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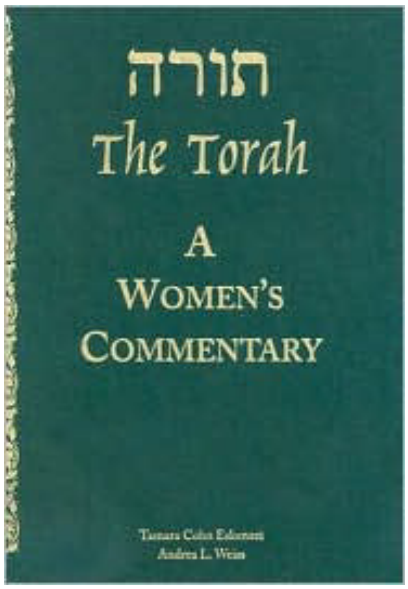

Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn, and Andrea Weiss, eds.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

New York: Women of Reform Judaism/URJ, 2008. Pp. lxiii + 1350. Hardcover. $75.00. ISBN 0807410810.

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What a delight! That was my feeling as I read *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss. The volume is a project of Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ), launched by Cantor Sarah Sager and inspired by the idea that "we must incorporate women's history and women's experience as part of the living memory of the Jewish people," as Sager writes in her preface to the book (xxvii).

The book's three guiding principles, according to the editors, are "contemporary, Jewish and women" (xxxi). It offers a commentary on the Torah written entirely by women from North America, South America, Europe, and Israel, who integrate traditional tools and innovative approaches. The methods employed include literary analysis, philological analysis, references to ancient Near Eastern literature, and reliance on archaeology, anthropology, and sociology, along with a large serving of historical criticism in the body of the commentary. This last point is why the book cannot be recommended to Ultraorthodox men and women or a significant sector of the Orthodox public, who will see it as rank heresy. Anyone who is not turned off by the idea that the Torah is a long and complex human enterprise, however, will find much to praise here. The target audience consists first and foremost of Jews who want to read the weekly portion with a gender emphasis. The book follows the traditional Jewish division of the Torah into fifty-four weekly portions; in this way, among others, the editors see it as a Jewish project. As

they note, however, the Aramaic translation found in *Mikraot G'dolot* (also known as the Rabbinic Bible) has been replaced by an English translation, and the traditional commentaries printed in *Mikraot G'dolot* have been supplanted by the contributions of one hundred contemporary female scholars (not counting the women who contributed poetry and prose to the "Voices" section). To this I would add the most important difference, associated with the second point: much of the content derives from the discipline of biblical criticism and leaves Jewish tradition far behind. Thus the most significant difference between *Mikraot G'dolot* and this volume involves the authors' commitment (or lack thereof) to Jewish tradition and halakah. Such commitment is unquestioned in *Mikraot G'dolot;* here it is at best an option (and usually not the option selected). The book represents many hues of the spectrum with regard to the authors' commitment to tradition and degree of religious observance, ranging from Orthodox (though not Ultraorthodox) to thoroughly secular. An essay such as the editors' "Women and Interpretation of the Torah," which deals, among other points, with the conjectured sources of the Torah and is quite useful for anyone interested in modern biblical scholarship, obviously could not have been included in a project committed to the Jewish tradition of the infallible Torah that the Lord gave Moses at Mount Sinai

In "Introduction: About This Book," the editors summarize the project's intention and methodology and review the decisions they made concerning some aspects of it. This includes the choice of an English translation, which fell on the 2006 version of the URJ translation with some minor modifications, and the preference—appropriate, in my eyes—for a "gender accurate" translation that attempts to render the Hebrew according to the meaning of the text as suggested by the context, rather than a "gender neutral" or "gender sensitive" approach.

The introduction is followed by five short essays that discuss and illuminate certain aspects of the five sections into which the book is divided. Particularly noteworthy here is the thoughtful piece by Carol Meyers, "Women in Ancient Israel: An Overview," which challenges the dominant notion of a clear division between the private domain, in which women were active, and the public domain, which was reserved exclusively for men. Meyers shows that in biblical society, which was largely agricultural, the private domain included extensive economic activity and that women's contributions were essential for the family's survival. She also argues for the existence of an informal social network of women who hosted one another while performing the various tasks for which they were responsible and notes that this network even gave women some political power.

