all, the authors have employed a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that sheds light on the many issues affecting women in the biblical world. In short, the *Compendium* contributes greatly to advancing feminist theological scholarship.

**Martin Rumscheidt (Dove, NH, USA)**

The idea of an English translation of the German *Kompendium* came up during my visit to Luise Schottroff in Kassel in 1999. I suggested that during the annual meetings of the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Nashville, Tennessee in 2000, she and I should meet with representatives of publishing houses whom I knew personally and with whom my spouse Barbara Rumscheidt (r.i.p.) and I had previously worked and published translations. By the time of those meetings, a second edition had already appeared in Germany, a clear signal of the volume's success. We had a wonderfully long and relaxed conversation with Mr. William B. Eerdmans, which resulted in him proposing that he would contact Gütersloher Verlagshaus and secure a copy and decide on whether or not his publishing company would proceed with the project of an American edition. By mid-2001, Mr. Eerdmans gave Barbara and me the signal to start with the translation.

Barbara had published a book with Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company before, and she and I had prepared translations, including works by Luise Schottroff, for this and two other publishers in the United States. When we began our work for the *Kompendium*, Barbara was already undergoing treatment for breast cancer. The translation of only one chapter had been completed when the disease brought her life to an end.

Here is where the story of the lengthy delay in the publication of the *Kompendium* began. Barbara's death deprived me of my forty-year life partner and of my significant partner in translating from German to English. Our friends would say: Martin translates from German into English, and Barbara translates his English into English! It took me over a year before I felt collected enough to resume the translation labors. It became very clear and imperative that the work required a team of translators, the creation of which – initially I and two others, then three, and finally five others – took close to a year and a half. The seven translators, including Barbara, were located on the East and West coasts of North America and in South Africa, with the internet as an indispensable associate!

Generous financial contribution from the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, as well as support in various kinds by the Seminar für Exegese des Alten Testaments at the University of Münster in Germany under the directorship of Dr. Marie-Theres Wacker allowed two women in her research team, Ms. Daniela Abels and Ms. Stephanie Feder, to prepare the extensive bibliographies. In addition, a scholar competent in Hebrew had to be found to prepare the transliteration of the Hebrew terminology for the book. After a relatively lengthy search, Dr. Nicole Ruane accepted the task. For me, the editor of the

*Compendium's* American edition, the word “gratitude,” even when encased in the most laudatory adjectives, falls short of what I owe these colleagues.

As the various chapters were ready, it seemed wise – given that they had appeared by then just over a decade ago – to ask the authors whether more recent literature should be added although in accordance with the contract between Gütersloher Verlagshaus and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company the texts could not be modified. Several authors provided helpful clarification to the translations, and all of the changes and modifications added considerable work to the translators.

The story of the lengthy delay of the American edition of the *Compendium* came to an end when, eleven years after the decision to publish a translation, the book came out in 2012. I fully accept the responsibility for the delay, but I am consoled in holding 1,030 pages in my hands, recognizing that feminist biblical interpretation on several continents is enriched by women scholars receiving each other's work, critiquing and drawing on it, and thereby advancing it.

### **Helen Leneman (Baltimore, MD, USA)**

In preparation for this panel, I read four chapters of particular interest to me. Two of them appeared already in another earlier English translation in Athalya Brenner's *Feminist Companion Series*. Since the translators were not allowed to update citations and references from the original volume, which I consider a major shortcoming of the English translation, the bibliographic references are quite outdated.

Susanne Scholz's chapter on Exodus “The meaning of liberation from ‘his’ perspective” is also translated as “The Complexities of ‘His’ liberation talk” in the *Feminist Companion Exodus to Deuteronomy Second Series*.<sup>4</sup> It is a very useful survey of much previous commentary. I might take issue with one comment: Scholz states that only Jethro is mentioned as sitting down to a meal with Moses, so presumably Zipporah was no longer on the scene. The writer would not have mentioned Zipporah either way, because as Scholz repeatedly stresses, the writer was interested exclusively in Moses, who was his only focus. Cheryl Exum's chapter “Judges: Encoded Messages to Women” seems to be an expansion of her earlier chapter in the *Feminist Companion to Judges Series 1*,<sup>5</sup> which is entitled there as “On Judges 11.” Exum makes some important points, all with great clarity. For example, she distinguishes between the meaning of power and authority (p. 114), and she also comments on the author's voice (p. 117). She proposes to hold the narrator responsible for using female voices to promote his own ideology. She also raises the interesting questions

how to divide women into “good” and “bad” based on sexuality but never to describe men in this way. Although the term “bad boy” exists, it does not have the same connotations as “bad woman.” The article is filled with provocative observations and ideas that force us to rethink some of our own prejudices and agendas.

When I started reading Ina Petermann’s “Ruth: Border Crossings of Two Women in Patriarchal Society,” I recalled the phrase Athalya Brenner, as my Ph.D. advisor, often repeated: “Show me, don’t tell me.” In her introduction, Petermann describes Ruth as “dangerously attractive” and Naomi as an “old woman.” These outdated stereotypes of the two women are not supported in the text. Elsewhere Petermann refers to Ruth’s “initial rejection of marriage,” which came as news to me. She did not offer a citation, probably because it is not in the text. The English translation characterizes Naomi as a “Jewess,” a rather anachronistic and non-academic terminology because there were no Jews before the Middle Ages. Yet in the original German Petermann calls her a “Judahite,” and so the English modified the German in a disadvantaged way.

