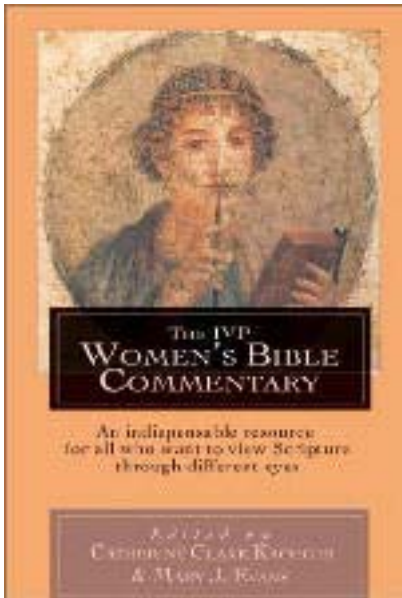


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Kroeger, Catherine Clark, and Mary J. Evans, eds.

The IVP Women's Bible Commentary

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The IVP Women's Bible Commentary is a one-volume commentary presenting the work of ninety contributors from around the globe (about half are American, judging by their institutional affiliation); most but not all writers are women. The volume contains articles on all the biblical books and seventy-eight supplementary articles on specialized topics. Each article on a biblical book includes a brief introductory essay, an outline of the biblical text, a commentary section, and a bibliography. The commentary sections are variously structured: some are essays on prominent themes from the book (e.g., "Isaiah" and "Philippians"); some focus on particular aspects or stories of the book that might be of interest to women (e.g., "Luke"); many provide a general commentary on the whole text of the biblical book. The supplementary articles treat a wide variety of topics: among others, particular women (e.g., "Hagar" or "Martha and Mary"), aspects of social history (e.g., "Infanticide" or "Widows"), and some theological issues (e.g., "The Trinity"). These articles vary in length from a few paragraphs to several pages; some are historical descriptions and contain extensive bibliography for further reading (e.g., "Homosexuality"), and others are more personal reflections (e.g., "Depression"). The book concludes with an index of articles and a scripture index.

In any book such as this one, the preface defines the perspective that holds the book together. Why was this enterprise deemed important to its editors? Kroeger and Evans tell

us that they intend the book to serve “as a complement rather than as an alternative to other commentaries . . . seeking to provide a resource for the whole church—both women and men—that will allow readers to notice and identify issues within Scripture that relate to women or reflect their unique perspective” (xiii). They also state that the commentary was prepared by “women of faith who believe that all Scripture is inspired by God and given for the benefit of all humanity,” scholars who hold “‘a hermeneutic of faith,’ a conviction that the Scriptures are meant for healing rather than hurt, for affirmation of all persons” (xiv). They admit that their approach will still require asking “some very hard questions about text and context, original intention, and enduring significance” (xiv). They conclude that their work “argues for the full inspiration of the Bible and the full equality of women” (xv).

In setting forward their task in this way, this volume adds its voice to a discussion begun by other Christian feminist works, most obviously the *Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe; expanded edition; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), but also *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994) and the Feminist Companion series (Sheffield Academic Press), among others. This discussion has at its core the question of how one reads the biblical text, which has central significance for Christian faith as well as Western culture but has been “used for unjust oppression in contemporary societies” (xiv). To use the words of Sharon Ringe, “the power of the Bible in women’s lives has been at best ambivalent. It has functioned as a force for life, for hope, and for liberation . . . [but] women reading the Bible have found themselves on alien and even hostile turf” (*Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3). Kroeger and Evans conclude their preface by stating that their contribution to the debate will be from “a more conservative position than some other materials” (xv).

And this is indeed what *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* contributes. As an interpretive voice from an evangelical perspective on scripture, the commentary presents various positions on historical-critical questions. Some voices are historically conservative, as, for example, with respect to Exodus, “it is not improbable that Moses, reared in the court of Pharaoh, was capable of recording the history of his people . . . [although] this does not rule out the possibility of later editing” (27); the psalms titles are taken as “indicating authorship and, sometimes, circumstances of writing” (288); Acts is dated early and treated as “an extraordinary, remarkably accurate historical record” (606). However, there are also essays that intentionally by-pass or assume the results of modern critical historical work: the commentary on Jonah chooses to focus on “genre and tone” rather than whether the book is “history or a type of parable” (458); the introductory remarks for Isaiah explore “both perspectives, for and against unity, and leave readers to decide for themselves” (352); Mark is introduced as “the first canonical Gospel” and

“eschatological history” (547); authorship issues in 2 Peter are “not overly important” (793). The bibliographies to direct further reading are similarly varied, some providing titles of other popular conservative commentary series and some providing references to the critical literature that was used in the commentary (e.g., compare “Matthew” [541] with “Genesis” [26–27]).

The book’s scope, dealing with canonical texts not including the Apocrypha, identifies it as a Protestant Christian endeavor. The articles also assume a Christian audience, and some articles try to make connections to faithful living. As ever, such applications are most problematic in interpreting Old Testament texts, and such problems tend to show up in the supplementary articles, which have a broader sweep than the exegetical studies. For example, as part of the discussion “Sibling Rivalry” there are lists of siblings in the Old Testament who were rivals, a pattern the author suggests is not seen among the disciples of Jesus who were siblings (17–18). Such a conclusion interprets the silence of the Gospels and the explicit use of the rivalry theme in Old Testament narratives as though the two were directly comparable and definitive as a contribution to the modern discussion of this issue. (I also wondered what the author did with New Testament texts where Jesus declared that he came to create sibling rivalry; Luke 12:49–53.) Only a hermeneutic that disregards the literary purposes of the texts with which it is working and assumes the superiority of the New Testament can come to such conclusions.

However, the more important question raised by the commentary is the satisfaction it gives as interpretation of scripture from women’s perspectives. Here I was frequently not satisfied. The work raised again the broad question of whether there is a distinctive woman’s perspective on some texts if women’s experience does not provide a general *critical* hermeneutic, such as on Daniel (cf. C. A. Newsom, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 201). However this becomes a more important issue where a faithful hermeneutic, as advocated in this book, excludes critical analysis if that analysis finds that the text is alien or hostile to women’s experience. For example, consider the interpretation of Hos 1–3, a text that many women find very offensive because of its depiction of violence against a woman as a metaphor for God’s action against Israel. In *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* there is an acknowledgement that “some commentators regard this metaphor with disgust,” but the commentator understands the text as “an illustration from life to explain the deterioration in the relationship between Yahweh and his people” and concludes that “the imagery works” (435). In my opinion, the rhetorical efficacy of the imagery is the primary reason it calls for some other kind of critical response. Other “texts of terror” are similarly treated.

The publication of this volume points to the growing strength of academic work of women within the evangelical movement. As well, it provides another voice of women,

reminding all of us, but especially those who read the biblical text more critically, of the multivocal character of women's voices. Is this a book for the whole church? Probably not. There are many of us in the wider church for whom its hermeneutical stance does not adequately handle the critical issues of the biblical text nor the ambivalent experience of women when they read it.