The main section of this book (1,290 pages) adheres to a rigid format. For each weekly portion there are five sections: first (the bulk of the book) comes an introduction to the portion, followed by the biblical text in the original Hebrew (on the right), the English

translation (on the left), and, below them, a running commentary that focuses on gender issues, cruxes, and topics of special interest to contemporary readers. This section was written by biblical scholars (one or two for each portion). The body of the commentary incorporates frequent editorial notes intended to expand on some aspect of the commentary or to suggest an interpretation other than that proposed by the commentator. I found these editorial notes useful; they certainly made the process of reading more interesting. Of course, there are weekly portions with a conspicuous female presence where there is no lack of gender-related issues to ponder, such as B'reishit, Chayei Sarah, and Sh'mot. With regard to weekly portions where women are scarcely present or are quite absent, the commentators frequently find an indirect way to bring in gender topics. For example, Moses' dispatch of the spies in Sh'lach L'cha inspires Nili Sacher Fox to compare the portion with the episode of the spies sent out by Joshua (Josh 2) and to focus on the key female character in that later story—Rahab (869, 871).

The second section, "Another View," offers a short essay by a biblical scholar about some aspect of the portion. In general it deals with some topic that did not receive special attention in the commentary, but not always; when there is an overlap between this section and the running commentary, the voice heard in "Another View" sometimes resembles the commentary and sometimes poses a strong contrast to it. There is similarity, for example, in B'reishit, since Meyers's take on the status of women in the Bible is not all that far from that of Eskenazi, who wrote the running commentary on this portion. There is also similarity between Athalya Brenner's running commentary on Vayeishev and Susan Niditch's "Another View," since both of them compare Potiphar's wife to Tamar (though with different emphases). Contrasting positions can be found, for example, in the treatment of Rebecca's deception of Isaac by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Hara E. Person in their running commentary on Tol'dot, as opposed to the reading of Diane M. Sharon in "Another View." Whereas the commentators praise Rebecca for making sure that it is the worthy son who receives the blessing and thereby continues the covenant between God and the people of Israel (133), Sharon suggests that Rebecca misinterprets the vague prophecy that the elder will serve the younger; she proposes that the lesson to be learned from this portion is "to have the wisdom and patience to let divine intention blossom in its own time" (150).

The third section, "Post-biblical Interpretations," presents a selection of interesting midrashim and traditional commentaries, dating from the third to the nineteenth centuries, collected by specialists in the rabbinic literature. Here also the emphases are gender-oriented but, again, not to the exclusion of other topics. We find, for example, the midrash that introduces Sarah into the plot of the binding of Isaac and links her death to her son's aborted sacrifice, the various midrashim that have Dinah marry her brother Simeon or Job, those that identify Caleb's wife with Miriam or with Bithiah daughter of

Pharaoh, and the midrash that exhibits women's power to destroy (e.g., Korah's wife, who incited him and brought about his destruction) or to preserve (e.g., the wife of On son of Peleth, who saved her husband with a ruse).