Petermann approaches the text as a theologian without warning the reader of her biases. “Woman thinks, man provides, God’s at the wheel” is apparently a translation of the German expression “Die Frau denkt, der Mann schenkt, Gott aber lenkt” (130). Perhaps it works better in German. Petermann also claims, “God has good intentions,” turning this article into a sermon rather than in an academic article. There are also linguistic mistakes in the translation. Orpah does not derive from Hebrew for “back” but “nape of the neck.” Petermann also compounds an error of centuries of mistranslation, as there was no corn in the fields of Bethlehem. There was no corn anywhere except in the Western Hemisphere until the end of the fifteenth century so perhaps a better translation would have been “barley.” Ruth is not collecting ears of corn, but sheaves of barley. These are basic translation errors that should have been caught by the editors. I found it interesting that Petermann finds an intertextual relationship between Naomi and Job, based both on her complaint and on the use of Shaddai for God. The German composer Georg Schumann, using texts from Job, opened his 1905-oratorio on Ruth with a long complaint for Naomi.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I want to comment on “The Books of Samuel: Women at the Center of Israel’s History” by Ilse Müllner. Since her opening sentence is, “In the Christian canon,” I should have been prepared for her perspective. But when she refers to the birth narratives of “important men in Israel’s history,” I was not prepared to find Jesus’ name in that list. This very Christian perspective is both non-academic and off-putting to this Jewish reader. I also find problematic the reference to Bathsheba’s “monthly indisposition” as a given when it has been much disputed if not disproven in more recent commentaries (including my own)<sup>7</sup>.

In the conclusion Müllner refers to the “fragmentariness” of female figures (“fragmentary nature” would have been better English) which makes a feminist reading of these texts awkward and unsatisfying. She then asserts that “only the imagination can fill in the many empty spaces,” which could have been a perfect transition into the growing field of reception history. It is a pity that this field is completely ignored in this volume – at least in the chapters I read. Even a nod to some artistic retellings would have added a great deal.

**Deborah Rooke (Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, UK)**

Although I count myself as a feminist and have worked with feminist scholarship for more than fifteen years, I have to confess to not having encountered this volume before its English translation passed across my desk in my capacity as editor of the book review journal, the Society for Old Testament Study/Journal for the Study of the Old Testament *Book List*. On seeing the *Compendium*, I was intrigued, and naturally I exercised editorial privilege to claim and review it for the *Book List*.<sup>8</sup> With the invitation to participate in a panel at AAR on the book and the subsequent decision to publish the panel proceedings in *lectio difficilior*, my thoughts on the volume will thus have a wider distribution than they might otherwise have had.

At risk of stating the obvious, at least to anyone who has seen the thousand-page volume, this is clearly a major work of feminist interpretation. My comments come from an overview perspective rather than a detailed discussion of individual contributions. The comments are an attempt to get to grips with the volume as a whole – as a concept, so to speak – and to plot out where it lies in the wider landscape of feminist criticism. To this end, I shall comment on four aspects of the volume: its scope, coverage, methodology, and outlook.

*Scope:* The first thing to notice about this volume is the breadth of its scope. It encompasses not just all of the traditional biblical and (what Protestant Christianity has deemed) apocryphal literature that makes up the accepted authoritative canons of scripture in Western church and synagogue. It also includes works well known to scholarship but they probably would have been equally well known to Jewish and Christian groups in antiquity although they are excluded from the canons.<sup>9</sup> Examples of non-canonical works discussed in the *Compendium* are *Joseph and Asenath*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the *Gospel of Mary*. Despite the broad scope of the volume, however, the editors admit that they have not included every work of every known Christian canon, so to that extent the volume remains partial in scope. Still, the inclusion of works that are of relevance and

interest to feminist exegetes, whether or not they are in an official canon, serves to challenge and relativize the whole concept of canon. This is an important aspect of feminist biblical criticism as canons are so often male-determined, serving male interests. The question of whether women should accept without question the canon bequeathed to them by the male tradition is one that has exercised feminist exegetes from the beginning of modern feminist exegesis, and this volume highlights that issue by providing an interesting answer to the question.

The *Compendium* is also noteworthy as it provides the first feminist commentary for several texts, thereby setting a precedent and encouraging the broadening of feminist commentary. True, certain elements of the tradition have lent themselves more easily than others to feminist comment, such as the prophetic books with metaphors of marriage between God and Israel or the canonical and apocryphal Wisdom books with the figure of Woman Wisdom (and often Dame Folly), or the book of Judges with its multiplicity of women. But this is not to say that other elements would not benefit from feminist scrutiny. Such scrutiny is not always easy, nor does it necessarily produce positive results for women. Yet if part of the enterprise of feminist interpretation as a whole is to identify male-centered hegemonic agendas and to highlight what is of benefit to women, then everything needs to be scrutinized with an awareness of its ideological stance in relation to both women and men. A good example of this point is the inclusion of a commentary on the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The *Testaments* are not a work that could be regarded by any stretch of the imagination as “feminist” or as having women’s interests at heart. Appropriately, thus, the commentary is subtitled “how men use power.” It shows how male ideas about and attitudes toward women as evidenced in the *Testaments* still exist and affect women’s lives negatively on a daily basis.

*Coverage:* As a one-volume commentary, the *Compendium* follows in the tradition of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* (1895/1898) or the American-based *The Women’s Bible*, edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, celebrating Stanton’s pioneering work, and of the two-volume commentary on early Jewish writings, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and entitled *Searching the Scriptures* (1993-1994), which was again a response to Stanton’s work as its centenary approached. Unlike its three predecessors, however, the *Compendium* comes from Europe rather than from the USA, and it is therefore a landmark in the development of European-based feminist scholarship. Indeed, it might be regarded as a European *Women’s Bible*.

