

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *The Woman's Bible*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1993. 366 pp. \$9.95.

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One of the leading causes of the feminist movement was and is a woman's right to vote. Women's suffrage's leading proponents were feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While more conservative women were calling for a woman's right to vote, Stanton and her followers believed the source of all oppression concerning women was due to religion, particularly the Christian faith and its Holy Bible. With this belief, Stanton and others put together a Bible for women, but something more like a commentary on Scripture from the perspectives of feminism and higher criticism. This work, *The Woman's Bible*, is key to understanding the positions of feminist theologians and how feminism has impacted Christianity today.

Summary

The monograph opens with a brief history of the women's suffrage movement while the rest of the book is devoted to commentary on the Old Testament, Kabbalah, and New Testament. An appendix of letters answering specific questions is helpful in that it offers a more extensive look at the views of the writers of *The Woman's Bible*. The majority of the commentary is dedicated to the Old Testament, with the main focus on the passages pertaining to women. Overall, the view of the commentators is that the Old Testament was tampered with by men wanting a patriarchal society in which they could oppress women. In the brief section on the Kabbalah, which is a Jewish oral tradition that was finally written down dealing with different aspects of God, Stanton and team are pleased since much of the focus of the Kabbalah is on the feminine nature of God. As for the section on the New Testament, miracles are often dismissed, the meanings of parables

changed, and Paul's writings are seen as uninspired. While the view of the commentators concerning the New Testament is more positive than that of the Old Testament, the overall theme of the entire book is that Scripture should be revised.

Critical Evaluation

The most helpful section in the entire monograph is actually the foreword written by Maureen Fitzgerald. By understanding the time and situation in which the women who wrote *The Woman's Bible* were, one better understands the overarching attitudes of the book. Women's suffrage was the critical hinge on which everything swung for these commentators, and more so than for anyone else, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. As explained in the introduction, Stanton believed religion was the source of all oppression of women. For example, once Stanton realized the influence of religion would not go away, she "reoriented her reform emphasis to concentrate on religion, believing that the Judeo-Christian tradition must be attacked directly...and embrace a liberating theology that stressed self-development, female divinity, and the exercise of individual conscience" (xx). With the beliefs of Stanton and her team in mind, the statements in the commentary are put in their correct context.

By stripping away the authority of Scripture, Stanton places her subjective judgments upon each passage. Through Stanton's own admission of what a woman's motto should be, "Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice," she and her colleagues sacrifice nothing of themselves in submission to the God of the Bible or the Bible itself (131). Each passage is seen through an objective that continually attempts to refute and deny Scripture while raising women up as all that is good in humanity. The reconstruction of Scripture is seen throughout the commentary as verses are dismissed or

their meaning changed. For instance, Jesus is given the attribute of physical beauty, which is never stated in the Bible, and actually the contrary is set forth (117). The majority of the Old Testament is thrown out or written off as being by men and for men. Thus, the Lord and Scripture are seen as completely untrustworthy, and all wisdom, understanding, and truth are found with the individual. Stanton and others who hold to such a view of God and the Bible falsely put their faith in themselves, and for them nothing can be certain if God is a liar and humans are more intelligent than He and His word.

The second attitude pervasive throughout *The Woman's Bible* is one that says women can do no wrong as long as they do not submit to men and focus on the advancement of themselves instead of their husbands or families. Stanton held that the family was not a single unit but rather several independent beings (xviii). Thus, contrary to the plan of God, being a wife and mother are at the bottom of the priority list while a woman's education and self-fulfillment are put first. Instead of looking to heroines of the faith such as Sarah, Abigail, Ruth, and Esther, Stanton and the commentators uphold such women as Vashti and Jezebel as those who truly had wisdom. Jezebel's wickedness is seen as a bias of the Jewish historian, who "does not give any facts whatever which warrant the assertion that Jezebel was any more satanic than the ancient Israelitish gentleman, to whom her theological views were opposed" (74). Thus, the words of Scripture are reconstructed, for surely no woman would have been that evil. With this strategy, even the vilest of women can be made into a woman of seeming compassion, wisdom, and beauty.

In conclusion, to dissect the entirety of the commentary in *The Woman's Bible* would take pages upon pages. Viewed succinctly, the monograph is one with an agenda that seeks to promote women and self while destroying God's ideal for biblical womanhood and refashioning it in the image of the day. Thus, the individual has been placed above God. Women who are serious about God's true ideal for womanhood should read this book in order to understand the opposition they will face and the views being promoted in the world then as well as today.