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Schwartz, Matthew B., and Kalman J. Kaplan

The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of Biblical Woman

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Corinne E. Blackmer
Southern Connecticut State University
New Haven, Connecticut

Matthew B. Schwartz and Kalman J. Kaplan have co-authored several works on Bible-based psychological counseling. Whether for affirming life over suicide or family bonds over alienated individuality, practical guides to mental health based on the Bible have become an increasingly influential subfield of biblical psychological criticism. This volume focuses specifically on the psychological problems of women, who most persons of feeling will know have come to suffer deeply from depression, trauma, abuse, sexual adventurism, and endemic conflict in the world of today, where levels of unhappiness and aimlessness are endemic among the once far more solid world of women. Money seems to have worsened matters, especially as women are objects of attack from an omnivorous consumer culture of novelization and obsolescence where women please sexually and men achieve the status of gods through blistering displays of warrior violence and pornographic freedom. For these authors, both Jewish, Western culture demeans women in part because of the pessimistic Greek mythological *Weltanschauung* on which Freud modeled psychoanalysis. As a Jew intimately familiar with the Bible's stories, Freud could have turned to the Bible, and his decision not to stands as both indicative and indicting, for the Bible, unlike Greek myth, shows women as powerful and solid, as having a strong sense of their purpose, based on their participation in the covenant and the divine historical plan. Indeed, the deep fear of female sexuality evident in Greek mythology has

no place in the Bible, where women's procreative power receives the highest blessing as intrinsic to the covenant. The authors vigorously recommend the Bible as enabling women to balance attachment with independence and to model psychological strength, discernment, and intelligence. Women, who once had no choice but the Freudian world of retaliation and revenge, male domination, and female enmity, can instead choose to explore conflicts and experience growth and healing amongst the grand cast of biblical female characters, including Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Bithia, Shifra and Puah, Miriam, Zipporah, Rahab, Tamar, Deborah, Jael, Esther, Bathsheba, Abigail, Hannah, Hulda, Mizpah, Ruth and Naomi, and others. While some biblical women suffer terrible violence, they do not seek to matter greatly, which means that their suffering never becomes run-of-the-mill. While G-d is decisively patriarchal and, at moments, misogynistic, he actually destroys the world out of heartbreak at the abuse of women and has no qualms about going around men and deciding the future with women.

In the opening chapters, "The Greek Model" and "The Biblical Model," there is no room for joint understandings between these absolute opposites. The Greeks are pagans, idolaters, misogynists, and oppressors, while the Bible is monotheistic, faithful, respectful of women and family, and hospitable. Greek mythology and the psychological theories based on Greek mythology and Western literature harm and degrade women. Ancient Greek culture and mythology reflects an inimical, pessimistic, misogynistic cosmos that denies women purpose and worth, and fears their sexuality. Electra mirrors this cosmos, plotting to murder her mother Clytemnestra, an unbearable reminder of her own hated womanhood. Medea murders her children in wanton rage, and Zeus, for his part, seduces women who bear the punishment of his jealous wife, Hera. This *Weltanschauung* informs Western literature about tragic heroines who spurn convention and seek escape from their sense of emptiness in illicit sexual affairs and addictive habits. They end as suicides. The still-prevalent Freudian worldview has injurious assumptions about women that fuel abuse, paranoia, and violence. The strong sense of purpose and worth of biblical women made them capable of intimacy and independence, whereas contemporary women too often become submerged in pathological relationships and then assert their autonomy in destructive and alienating fashions.