Like other such one-volume Bible commentaries, the *Compendium* is inevitably a broad-brush-stroke treatment that deals in themes and highlights certain aspects of its subject,

rather than giving detailed textual analysis on a verse-by-verse basis. There are pros and cons to such an approach. One pro is that it gives a large-scale grasp of trends: it enables recurring motifs and themes to be identified not just within but also between individual writings, and this in turn contributes to an understanding of how the works function as a corpus. The broad-brush approach also makes the commentary more accessible to a wider audience because it is not overburdened with highly technical argumentation that would daunt all but the specialist reader. The volume thus functions as a digest of feminist scholarship, a sort of “state of the art” work for the time and context of its production. As such it could readily be used as either an introduction or a summary or indeed as a kind of textual reference work for what a feminist critique of such and such an ancient writing might look like.

On a more negative side, there is a danger of making over-broad generalizations or misleading statements because there is no room to look at things in detail. Likewise, the lack of space can also mean that some sections of books are not dealt with in the commentary, which again can give rise to partial or distorted readings of the material. It is always a question of balance in one-volume bible commentaries between inclusions and omissions and between detailed and summary treatment, and such commentaries’ succinctness is always at once their strength and their weakness. This is also true for the *Compendium*.

*Methodology:* Moving now from structural issues to those of methodology, I am struck as a twenty-first-century reader of this late twentieth-century volume that it is a decidedly historically-based work. Many of the contributors explicitly state that they use historical-critical methodologies. Although a number of contributors use historical-critical tools together with other methodologies such as narrative analysis, there is an absence of other more ideologically based methodologies. Indeed, the editors themselves admit this in their introduction to the translation. This is not to say that historical-critical methods are invalid. On the other hand, in feminist biblical interpretation as a whole there are plenty of non-historical methodologies that provide equally insightful results for those who use them. Given that the status of historical criticism is problematic because of its association with androcentric norms of so-called objectivity, I question how much reliance should be put on it in a feminist context. To use a provocative metaphor: Is it like making women soldiers, giving them weapons so that they are equipped to attack their opponents or to defend themselves? And is that a good thing, or is it not better that women find our own methods of offence and defense? But does the idea of women finding our own methods raise problems of recognition? In other words, for women to gain credibility in the scholarly

arena do we need to master and use the tools of the male academy? Whatever one's opinion is on this issue, and it is by no means a new debate, the fact is that this collection is dominated by historically orientated approaches, and to that extent it responds to a particular academic context, namely the German context of its original production, but it is not representative of the full breadth of feminist interpretation.

*Outlook:* The same comment about being unrepresentative could also be made about the outlook of many chapters in the *Compendium* and about this volume's editorial stance. The project as a whole is undertaken largely from a Christian theological viewpoint. This again gives the volume a distinctive flavor that I have not found in other types of feminist writing and which would not be acceptable to all feminist biblical exegetes. Certainly not every feminist biblical critic has to think the same way or use the same methodologies or have the same belief structure, and so this in itself does not undermine the value of the volume. However, in view of its relative uniformity of outlook and methodology, I cannot help feeling that there is something disingenuous about the claim that the title makes. It promises without qualification to offer feminist biblical interpretation, and yes, it is feminist biblical interpretation but with the methodological and perspectival limitations noted above. To be fair, the same could be said of every one-volume "women's Bible" project, so perhaps this is an issue of marketing or presentation rather than about the substance of the book. All of us should be better at labelling what we do, at least in subtitles to avoid giving false impressions of either uniformity or diversity.

In conclusion, when all is said and done, the question that gets to the heart of the assessment of any book is this: Would I use it in teaching and research? My answer for this volume is, yes. Particularly in Oxford where I currently teach, where curricula are still quite strongly orientated towards historical critical methodologies, a volume that shows how to do something different with those methodologies can be a good way into alternative viewpoints on the biblical text. And as remarked earlier, the fact that the volume challenges the limits of the traditional canons of scripture by commenting on related non-canonical works is an important feature. It highlights the partiality of the canonical record by showing that a deliberate choice of what to include in any of the ancient canons has been made from a significantly wider range of available materials, and this helps to raise awareness that canons are constructions rather than givens. Whenever something is constructed it is done with a particular agenda in mind, and seeing what was *not* included in the canon gives a better idea of what agenda those who created the canon might have had. Understanding this dynamic and using it to ascertain who might have had the power to put it into action and for whose benefit is a hugely important aspect of feminist biblical interpretation. Both of these

features make the volume valuable for teaching. As for research, the fact that it provides commentaries on some of the texts that have proved least attractive to feminist exegetes is a real boon. It shows that possibilities for feminist readings exist even in the most unlikely places, it encourages ongoing engagement with every text from a feminist point of view. The *Compendium* is by no means the last word in feminist biblical interpretation. It is a snapshot from a specific intellectual and cultural context at a specific point in time. But it is a landmark and an example of what feminist biblical exegesis can achieve even in an intellectually conservative environment. As such, the *Compendium* is to be welcomed and used as an inspiration to continue the feminist task in every context, a task which is as important today as it ever was.

**Dora R. Mbuwayesango (Hood Theological Seminary, NC, USA)**

The *Compendium* gives visibility to the labor of feminist exegetes in the German-speaking world, especially as the translation significantly widens readership to non-German speakers and readers. It adds a needed resource and many voices to the roundtable of feminist interpretations of the Bible. I wish I had had the time to read more than two essays before this meeting, but I was able to read only two essays. Both are on the book of Genesis. One is written by Helen Schüngel-Straumann and entitled “Genesis 1-11: Primordial History.” The other comes from Irmtraud Fischer and is entitled “Genesis 12-50: The Story of Israel’s Origin as a Women’s Story.” My remarks do not do justice to the efforts of the authors. I wish I had responded to the essays when they were originally published, and I also wish the authors would have had a chance to revisit their works before this translation. I wonder if my comments could have changed their views and how they might have revised their essays.

