

BOOK REVIEW

The Torah: A Women's Commentary, Editors, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Andrea L. Weiss, New York: [Union for Reform Judaism] URJ/Women of Reform Judaism, 2008, 1350 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

The opening decade of the 21st century began on a fruitful note for interested laity and biblical scholars alike. Three superb Torah commentaries, each bringing special gifts, were published by the Conservative and Reform movements in the United States. In chronological order they are *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (The Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2001); *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* ([Union for Reform Judaism] URJ, 2006); and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* ([Union for Reform Judaism] URJ/Women of Reform Judaism, 2008).

The Torah: A Women's Commentary brings a unique and long overdue perspective. This work "collects and showcases the teachings of Jewish women in the first comprehensive commentary on the Torah written entirely by women" (*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, [hereafter *TAWC*] xxxi). It received the National Jewish Book Award's 2008 Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year award.

Why was it necessary, or desirable, to have a Torah commentary written by women? Stated simply: women understand and experience Torah (Torah in all of its definitions, specifically, and broadly) differently than do men. "In the past, commentaries by learned men spoke on behalf of [women], even when they did not represent the insights of women" (*TAWC* xxxii). This commentary allows women to express their particular perspectives. And it is perspectives in the plural: there is no one commonly-held women's perception. The editors acknowledge this multiplicity of views, for each *parashah* has a section termed "Another View" (see below). This book is a book written by women, but it is meant for both men and women, for all will be enriched by seeing Torah through new eyes and with new awareness. It highlights when and where women play significant roles (for example, the open-

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ing section in Exodus), and brings to the reader's attention examples where women have a more elusive role.

Three guiding principles influenced the editors: "contemporary, Jewish, and women." Contributors include more than a hundred distinguished women academics, women rabbis, women cantors, women educators, and women poets. These women represent "the full spectrum of the Jewish community: in addition to Reform, [it includes] Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist scholars as well as unaffiliated and secular ones." Contributors live in North America, South America, Europe, and Israel (*TAWC* xxxi, xxxii).

A major goal for the editors was appropriate gendered language. Of particular, though not exclusive concern was how to translate the words used for the deity. While earlier attempts at biblical translation produced "gender-sensitive" or "gender-neutral" editions (such as the Christian *New Revised Standard Version*), they each had their own limitations. Fortunately, the Union for Reform Judaism had already published *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* in 2006 [hereafter *TAMC Revised*]. This commentary for the first time created a comprehensive "gender-accurate" version of most of the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) *Torah*. The guiding force for this endeavor was Rabbi David E. S. Stein, who had served as the General Editor, revising translator, and Masoretic Hebrew text editor of *TAMC Revised*. Stein served as project manager and copy editor for this volume. He had previously served as project manager for the Conservative movement's *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*.

The late Rabbi Chaim Stern had prepared a fresh translation of Genesis. Stein continued and built on Stern's work as he served as the revising translator for the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy for the Union for Reform Judaism's *TAMC Revised*. "The most innovative aspect of Stern's translation is its gender-neutral treatment of language for God...Stern rendered God's name as 'the Eternal,' a choice that dates back to Moses Mendelssohn's 1783 translation of the Torah into German, and one that reflects a biblical understanding of the divine name as related to the Hebrew verb 'to be'" (*TAWC* xxxiii).

The Torah: A Women's Commentary takes a different route, namely not to translate God's name at all. Whereas *TAMC Revised* renders it as 'the Eternal,'

the *TAWC* editors simply preserve the same four letters found in the Hebrew text (in this review designated by the letters) Y-H-V-H.

Otherwise, the translation of *TAWC* is almost identical to that found in *TAMC Revised*. The Hebrew Bible generally, but not exclusively, "uses masculine verb forms, adjectives, and pronouns when referring to God; and customarily such language is mechanically produced in English. Therefore, [in both *TAMC Revised* and *TAWC*,] speaking about God in a gender-neutral way require[d] making adjustments not only to God's name, but also to all related wording." This meant avoiding pronouns, such as by employing "God's" rather than "His," or "God" rather than "He" (*TAWC* xxxiii).

For example, compare these translations of Deut. 10:12:

to revere the LORD your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and soul (NJPS/Etz Hayim)

to revere the Eternal your God, to walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve the Eternal your God with all your heart and soul (*TAMC Revised*)

to revere your God Y-H-V-H, to walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve your God Y-H-V-H with all your heart and soul (*TAWC*).

Different issues emerged when the question referred to humans. If a verse used masculine language, did it necessarily refer to men, or could it be men or women? "Furthermore, when do the Hebrew personal nouns like *ish* or *adam*, often rendered as 'man' in older translations, refer specifically to men, or to both men and women?" The translators needed to face all of these questions (*TAWC* xxxiv).

