Brenner, A 1985 — The Israelite Woman


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 Utey fared, and to what extend 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.

Charlesworth, J H (ed) 1992 — Overcoming Fear


Reviewer: Prof P M Venter

This book deals with the roll which fear plays in the relationship between Jews and Christians. Most of the contributions hail from a symposium held by the American Interfaith Institute in Philadelphia, United States of America in 1987. The participants discussed the impact of fear on the conflict between Jews and Christians, in many instances from personal experiences.

Some of the contributions discuss the theme of the symposium from the viewpoint of Biblical and post-Biblical literature. In an excellent paper Culpepper points out that the term ‘Jews’ in die Gospel of John should be understood against the social background of the conflict between Christian Jews and other factions of the Jews during the first century. This conflict is transposed in the strategy of the narrative onto the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. The viewpoint of Hanson is that the conversation between Jews and Christians should take place on the cognitive as well as the affective level. Better knowledge of the literature which they have in common would contribute towards greater willingness to talk about differences and agreements. Tatum shows in his work that Clement of Alexandria of the second century, in contrast to others of his time, showed a positive attitude towards the Jews. He was willing to acknowledge that Christianity had and could learn much from them. Murphy uses a Tanak/Old Testament theology and points out that the ‘fear of the Lord’ forms a central theme in the collection. In this theme he sees a mutual point of agreement which should draw the two groups closer together.

Another group of contributions deal with trends in the relation between the two groups. Fenn describes fear as a phenomenon of the modern secularised society which is manifested in various forms where larger groups dominate smaller groups. Anderson points out that the trend towards absolutising and the fantasy of superiority among Christians constrains the dialogue between Jews and Christians. Mendels talks from an Israeli point of view. He thinks that Christians and Jews are in need of each