Both essays present a critique of the traditionally negative interpretations and offer alternative readings. Both follow the historical critical approach that divides the narratives into different sources although Schüngel-Straumann does more with it than Fischer. Schüngel-Straumann divides Genesis 1-11 into Yahwist and Priestly narratives, with the Yahwist texts as the older of the two and the Priestly text as serving as a corrective to the older Yahwist views. Schüngel-Straumann focuses on Genesis 1-3, Genesis 6, and the flood narrative. Beginning with the Yahwist narrative of Genesis 2-3, she corrects the negative readings by showing that it does not include a fall and a negative depiction of the woman. For instance, she argues that the serpent talking to the woman does not signify that the woman is more easily tempted than the man. Instead, Schüngel-Straumann maintains that

the Yahwist puts the woman under the tree in accordance with ancient Near Eastern iconography. She thus disassociates the story from the doctrine of the fall, but she does not give it up and finds it later in the story of Cain and Abel. She also resorts to androcentric gender stereotypes when she views the act of offering food as a woman's task because she views women as nurturers.

Focusing on Genesis 3:14-16, Schüngel-Straumann sees this passage as a description of a situation that the author observed during his time: men's toilsome and often fruitless labor in the fields, women's painful experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, and the domination of man over woman. According to Schüngel-Straumann, the author shows that these conditions were not willed by God. Thus she maintains that Genesis 2 represents "the way God intended the relationship between man and woman to be" (p. 6). In her reading, Genesis 3 distorts the relationship as it appears in Genesis 2. Yet Schüngel-Straumann does not seem to notice the androcentric view presented in Genesis 2, and she also regards the priestly narrative of Genesis 1:1-2:4a, in particular Genesis 1:26-28, as a corrective to Genesis 2. She asserts that the Priestly text eliminates the domination of man over woman. Furthermore, Schüngel-Straumann emphasizes that Genesis 6:1-4 corrects the negative role given to women in the story's reception history. In the original version women are passive victims of the sons of God, and only the subsequent reception history depicts women as active and their sexuality as negative. Schüngel-Straumann posits that these negative views of women's sexuality are influenced by a strong dualistic opposition between spirit and flesh absent in the Hebrew Bible. Thus again she resorts to stereotypes when she explains that masculine and feminine features of God are represented in the flood narratives. In addition, it is striking that Schüngel-Straumann divorces this portion of Genesis from the rest of the book and also from its broader location in the Hebrew Bible. I wonder how the function of this narrative in the overall context of the origins of the Hebrew Bible could have modified Schüngel-Straumann's corrective interpretation of these portions from Genesis 1-11.

The other essay, "Genesis 12-50: The Story of Israel's Origins as a Woman's Story," written by Fischer is also a corrective reading that highlights the active or even primary role of the women in the founding story of the people of Israel. Fischer argues that the general designation of the narratives as the stories of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) hides the very active and positive role of the women (Sarah, Leah, Rachel, etc.). While arguing that this disregard to women's role is imposed on the text by interpreters, Fischer again exonerates the authors of the texts. For example, she excuses the disregard of daughters with the explanation that "daughters do not count in a society that generally

constructs its genealogy in terms of male descendants.” Fischer does not state that this kind of marginalization of women is problematic from a feminist perspective.

Troubling is the overall argument and conclusion of the essay. Fischer writes: “The mothers of Israel are not little matrons. But they are the founders of Israel.” In 1999, it was perhaps necessary to highlight the positive roles of women in the founding story of biblical Israel while ignoring the negative aspects. I wonder what Fischer would say about the role of women in the narratives if she took into consideration postcolonial and other ideological concerns. As in the case of Schüngel-Straumann’s reading, I wonder how reading Genesis 12-50 within the larger context of Genesis through 2 Kings would have changed the positive interpretation of the women’s role in Genesis. Would Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah say: “We are no little matrons but the founders of Israel?” What kind of solidarity would they have with Canaanite women and other oppressed people in the biblical narratives and their contexts?

My remarks on these two essays are informed, for the most part, by the developments that have taken place in feminist studies and biblical studies since 1998. What I observe here is not meant to take away from the *Kompendium*’s accomplishments. I hope that my contribution will be seen as a nudge to German-speaking feminists that it is time to do another commentary, one that takes into consideration the accomplishments of feminist biblical hermeneutics made during the past fifteen years.

### **Johanna Erzberger (Institut Catholique, Paris, France)**

I moved from Germany to Paris a little more than a year ago, and the request to give a statement about the English translation of the *Kompendium* that takes into account the particularities of a French context has posed some difficulties. What I thus offer is a contextual perspective. I will briefly review the history of my efforts of understanding the specific French situation of feminist and gender studies in biblical studies that serve as the context of my discussion of the *Kompendium*. Yet I will leave open the discussion on the role of the *Kompendium* in this specific setting

