

Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

Brenner, A 1985 — The Israelite Woman

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. 144 pages. Price: US \$13,95

Reviewer: Rev Lynette Steyn

Even the common reader of the Bible knows that the society of ancient Israel was a patriarchal one. The positions of power in the community belonged to men: the elders or 'wise men' of the clan, who acted as leaders and dispensers of justice; persons of religion — priests, prophets, magicians; poets and orators; and military leaders. Once the monarchy was instituted, the king assumed a supreme position at the top of the social hierarchy. Very few women of biblical times tried to acquire positions of prominence outside their home and immediate family. Those who tried, struck out on their own, out of the family circle and into the male domain of political life. Using Old Testament narrative as ground material, Athalya Brenner tries to find out how they fared, and to what extent their attempts to manage on their own turned out to be successes or failures.

Part one of this study deals with the role women played in professions and social institutions.

Contents: part one

- Queens/Queen-mothers (16 pp)
- Wise women (13 pp)
- Women poets and authors (9 pp)
- Prophetesses (10 pp)
- Magicians, sorcerers and witches (11 pp)
- Female prostitution (6 pp).

Contents: part two

The focus is on the typical roles in which Hebrew women appear in Biblical stories. The aim is to trace the development of stereotypes and paradigms — if any.

- Mothers of great men (14 pp)
- The two sides of the temptress (9 pp)
- Foreign women (8 pp)
- The stories of foreign women focus on the women's sexuality/powers of seduction.
- The ancestress — an extended female metaphor (9 pp).

Conclusion

1. According to the Old Testament, a woman's proper realm is the family and domestic pursuits. The best and most useful way to express herself and achieve personal security is through bearing children — especially male ones.
2. Woman is subordinate to man.

Because of these views the possibility of regular female participation in public affairs is excluded. Exceptions do occur and are sometimes judged quite severely. The literary paradigms describing women and female behaviour vary. But in all of these models women are looked upon as the second sex — the weaker sex, who are at their best and most efficient when they use traditional female weapons (= sexual charms) for achieving their goals. Thus woman, the instigator of human civilization, finds herself unable to participate in the power struggles and decision-making that determine the shape of this very civilization.

This book is not merely a re-write of Old Testament narratives. Because she does not seek to find a standard for correct attitudes for a bygone Biblical age, radical feminists will find Athalya Brenner's study too mild and of no use. But the reader who is interested in the social behaviour of the religious community of Old Israel will understand the Bible better through this short book.
