

Lynn Japinga. *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament: Who They Were and Why They Matter*. Louisville: WJKP, 2017. 221 pages. \$17.

Lynn Japinga, professor of religion at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, introduces readers to a treasure trove of well-known and little-known women in the Old Testament. The book contains forty chapters, each between three and six pages in length, and each devoted to a woman or a pair of women.

For each chapter and character, Japinga provides the story's location in the Bible and whether it is in the lectionary, followed by a fresh retelling of the story and suggestions for preaching. The stories are organized in canonical sequence beginning with Genesis (Eve) and ending with Hosea (Gomer). She advocates not using these stories as moral lessons but rather as stories that "focus on discerning God's action" (5).

Japinga often gives examples of how the interpretation of these stories have promoted misogyny and then offers a counter interpretation. Frequently, she cites misogynous interpretations from the church fathers, for example: Tertullian (7–8), Calvin (16, 21, 31, 36, 40, 41, 49, 55), Jerome (36), and some medieval commentators (36). She quotes Martin Luther as saying, "women are rather weak in nature" (21, 31, 40–41). It seems, however, her favorite and more recent go-to misogyny is Abraham Kuyper's 1936 commentary. Referring to him almost two dozen times, she quotes Kuyper as saying, for example, that women rose to power only when no men were qualified, as in the case of Huldah (163). About the women in Jesus' lineage (Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba), Kuyper concludes that they are an "abhorrent degradation" (42). The author also references Kuyper's argument that when women become corrupt, they can be worse sinners than men (147).

Japinga does mention more contemporary scholars like Carol Lakey Hess who portrays Miriam as a jealous woman (55). She also quotes Walter Brueggemann who speaks of no need to criticize Rebecca because she really didn't know what she was doing (26). Japinga finds this a misogynous statement that gives Rebecca no credit for being an intelligent woman (26). Phyllis Tribble is one of the few anti-misogynists quoted and affirmed.

One of the strengths of this volume is Japinga's acknowledgement of the complexities of these stories. She deals honestly with flaws as well as strengths of these characters. Regarding Lot's two daughters and the incest in the cave, Japinga concludes, "Contemporary readers are not called to imitate them, but to see that new life can grow out of despair and destruction. God took that dysfunctional family and made their descendant, Ruth the Moabite, an ancestor of Jesus. The future was born in that cave" (23). She challenges reader to think how women define spirituality differently from men based on their experience of childbearing: less an image of wrestling with God and more in the desire for love and relationship (32–33).

Japinga offers insightful and creative ways of preaching these stories. She suggests the story of Sarah and Hagar be used as an opportunity to address the three religions that spring from them: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (17–18). She connects contemporary issues raised by these stories such as date rape (37–38) and fertility issues, as in the case of Rachel and Leah (32). With the story of Tamar, she offers important perspectives on physical and verbal abuse and the church's responsibility to victims (132–135).

There are a few minor issues I have with the volume. First, Japinga began by lamenting the paltry number of sermons on biblical women by contemporary preachers like Craddock, Gnomes, and Rutledge. I'm not sure this is a fair assessment. For one, both Craddock (e.g. *Collected Sermons*, 2011) and Rutledge (e.g., *And God Spoke to Abraham*, 2011) preach

primarily biblical texts and not biblical characters. My quick perusal of their books showed they also had very few sermons on biblical men. For another, as I look through fifty sermons preached by Ellen Davis in *Preaching the Luminous Word* (2016), I find the same scenario. The same could be said of the sermons by Elizabeth Achetemeier and Alyce McKenzie. These scholars and preachers are known more for preaching texts than characters.

Second, even though most of the stories are interpreted thoughtfully and fairly, the interpretation of the woman of strength in Proverbs 31 is questionable. Japinga sees this text as promoting “superwomen” (183). She maintains that this portrayal is really the image of God and not a woman, concluding that readers must not see this woman “as a role model but as an image of God who is the ultimate provider” (183). I beg to differ with her on this, and so does Ellen Davis who sees this woman as an ordinary hardworking farmer (see *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 2009, 147–154).

Finally, no book could cover the entire waterfront of women in the Old Testament. It would be important, however, in a book like this to tell the story of the Shulammite woman in the Song of Songs. With all the examples of abuse Japinga addresses, here is an example of a woman equal to a man and a man who loves and honors the woman. There is mutual respect for one another, they constantly affirm each another, and they are committed to one another.

Japinga presents a thoughtful, creative, and challenging resource. I especially enjoyed the way she retold these stories, adding touches of humor along the way, and reminding me of their complexity and richness. For preachers, this is an extremely valuable resource that will provoke thoughtful reflection and fill a gap in the content of their preaching. For those who teach preaching, this book provides a great opportunity for discussion on long neglected characters and on critical issues facing our churches and our culture. Japinga is to be commended for what she has contributed.

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