My first impression of French feminist or gender exegesis was that it did not exist. This first impression was readily confirmed by a French colleague at the Catholic University of Paris (ICP), who responded to my desperate search for some traces of gender studies in the French contexts. The colleague declared rather matter-of-factly that it did not exist. The colleague also made this point happily and without any visible sign of regret. Two French-speaking Swiss male email correspondents confirmed that, unfortunately, feminist or

gender perspectives in biblical studies were not very developed. The English translation of the *Compendium*, which is the subject of this panel, appears twice in the *Catalogue Collectif de France*: in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris where I was able to lay hands on it and in the library of the Catholic University of Lyon where the Center *Femmes et Christianisme* is situated. The existence of the book in the second library hints at the existence of scholars interested in gender perspectives. To be fair to the French library situation, there are also copies of the German original in Strasbourg and Montpellier. Two incidents corrected my above mentioned first impression of the nonexistence of French feminist Bible studies. Both are marked by haphazardness. Elisabeth Parmentier, who holds the chair for Pastoral Theology at the Protestant Faculty of the University of Strasbourg, was first introduced to me as a French feminist theologian by a German Bible scholar. The majority of my French conversation partners consider her as a serious, even brilliant theologian but not necessarily as an outspoken feminist. Elisabeth Parmentier, judging from our correspondence, considers herself to be a theologian involved with gender issues in her theological work. She is proud to not do her work in an Anglo-Saxon way. An article in which she explains the French way of doing feminist theology and which I found very helpful in my endeavors to understand the specific role of feminist and gender approaches in French theological contexts is addressed to a non-French audience.<sup>10</sup> A couple of weeks ago, *La Croix*, the French Catholic daily, which is read by a wide range of French Catholics and freely available at the ICP, printed a favorable article under the heading: “Faut-il une théologie féminine?” (“Do we need a feminine theology?”).<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Parmentier’s work and the short article in “La Croix” are not of equal importance. Yet they point to two fundamentally different, even opposing though not connected positions on feminist or gender studies in the French theological context. As Parmentier frequently refers to Elisabeth Badinter as one of the main figures in contemporary French feminism, she places herself in the context of a larger debate that goes beyond theological discussions. The article in *La Croix* answers Badinter’s fears about recent social developments. In this regard both Parmentier’s position and the article in *La Croix* might be called “representative” of French views on feminist theology.

Some central points that mark Parmentier’s gender approach are also supported by Badinter. Both vote for an extension of possible criteria of differentiation in terms of intersectionality. They explicitly name status and class as having been more important than gender in the history of French society’s power differences. They argue against the codification of the role of women as victims and against the construction of parallel

gendered universes that are feared to result from a “feminisme séparatiste” (“feminist separatism”).<sup>12</sup>

Against this background Badinter and Parmentier refer to the interdependence of both sexes. They quote the ideal of *mixité*, the participation of both sexes in public social contexts, which seems to characterize French society to a relatively high degree although it is still not fully realized. Regarding biblical studies, Parmentier wants the ideal of *mixité* to be implemented in research even when this ideal does not explicitly relate to gender topics or involve male and female researchers equally.<sup>13</sup>

Badinter considers the counter-horizons of the presentation of women as victims and the resulting feminist separatism, mainly found in Anglo-Saxon studies, to have influenced recent social developments. She understands them as a step backwards and as endangering an already achieved status of *mixité*. Badinter illustrates her concern with the growing number of young mothers working part-time and the trend towards extended periods of breast feeding.<sup>14</sup> While the trend to work only part-time stems from a certain frustration with the double burden of having a job (where *mixité* has been reached to some degree) and one’s family situation (where *mixité* has not yet been reached), the second trend is not only facilitated by the first and justifying it in return, but Badinter reads it as a return to a naturalistic view on sex and gender of difference feminism.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that a naturalistic view of gender roles has also played a crucial role in the argumentation of the opponents to the French government’s effort to pass a law allowing homosexuals to marry and to adopt children. Among the opponents, the Christian churches played a significant role in this debate in France. This law, allowing marriage and the adoption of children to same-sex couples, was finally signed by President François Hollande on May 18, 2013. Published in a daily newspaper, the article in *La Croix* seems also to point in the same direction. It supports the notion that the sexes are different but equal, as well as the idea of a woman’s better understanding of the relations between theology and “les situations de la vie” (“the situations of life”). It evokes this impression notwithstanding the claimed necessity to differentiate between women of different cultural backgrounds and personal status. Most revealingly, the article differentiates between women who are “married/having kids” and “unmarried” women. If the article concludes with a plea for a Christian anthropology rooted in biblical traditions as the answer to current social discussions, who in France would not think about the recent debates regarding a certain law? It is obvious, then, that a feminist approach appreciating difference feminism and questioning the ideal of *mixité* has not yet reached the universities. *La Croix* asked a German scholar to respond to the above mentioned article, initiated by the Pope’s recent endorsement of strengthening

female perspectives in the Church.<sup>16</sup> The reaction of my German colleagues at the ICP was friendly astonishment.

The *Kompendium* is mentioned in Elisabeth Parmentier's "L'écriture vive", an introduction to different methods of biblical interpretations.<sup>17</sup> She presents feminist exegesis as an example for a "modèle experiential" to answer the specific needs of a specific group of readers whose advantages (the adjustment of unilateral traditions of interpretations) and disadvantages (the danger of the interpreting subject's self-referentiality) are discussed by way of historical representations. She also mentions the *Kompendium* as an example of the German perspective that she considers as influenced and serving as an answer to earlier English and more specifically US-American perspectives. She refers to the *Kompendium*'s underlying decision on the shape of the biblical canon as an illustration of the danger to interpret the subject's self-referentiality. However, she does not discuss the book's influence on other non-German exegesis. Whether the *Compendium*, neither subscribing to a difference feminist view nor exemplifying the realization of *mixité*, might influence the French discussion on biblical feminist exegesis remains an open question to me.<sup>18</sup>