The fourth section, "Contemporary Reflection," offers the stage to Jewish women who may not be scholars. The contributors include Jewish thinkers, rabbis, cantors, educators, and other Jewish interpreters who bring their personal or professional perspective on the portion and try to find in it notions that are relevant to our lives today. For example, Sarah's importance as part of the covenant between God and Israel, in Lech L'cha, allows Rabbi Ruth H. Sohn to consider the importance of daughters in general and to mention contemporary rituals associated with the birth of girls, including the *b'rit bat* and (new to me), the *B'rit N'tilat Raglayim* (Covenant of Washing Feet), which welcomes and blesses the newborn girl by washing her feet, just as, she says (though the biblical text, Gen. 18:4, does not), Abraham washed the feet of his guests (80–81). Rebecca's childlessness, recounted in Tol'dot, moves Valerie Lieber to praise adoption and criticize the importance that Jewish society assigns to biological children, a notion she sees as a failure from both a feminist perspective and a Jewish perspective (152–53; see also Lisa Hostein, "On Adoption," in the "Voices" section on Sh'mot, 329). The psychological transformation of Judah, as found in Vayigash, leads Rabbi Miriyam Glazer to consider personal growth through suffering and to reject the idea of instant transformation (277–78). The injunction "you shall be holy" (in K'doshim: Lev 19:2) leads Elyse Goldstein to look for the path to holiness: "though *parashat k'doshim* demands holiness, it is up to us to define holiness in a way that is truthful for both women and men" (719). The laws of kashrut in the portion R'eih inspire Ruth Sohn to explain that today many Jews incorporate ethical considerations (with a regard to both human beings and animals) and environmental concerns into the determination of kashruth, based on the idea that "you are what you eat" (1137)—a message with which I strongly identify.

The fifth section, "Voices," consists of literary contributions, mainly poetry, by several hands, which relate directly or indirectly to the weekly portion and constitute a different type of commentary on the Torah.

At the back of the book are brief bibliographical entries on the contributors (not including those to the "Voices" section), in alphabetical order.

The rigid format of the book should not deceive readers about its content, which is far from homogeneous. The book is a deliberate celebration of polyphony. For example, alongside the exegesis of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Carol Meyers, who emphasize the facets of the Torah that promote the empowerment of women (see, e.g., Eskenazi on B'reishit, where she argues, following Trible, that the woman is not depicted as inferior to

the man), we have Rachel Adler representing the common view that Gen 2–3 are "the creation of patriarchy" ("Contemporary Reflection" on B'reishit, 31). Similarly, Esther Fuchs emphasizes the patriarchal aspects and repression of women in the Bible and argues that the Bible relates to women as "sexual objects and procreative instruments" ("Another View" on Vayeira, 105). Eskenazi's opinion is different (see her introduction to Genesis, 2). Frequently the commentary includes a cross-reference to another passage in the volume that offers a different opinion by another scholar.

Some topics are dealt with more than once, such as, What sex is God? (although God is frequently described in male terms, there are passages in which female images are applied to the deity; it follows. then, that God is not of any sex). Who is the target audience of the Torah? What are its objects of reference—does the dominant use of masculine language include or exclude women? (The answer depends, of course, on the context.)

On more than one occasion the book reflects its contributors' ethical views, as in Eskenazi's note on Noach, where she laments that Noah's curse of Ham was used by white colonialists to justify the enslavement of black Africans, reinforced by the insight that the curse is pronounced by Noah and not by God (46); or Andrea L. Weiss's emphasis that Deuteronomy demands justice for all, including animals (her introduction to the book of Deuteronomy, 1038).

The tension between the Torah and modern notions is highlighted in Judith Plaskow's consideration of the sexual code of Lev 18 ("Contemporary Reflection" on Acharei Mot), which, she says, "requires both criticism and transformation" (697). This tension peaks in Ora Horn Prouser's commentary on Ve-et'chanan, with regard to the injunction to wipe out the seven Canaanite nations (Deut 7:1–5): "We must confront the fact that this is what the Torah says and be willing to disapprove of it. While we may attempt to understand this rhetoric in its historical context, we can still reject it as something we would not endorse today" (1080). Also relevant is the editorial note there, to the effect that, even though every conquest involves killing, the extermination of the seven nations as described in the Torah "is unlikely to have been a historical actuality" (1080; see also Dalit Rom-Shiloni's commentary on Eikev, 1094).

To offer a very brief taste of the rich diversity of this book, I will conclude with the poem "Sarai," by Sherry Blumberg, from the "Voices" section on Lech L'cha (83), a poem that focuses on the female experience and a woman's need for direct contact with God:

> Leave my home?
> My father, my mother?
> Go with him

To this place unknown?

Follow this man
Who will cause me tears
Who may bring me laugher
Who says it's God plan

So God, speak to me
That I may hear
Not just to him.
This is my plea!