The authors place the reader on the self-enhancing ground of the Bible and eliminate the intimidation some women might feel toward biblical women as different and unfamiliar. Indeed, the authors show the covenant and mission as theirs, not based on a specific people, but rather through their attitudes, actions, and beliefs. The contrast between what women in different camps can expect from the creation is illustrated by comparing the Greek myth of Zeus and Pandora with that of Eve in the garden of Eden. Zeus wants to create trouble for mortals, so he makes Pandora his plaything, and she has neither investment nor moral autonomy in the story. When trouble emerges from her box, it is

Pandora, as a woman, who is blamed. In striking contrast, in the garden, G-d fashions Eve as an *ezer kenegdo* (Gen 2:18), which the authors translate as “helpmeet-opposite” (20), and Eve has complete attachment to and moral deliberation within this story. She errs in judgment out of her desire and her strong thirst for experience, but she remains a balance between helping her mate and retaining her independent being. Because of the dual familial and G-d-directed composition of her being, she can undertake the covenant.

This strong introduction transitions into much more description and illustration, with only incidental deep interpretation. “Love and Devotion,” “True and False Wisdom,” “Courage,” “Unhealthy Sexuality,” “Women as Daughters,” “Women as Mothers,” “Women of the Home,” “Rejecting One’s Mission,” and “Accepting One’s Mission” provide summary explanation of how the chapter topic matters and then give clear and detailed narratives of many biblical women, titled after their names, which makes them read like modern stand-alone life stories, rather than strands in an echoing, self-referential meta-history of dazzling power and volume. These stories are, moreover, clothed in contemporary language, meanings, and concerns. These women encourage or respect their “man,” love their “families,” and remain calm and steady when they must disagree with a man. Samson’s mother, Hazzeleponi, remains modest and inclusive even when her husband quakes in fear of the angel who has blessed them. Rizpah accepts that her sons had to die but nonetheless mourns them and guards their corpses. Abigail, for her part, exemplifies courage in meeting David and convincing him not to murder her churlish husband Nabal. Rahab sees the might of G-d and so helps the Israelites capture Jericho. On the other hand, women like Jezebel, described as intelligent and capable, reject their mission, in this case apparently to flaunt idol worship and murder. In the chapter on sexual violence, given the unfortunate title “Unhealthy Sexuality,” the authors recount the horrid stories of gendered violence of Dinah, Tamar, and the profoundly traumatic narrative of the Levite’s concubine and the descent into a bloody civil war. In this case, if not in others, the authors make little effort to go past the reiteration of the events of the story. Unfortunately, without a committed analysis of the psychological and political dynamics of these stories, the women bear the fate of Greek mythological characters, vanquished without reason or justice, their mission also obliterated, ironically, by the precise blessed significance the Bible attributes to loving human sexuality.

In the epilogue, the authors pose a rhetorical question: What would have been the implications for “modern psychological health and growth” (179) of seeing Ruth and Naomi rather than Electra and Clytemnestra as the model of mother-daughter relations? The company of Ruth and Naomi improves, and would do so for these psychological ends. The conduct of Elektra and Clytemnestra appalls, but so does that of all the other characters. Chained to revenge and retribution, Athena emerges in the end to declare that only justice without humiliation or defeat can heal these people.

This book does not aspire to the values of complexity, scope, or exactitude of a scholarly work of biblical psychological criticism. Some would wince at the bludgeon-like and reductive opposition between Greek mythology and the Bible, as they would be the other tired foes—paganism versus monotheism, Canaan versus Israel, and so on. The resolute heterosexism of this book is both predictable and disappointing. It is predictable because smoothness, clearness, and harmonization are the instruments of persuasion. It is disappointing because modern psychology has rebuked homophobia, and the Bible is once again put in the service of resurrecting it. However, this book has a strong intention to accomplish good for audiences who can do well, the authors feel, to meet a form of feminist ethics that commands respect by infusing balance, intelligence, graciousness, and purpose into traditional social relations. The authors show convincingly the values of incorporating the Bible into pastoral counseling. It will reflect such health to promote it. It will encourage appreciation of where and how the narratives of biblical women illuminate or remain foreign to the experiences of modern women. At last, the biblical women have acquired, through the continuity of their traditions, their participation in the covenant, and their inclusion from the beginning this story, an assured identity that is a “healthful” model for women. Even more intriguing, the authors seem to reopen the covenant of the chosen people for them, on the provision that they variously demonstrate that they have made these horizons of world-changing meaning their own.