**Response: Marie-Theres Wacker, editor (with Luise Schottroff) of the German edition**

First of all, I want to express my gratitude to Susanne Scholz who organized the panel discussion on the *Compendium* during the Baltimore's AAR conference in November 2013, encouraging "feminist commentary upon feminist commentary." I am very grateful to Robert Wafawanaka who has taken so much time and patience to go through the whole volume, including most of the individual commentaries. He elaborates on their emphases and how the commentators deal with this or that woman figure. He also underlines particular concerns detectable in the various interpretations, such as sensitivity to women who are economically marginalized or suffer from violence. It is high appreciation to receive such a careful, thorough, and empathetic reading. I am also most grateful to Martin Rumscheidt and his team for their endurance during the long period of working on the translation. And indeed, the translators made accessible their completed translations to the authors. For a variety of reasons, some authors could not take advantage of the offer to provide updates. Martin took it upon himself to add "further readings" to the bibliographies and to translate updated resumes of every contributor and their recent publications. Of course, my warmest thanks go also to Helen Leneman, Deborah Rooke, Dora R. Mbuwayesango, and Johanna Erzberger who discuss a book written for a German-speaking audience, published more than a decade ago, and now moving back to the context from

which it took a good part of its inspiration, the United States. Perhaps other authors of the *Compendium* are interested in joining this conversation later. My response does not refer to every single point raised by the panelists. Rather, I will address two basic issues that appear repeatedly and are obviously intertwined. They concern the issues of method(s) and context(s).

To start with Helen's comments, I would like to acknowledge readily that reception history was not yet in view as a relevant exegetical method when we wrote our commentaries for the *Compendium* in the German-speaking context during the latter part of the 1990s. Clearly, reception history provides an effective perspective for biblical studies as part of the larger field of cultural studies. It is sensitive to the contextual, time-limited, fragmentary ways of interpretation, and it teaches modesty about our own insights and literary productions. Yet it is not a specifically feminist or gender sensitive approach but it can be practiced with feminist or gender awareness. A problem is that reception history usually offers endless variations of androcentric readings of biblical literature although it also enables us to detect changes, transformations, or upheavals in art, music, and literature, as well as in law, politics, and economics. In short, it allows us to examine the political and private spheres and explore changes, transformations, and upheavals in biblical meanings. The study of the Bible's reception history must thus be regarded as part of the feminist scholarly efforts to uncover structures of oppression. The authors of the *Compendium* are committed to this challenge even though our volume does not cover the wide range of the Bible's reception history.<sup>19</sup>

With Debora's and Dora's observations on the decidedly historically-based methodology of the *Compendium* we touch upon a complex issue of biblical scholarship in general and of feminist biblical studies in particular, and I can only outline some of my ideas relevant to this debate. The texts under consideration are products of the ancient Near Eastern and ancient Eastern Mediterranean worlds. As such, it makes sense to analyze them in their original contexts, and the existence of so many excellent studies on gender in the ancient world, including the world of the Bible, shows how exciting this kind of work is. It is true that for many centuries biblical texts were not transmitted or received as part of the Fine Arts or as enjoyable literature, but rather as sacred scriptures and thus as normative texts. Thus, they have to be studied with ideological criticism today. Nevertheless, they are texts from ancient worlds, and many authors of the *Compendium* show how figures or metaphors functioned in the ancient contexts. The authors also hope to identify more than one voice in the texts or to show the wide range of voices within a whole range of texts under consideration. Some authors use methods of source criticism or redaction criticism while

others read the texts within assumed historical contexts. Yet all of the authors share a common expectation, namely that under the thin surface of androcentrism there are alternative structures and voices challenging gender-oppressive views. This expectation does not naively ignore androcentrism, but it is grounded in the conviction that underneath the androcentric surface diverse voices criticize the stronghold of the obvious androcentric voice. Furthermore, I think most of the authors are driven not so much by the desire for objectivity but by the desire to use historical perspectives as a corrective to avoid reading again and again with the dominant voice or, even worse, to project androcentric clichés into the texts. It is true that we cannot ask an ancient audience to correct our interpretations, but at least we read the ancient texts with the recognition that they come from different worlds. Many contributions of the *Compendium* also implicitly criticize how the reception of the Bible took place within Christian communities, and they offer alternative interpretation possibilities that have often been suppressed. In this sense, then, the historical orientation of the *Compendium* is part of a specific way of doing feminist criticism. In fact, it parallels the quietly developing Muslim-feminist readings of the Qur'an in the German context.<sup>20</sup>

Let me take postcolonial readings as a prominent example of ideological criticism that is absent in the *Compendium*, as Dora correctly observes. When we worked on this commentary ideological criticism was not yet a developed approach in German biblical studies. Yet since the mid-1990s, a rapidly growing sensitivity to colonialisms of all kinds has been emerging in Germany. In my view, post-colonial criticism is not a feminist method or a method closer to women but a method that feminists can use for our purposes. To be clear, I want to distinguish between postcolonial readings and readings with the lens of empire criticism, the latter being closer to traditional liberation theological approaches present in the *Compendium*. Post-colonial readings detect exclusions of any kind, searching for new complex (hybrid) spaces and configurations. One specific area of study where I can see a lot of promise relates to past and present biblical interpretations on the topic of “the land.” A postcolonial perspective would analyze the narrative constructions in the Pentateuch, including Joshua, as legitimizing the appropriation of the land by the Israelites to the detriment of the Canaanites. It would also contest classical feminist appraisals of Rahab in Joshua 2:6 as a strong Canaanite woman and unmask her as the literary product of a colonial spirit imagining a typical woman collaborator. It would point to the reception history of land ideology in Christian migration movements since the seventeenth century CE, such as those from England to the United States, Australia, or South Africa. It would also side with the Palestinians in their struggle against Israeli occupation over the territory allocated to them by the United Nations. It would insist not to remain trapped in the

dichotomy of the “good” colonized people and the “bad” colonizers. Rather, it would search for the “third spaces” of encounter and transformation. As a German scholar living and working in the country which planned and implemented the Shoah, I insist on postcolonial possibilities to overcome new and false dichotomies, also when we look at the land in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and read the Bible with that conflict in mind.