To cite but a few examples:

Gender not at issue in the Hebrew text – NJPS rendered in masculine terms:

arel sefatayim (Ex. 6:12)

a man of impeded speech (NJPS/Etz Hayim)

who gets tongue-tied (*TAWC*)

ger lo toneh ve-lo tilhatzenu (Ex. 22:20)

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him (NJPS/Etz Hayim)

You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger (*TAWC*)

Gender at issue in the Hebrew text – NJPS rendered in neutral terms:

Va-yahel ha-am li-znot el benot Mo'av (Num. 25:1)

the people profaned themselves (NJPS/Etz Hayim)

the menfolk profaned themselves (TAWC)

banekha (Lev. 10:13)

it is your due, and that of your children (NJPS/Etz Hayim)

It is your due, and that of your sons (TAWC)

The translation in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, as in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition*, is termed a "'gender accurate' translation, not a 'gender neutral' or 'gender sensitive' version. In other words, it does not render all grammatically masculine language in gender-inclusive terms but instead attempts to convey what was meant in a given context. For example, it sometimes translates the word *avot* as 'fathers' and sometimes as 'ancestors,' depending whether that Hebrew noun functions inclusively or not in that particular passage" (TAWC xxxiv).

Compare the translation of the term *avot* in two different contexts:

from each of their ancestral tribes (le-mattei avotav) (Num. 13:2)

the covenant made on oath with your fathers (la-avotekha) (Deut. 7:12).

TAWC follows the fifty-four part cycle of traditional Torah readings. Each *parashah* contains five unequal sections of commentary, like the five sections of the Torah itself. The most prominent is the *Central Commentary*. Written by a biblical scholar, it commences with an introduction and an outline of the particular section. It continues with a running commentary placed at the bottom of the page which follows the Hebrew text and the English translation that accompanies it. This central commentary provides a continuous explanation of the plain sense of the text at hand. Generally, reference is made to the cultural context of the passage, while at times parallels are drawn to the modern world.

As mentioned earlier, TAWC incorporated the new Genesis translation prepared by Chaim Stern. The editors departed from the Stern translation only in translating Genesis 3:16-17. Their reasoning highlights why this volume re-

flects a women's understanding of Torah. After noting that NJPS has "your pangs in childbirth" and Stern, "your pains of pregnancy" (Gen. 3:16), here the editors explain why they translated this phrase as "your toil and your pregnancies." They note that in ancient Israel women regularly worked long hours in food preparation, manufacturing, and farming alongside men. Therefore, for "the Torah's original audience, this story would have brought such labors readily to mind...The writer in vv. 16-17 is accounting for the hardships of human existence and especially the creative aspects of life: procreation and production of food. Earlier ease is now mingled with hardship: 'good' comes with 'bad'" (*TAWC* 16).

The second section for each *parashah* is termed *Another View*. It also is written by a biblical scholar. This short essay concentrates on a particular aspect of the Torah section in question. It may agree or challenge ideas found in the *Central Commentary*. The third division features *Post-biblical Interpretations*. A scholar of rabbinic literature (particularly Talmud and Midrash) draws upon what often come from classical sources and rabbinic teachings. Next, a *Contemporary Reflection* offers the thoughts of authors who may be scholars, rabbis, cantors, or educators. Each reflects on how the Torah section speaks to the modern-day world. Finally, *Voices* features a particularly creative response to the *parashah*. Often this entails poetry.

Following the introduction to the book, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* presents five (again a nod to the books of the Torah) important essays. "Women and Interpretation of the Torah" explains that for "most of its history, Jewish interpretation of sacred texts did not represent the knowledge and insights of women, for authoritative interpretation long remained the domain of men." Fortunately, in the last third of the 20th century Jewish women became "truly visible in both the academic arena of biblical scholarship and in specifically Jewish circles." Prominent among them are the names Neḥama Leibowitz and Sara Japhet (*TAWC* xxxviii, xxxix). Their work paved the way for this volume.

"Women in Ancient Israel" notes that in biblical times a woman's identity was inseparable from her status as a married woman; that was the established norm. Though there was "gender asymmetry in matters of sexuality" generally, "the relationship between a woman and her husband was one of interdependence and complementarity" (*TAWC* xliii). Women had economic, educa-

tional, managerial, and religious roles. "Women in the Bible appear in nearly twenty different community roles beyond those we often associate with the household" (*TAWC* xlvi).

The essay "Women and Post-biblical Commentary" presents an historical summary of the Jewish commentaries and commentators cited in this volume. It discusses rabbinic literature, and the portrayal of women in rabbinic writings. "While the majority of exegetical teachings about women's intellectual capacities and public roles tend to be negative, different points of view have also been preserved" (*TAWC* li).

"Women and Contemporary Revelation" highlights the section *Contemporary Reflection* where women as "Jewish thinkers, rabbis, cantors, educators, and other Jewish interpreters respond to the Torah through a personal or a professional lens in order to articulate an ongoing encounter with God" (*TAWC* lvi). It quotes the midrashic observation that at Sinai the voice of God went forth to each individual Israelite according to that person's strength, to the old as the young, to the men and "to the women according to their strength" (Exodus Rabbah, 5:9). These contemporary reflections interact with, intersect, and challenge the traditional Torah text.

Finally, "The Poetry of Torah and the Torah of Poetry" explains that this commentary consciously continues "the oral tradition of intentional listening and of challenging the 'listener' to make connections between the text and [one's] own life" (*TAWC* lx).

The Torah: A Women's Commentary fills a long overdue niche in the world of Torah study. It presents both a feminine and a feminist perspective. The list of the authors and their respective credentials is, in its own way, a testament and a testimony to how Jewish women have taken their rightful public place as students and scholars of Judaism. As a male reader of the Torah, I am continually impressed with the additional and necessarily different insightful comments that these women offer. They bring a wider lens providing an enlarged understanding of this sacred text. This volume enhances our tradition even as it embraces it.