



Women and the Society of Biblical Literature.

Ed. Nicole L. Tilford

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Review by Valerie Abrahamsen

It comes as no surprise that most established American professional societies were founded, staffed and populated primarily by white men. The Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the “largest learned society of scholars who teach and research biblical studies” (page xi), is no exception. Several decades into the current wave of feminism and the field of women’s studies, the SBL remains mainly comprised of men; only 32 percent of the membership in 2017 was female (<https://www.sbl-site.org/SBLDashboard.aspx>).

In *Women and the Society of Biblical Literature*, editor Nicole Tilford seeks not only to trace the history of women in the Society but also to show the myriad ways in which SBL has honored women (or not), involved women in leadership positions, helped women to grow in their professional lives, enlarged and expanded its program units to include topics of intersectionality, and worked to become truly international in scope. The volume succeeds admirably.

Tilford lays out the origins of SBL origins by introducing us to the first few women members and providing short biographies of the ten female Presidents (the first being only in 1987, 107 years after the Society’s founding in 1894). The volume then includes readable, wide-ranging essays grouped in five sections: “Presidential Reflections,” “Reflections by Communities,” “Professional Life,” and

“Looking Forward.” In the interests of full disclosure, I am a biblical scholar myself and have been an SBL member for over 40 years. Reading these collected essays is a mostly fond journey down memory lane, an encounter with the names of admirable, familiar, and some quite well-known women and men in biblical scholarship. That said, there is

much more to this history for a wider audience than personal memories.

The women whose thoughts are included in “Presidential Reflections” set the stage for themes that recur throughout the book: courage, inclusiveness, and justice. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, now at Harvard, the first female SBL President and a pioneer in the field of feminist biblical studies, described formative initiatives taken by SBL in the 1970s and 1980s to promote the role of women and include the study of ancient women in the fields. Schüssler Fiorenza knew that she needed, in 1987, to give “an explicitly feminist presidential address;” in it, she called “for a paradigm shift in the self-understanding of biblical scholarship” and “a disciplined reflection on the public dimensions and ethical implications of our scholarly work” (52-53). No longer could religion professionals be content to examine texts and traditions from a supposedly “objective” perspective; scholars must engage the wider world in all its fullness.

The other women Presidents – and indeed most of the rest of the writers in this volume – take up Schüssler Fiorenza’s motifs. They discuss how the Society has aided women by adding program units at the Annual Meeting on women’s issues and new methodologies, invited women to serve on committees at all levels of the organization, instituted practices to combat sexual harassment, encouraged the mentoring of graduate students and junior faculty, and facilitated networking.

In “Reflections by Discipline,” we learn how women SBL members found their way in male-dominated fields of archaeology, Hebrew Bible, and New Testament. The

authors document, in one scholar's words, women's attempts to question "the systemic biases in modern scholarship that have absented ancient women from most scholarly works" (Nakhai, p.122). This questioning vastly opens up the fields to new discoveries and insights.

Community reflections are extremely important for both the SBL and our wider society. The authors highlighted in this section hail from African American, South American, Latina, European, South African, LGBTQ, trans, Jewish and Asian contexts. These essays are at once poignant, difficult to read and inspiring. Each writer has had to contend with misunderstanding, silencing, and discrimination (if not also violence), yet they have managed to contribute significantly to biblical studies and their communities.

In "Professional Life," authors discuss mentoring, the unrealistic expectations of "work-life balance," "writing as a sacred practice" (DeConick, p.266), the challenges of working in religious contexts where white men still hold most of the power, and "teaching as a mother" (Malbon, pp.310-12). One of the most engaging essays in the entire volume is that of brilliant Jewish scholar of the New Testament, Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt Divinity School (for whom I had the privilege of writing an article some years ago). Levine packs her piece with laugh-out-loud tidbits alongside her stellar observations. One sentence hints at her heroic life: "Only in this strange world does a Fundamentalist Christian call a Jew who belongs to an Orthodox synagogue and who teaches at a very left-leaning Divinity School to find out if it is kosher to report a church elder for child abuse" (283).

In "Looking Forward," authors offer suggestions for the SBL to improve itself, its field/s, and even higher education in general. According to Kelly J. Murphy, the Society's "education problem" is related, in part, to the question of the place of the humanities in the academy. As colleges and universities cut those departments and a segment of the US population questions the validity of a liberal arts education, "the Society must expand its networks, seek out new contributors, and explain what we do to the outside world (Murphy, p.334) to keep itself relevant.

While this might appear to be a niche volume for religion professionals in the academy, clergy, and women, the

essays can speak to a larger audience. First, men are widely featured, on both sides of the equation. Positively, male mentors and professors have aided these women in their careers and have been exemplary role models. Male readers can also learn from the more painful stories about ongoing male privilege and how deeply hurtful (often inadvertently) their actions can be.

Secondly, while biblical studies is significantly different from the sciences, for instance, other professional organizations can use this volume as a model for what to include and how to approach its own history.

In the end, suggestions made by final author Sarah Shectman can apply to other guilds and be of great interest to independent scholars:

Add more contingent faculty to committees.

Educate members on the "pipeline" problem and job numbers.

Provide more travel funding to professional meetings.

Support unionizing contingent faculty.

Increase enforcement of harassment and discrimination policies.

I would add, in the American context, that organizations can also advocate for a universal health care system, enjoyed by our sister advanced nations but not the US; fixing health care would go a long way toward eliminating the myriad financial and related challenges facing contingent scholars and citizens alike.

Valerie A. Abrahamsen gained her doctorate in New Testament and Early Christian Origins from Harvard Divinity School, and her research focuses on women in antiquity, New Testament, early church history, and social justice issues from a progressive, feminist perspective. In 2015 she published her book *Paranormal: A New Testament Scholar Looks at the Afterlife*, and she gives regular lectures as well as leading discussions, retreats and workshops.