Let me move on to the issue of context. I am very grateful to the panelists for recognizing the contextuality of the *Compendium*, especially its relative uniform Christian outlook, as Debora puts it. One obvious reason for this uniformity relates to the institutional academic structures for religious studies in Germany. Until very recently, religious studies did not exist in German institutions of higher education. Instead, university departments of Roman Catholic and Protestant theology have educated future school teachers and clergy. Thus the academic study of religion is located in theology departments, as for instance at the University of Münster where I teach, or it is part of university-based institutes that do not follow a *theological* curriculum. During the last decade, theological-denominational departments are emerging in Germany. For instance, in 2013, the first department of Jewish Theology opened within the University at Potsdam,<sup>21</sup> with the *Jüdische Hochschule* in Heidelberg since 1979. At other German universities, Institutes of Islamic Theology were founded in recent years.<sup>22</sup> I hope that interreligious academic relationships and projects will be part of our future scholarly work at German universities.

Already in the late 1990s, Luise Schottroff and I were aware of these impending developments. In the first edition of the *Kompendium* we explain in the preface that we hoped to include Jewish contributors, and so we did not call the book a compendium of *Christian* feminist exegesis for this reason. Most importantly, we did not want to impose our Christian perspective on potential Jewish contributors. We also tried to overcome traditional Christian anti-Jewish stereotypes and argumentation patterns. For instance, we did not separate Jesus of Nazareth from his Jewish roots but integrated him into Second-Temple Judaism. I realize now that the reception of our book in a context of religious pluralism and different academic structures makes our volume a different book, and perhaps it may even annoy some readers, as Helen’s comment suggest. It demonstrates that even a linguistically solid translation is a necessary but not always sufficient prerequisite to bring a book into another cultural academic and religious context without encountering translation difficulties. With her expertise on France, Johanna offers a telling example with her comments on France. There, the concept of *mixité* seems to be a widely accepted, and explicit gender perspectives are rejected as dangerous or ridiculous. Johanna explains that in France the *Compendium* will probably not be regarded as an appropriate approach to the

Bible. Similarly, Eastern or Southern European colleagues who work in feminist or gender sensitive biblical studies might point to even more complicated situations.<sup>23</sup> I thus wonder whether Deborah’s characterization of the *Compendium* as a “European Women’s Bible” is certainly a nice compliment, but is it not perhaps based on an imaginary harmony among European feminist Bible scholars? Yet then again, the ESWTR has struggled for nearly thirty years to translate ideas, thoughts, and people among our more than twenty-five member countries. In sum, the panel organized by Susanne Scholz in Baltimore offers a precious bridge for further conversations, clarifications, and unexpected insights into our various academic, cultural, and religious differences and similarities. I am looking forward to future collaborative efforts and conversations.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Johanna Erzberger**, Ph.D., is a lecturer at the Institut Catholique de Paris, France. She is currently working on a book on Jeremiah and on a commentary on the book of Baruch. Among her publications are *Kain und Abel und Israel: Die Rezeption von Gen 4:1–16 in rabbinischen Midraschim* (BWANT 192; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010); “Prophetic Sign Acts and Performances in Modern Art,” in C. J. Sharp and E. K. Holt (ed.), *Jeremiah Invented* (London: T&T Clark (forthcoming)); “Jer. 33:14-26 – The Question of Text Stability and the Devaluation of Kingship,” *Old Testament Essays* 26, no. 3 (2013): 663-683; “I Sought Him, But Found Him Not” (Song 5:6) – Public Space in the Song of Songs,” *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 2 (2011): 346–362.

**Helen Leneman**, Ph.D., is a professional singer and pianist who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. She combined her expertise in music and Bible into a new specialty: musical retellings of biblical narratives. Among her publications are *Love, Lust and Lunacy: The Stories of Saul and David in Music* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010); *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); and numerous contributions to *Encyclopedia of Biblical Reception*, as well as “Musical Paths to Experiencing Job,” in *Biblical Reception* 2 (October 2013); “Moses and the Exodus in Italian Opera,” in *Biblical Reception* 1 (October 2012).

**Dora Mbuwayesango**, Ph.D., is the Iris and George E. Battle Professor of Old Testament Literature and Languages at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina, USA. She is a postcolonial feminist scholar, originally from Zimbabwe, whose research interests include sexuality in the Hebrew Bible and postcolonial readings of the Torah and Prophets. She is coeditor of *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Hermeneutics*

---

(SBL, 2012), and among her recent articles are: “Canaanite Women and Israelite Women in Deuteronomy: The Intersection of Sexism and Imperialism,” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah* (ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009); “Zephaniah,” in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (ed. Hugh R. Page; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

**Deborah Rooke**, D.Phil., is Research Fellow in the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture and Associate Lecturer in Old Testament Hermeneutics at Regent’s Park College Oxford, Britain. Her doctoral work, *Zadok’s Heirs* (Oxford University Press, 2000), was on high priesthood in ancient Israel, and since then she has also written on gender in the Hebrew Bible and on Handel’s biblical oratorios and the Old Testament.

Recent publications include *Handel’s Israelite Oratorio Libretti: Sacred Drama and Biblical Exegesis* (Oxford University Press, 2012), *A Question of Sex?* (ed.; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), and *Embroidered Garments* (ed.; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009).

**Martin Rumscheidt** is professor emeritus of Historical Theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His research interests include German biblical and theological studies, social history, German theology since 1850, and Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Christian Theology. Among his publications are translations of works by Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Adolf von Harnack, Dorothee Sölle, Luise Schottroff, Marlene Crüsemann, and Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, as well as his own work on Barth and Harnack, Bonhoeffer, Holocaust.

**Marie-Theres Wacker**, Dr. theol., is Professor of Old Testament and Women’s Research in Theology at the Fakultät für Römisch Katholische Theologie of the Westfälische Universität Münster, Germany. Together with Luise Schottroff, she edited *Kompendium feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh, 2007; three German editions; English translation by Eerdmans in 2013). Her research areas include Jewish writings of the Hellenistic period, biblical monotheism, gender related biblical hermeneutics, and feminist theology. Her most recent publication is on the “female lineage” of her department’s history; see [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/13\\_2/wacker\\_marie\\_theres\\_dr\\_phil\\_barbara\\_klara\\_renz.html](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/13_2/wacker_marie_theres_dr_phil_barbara_klara_renz.html).

**Robert Wafawanaka**, Th.D., is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University, Richmond, Virginia, USA. Having grown up in Zimbabwe, he works in

the areas of poverty and wealth in the Bible and in contemporary society, explores ethics and justice issues, and approaches biblical literature from the perspective of postcolonial studies. He is the author of *Am I Still My Brother's Keeper? Biblical Perspectives on Poverty* (University Press of America, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For further information, visit here: <http://www.aarweb.org/about/partnerships>.

<sup>3</sup> Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2012). See also the original German publication: Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium: Feministische Bibelauslegung* (Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Susanne Scholz, "The Complexities of 'His' Liberation Talk," in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Second Series: Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 20-40.

<sup>5</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "Judges: Encoded Messages to Women," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges (Series 1)*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 131-146.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Leneman, *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Helen Leneman, *Love, Lust, and Lunacy: The Stories of David and Saul in Music* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 274-275.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Rooke, "Review of 'Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature,' ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 5 (2014): 27-28.

<sup>9</sup> The same is true for the collection edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures* (vol. 1 and 2; New York: Crossroad, 1993-1994), although this commentary includes the literature of Second Temple Judaism and Christianity rather than the entire Jewish and Christian scriptures.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Parmentier, "Vers une théologie intégrative: une spécificité de la théologie féministe française," in Valeria Ferrari Schiefer et al. (eds.), *Theological Women's Studies in Southern Europe* (Journal of the ESWTR 13; Peters: Leuven, 2005), 79-102. "Gender" is a highly sensitive topic in France, even more so when a non-French person talks about gender in the French context.

---

<sup>11</sup> Margareta Gruber, “Faut-il une théologie féminine?,” *La Croix* (October 11, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> See Elisabeth Badinter, “Fausse route,” in *La ressemblance des sexes. De l’amour en plus au conflit*, ed. Elisabeth Badinter (Paris: Librairie générale française, 2012), 922.

<sup>13</sup> Neither Badinter nor Parmentier put the differentiation of two sexes and the dependency of sex and gender into question. Simone de Beauvoir who is highly valued for encouraging women to partake in formerly male dominated fields is criticized for having levelled a given un-interchangeability of the sexes. See Elisabeth Badinter, “Fausse route,” in *La ressemblance des sexes*, 866.

<sup>14</sup> See Badinter, “Fausse route,” in *La ressemblance des sexes*, 942, 948.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of French feminism in relation to Anglo-American feminism, see, e.g., Sylvie A. Gambaudo, “French Feminism vs. Anglo-American Feminism: A Reconstruction,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 14, no. 2 (2007): 83-108.

<sup>16</sup> The interview that Pope Francis gave to several major Jesuit journals was published on September 19, 2013. For an English translation, see America, *The National Catholic Review* (September 19, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Parmentier, *L’Ecriture vive. Interprétations chrétiennes de la Bible* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2004), 247.

<sup>18</sup> The discussion might be understood as directed toward English-American and German discourses that are built upon their reception of earlier French feminism. The distinct ways of interpreting Simone de Beauvoir are revealing and would, in my opinion, deserve another essay. In reaction to this essay, Corinne Lanoir at the Institut Protestant de Théologie, Paris, and Sophie Ramond at the Institut Catholique, Paris, called my attention to the parallel reception of Spanish and Italian discussions not necessarily taking place at universities. They are hardly connected to the discussion described above, and they are not necessarily labelled as “feminist.” They certainly deserve further attention in feminist discourse.

<sup>19</sup> I would like to mention a new European feminist publication project that includes the reception history of biblical texts with a focus on women and gender-related topics. Entitled *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, it will be published in 25 volumes and be available in four languages. The main editors are Irmtraud Fischer, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, Adriana Valerio, and Christiana de Groot. For more information about this project, visit [www.bibleandwomen.org](http://www.bibleandwomen.org).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the *Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung e.V.* at <http://www.zif-koeln.de/index2.html>.

<sup>21</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.juedischetheologie-unipotsdam.de/>.

---

<sup>22</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.bmbf.de/de/15619.php>.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Larissza Hrotkó, “Ungarische Frauen im Aufbruch zwischen Religion(en) und Politik: Ein Überblick über die Entwicklung der ungarischen Frauenbewegung,” in *Feminist Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Annette Esser et al. (eds.) (Journal of the ESWTR 17; Leuven: Peeters, 2009): 153-164; Valeria Ferrari Schiefer et al. (eds.), *Theological Women’s Studies in Southern Europe* (Journal of the ESWTR 13; Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

.....

Susanne Scholz, Ph.D., is Professor of Old Testament at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, USA. As a diasporic German feminist Bible scholar, she has published widely in the area of feminist Hebrew Bible studies located in the post-Holocaust and neoliberal economic world, as well as on the epistemological and hermeneutical theoretical implications of reading biblical literature today. Among her publications are *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect (Volume 1)* (ed. and contributor; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress Press, 2010), and *Introducing the Women’s Hebrew Bible* (T&T Clark, 2007).