Fischer, Irmtraud

*Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel’s Beginnings*

Translated by Linda M. Maloney


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This book is a translation from the German of a book that first appeared in 1995 and then in 2000; Linda Maloney translated from the second, with minimal revisions, edition. The issue of relevance, ten years later, and for a book that originates in a certain European context, therefore has to be addressed in reviewing it.

Irmtraud Fischer is Professor of Old Testament at the University of Graz, Austria. In the past, and until mid-2004, she was professor of Old Testament and Women’s Studies in Theology at the Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Bonn and president of the European Society of Women in Theological Research. She is anchored in German scholarship, and German scholarship is classically rigorous but maybe resistant to change.

These facts are important, I believe, for reading her book. Fischer operated and operates in a milieu that is to a greater or lesser degree confessional. It used to be relatively tolerant to feminist criticism of the Bible (and other religious traditions) but is becoming progressively less supportive to this endeavor. For instance, her position in Women’s Studies in Bonn was scrapped upon her move (back, for there she taught also before going to Bonn) to Graz. In this environment where, nevertheless, feminist readings of the
Bible flourish, its practitioners must be extremely careful and rigorous in their critique, lest resistance to their expressed positions lead to practical consequences. Consider in that light Fischer’s words in her foreword to the first German edition of her book (vii):

I want to give a voice to the stories about the beginnings of the history of the relationship between YHWH, the God of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham, the God of Rebecca and Isaac, the God of Lea, Rachel, Zilpah, Bilhah, and Jacob, with God’s people Israel…. This approach is … legitimate in literary-critical terms because many of the stories of the women are among the oldest texts in Genesis. Nevertheless, the object of my reading is the canonical final text.

In other words, Fischer wishes to read the so-called patriarchal narratives in Gen 12–36, Exodus’s first chapters, and Ruth as matriarchal/patriarchal stories, in a manner that will “rehabilitate,” so to speak, the position of matriarchs within the rhetorical frameworks and levels of the individual narrative, then pericope, biblical book, and biblical beliefs and that will acceptable to her scholarly context and tradition.

Fischer succeeds in doing this, admirably. In this book, which harkens back to her Habilitationsschrift (1994) and is related to her commentary on Gen 12–36 for TKAT (forthcoming; see also her recent commentary on Ruth in the same series, published by Herder), she treads carefully between foregrounding female figures, on the one hand, and assessing the relative importance of their roles in the narratives they occupy, on the other hand. The result, many times, is insightful readings for single stories, as well as (at least) implied canonical and theological criticisms that go beyond her chosen biblical texts—as evidenced by her chapter 8 (146–49). Throughout her journey, Fischer remains firmly rooted in her milieu. Thus, her last paragraph reads as follows: “To those who seriously pursue justice and seek YHWH in their days, Deutero-Isaiah recommends (cf. Isa 51:2): Look to Abraham and Sarah, not only to the fathers, for women have wrestled with their God for the founding and endurance of their people!” (149).

Before answering more fully the question, What is there in this book for me and the likes of me, feminist and nonfeminist Bible scholars whose milieu and life context are different from Fischer’s, a brief survey of the book’s content is in order—brief, since a thorough description has already been undertaken by Yael Shemesh in her review of this work in RBL (http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4720_4860.pdf).

After a short introduction presenting her case—no fathers without mothers—Fischer reads Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham; Rebekah (“A Strong Woman with a Colorless Husband”); Rachel and Leah; Dinah and Tamar (“The Dark Sides of the Family
Chronicle”); Women at the Exodus; Naomi and Ruth. A concluding chapter (ch. 8), takes the texts beyond their immediate place and into the reader’s context (see above).

As Yael Shemesh has noted, Fischer commits some inaccuracies of reading, or generalizations (once again, see Shemesh’s review), and the lack of indices and an end bibliography is noted by the present reviewer as well, although full bibliographical information is given in the footnotes. For me, though, the lack of an end bibliography is perhaps less meaningful: the table of contents (iii–v) is detailed enough to serve as a guide to reading even in the absence of a source index, and since the book is essentially ten years old, any bibliography could not be up to date and can be gleaned elsewhere. An index of authors cited, nevertheless, would have been helpful.

What makes the book worthwhile for me—although it is so far removed from my admittedly Jewish but secular interest in the Hebrew Bible—are three main points. First, Fischer writes about her topic, as always in her work (notably on Ruth), with a sense of mission: she really and truly tries to be of service in demarginalizing female figures while, at the same time, limiting her decentering of male figures. This is no small task. The distance between what she tries to do and apologetics, for the biblical text and/or its interpreters, may be small, and she usually avoids it.

Second, her insights, big or small, are many. One of my favorites is the claim that by being the first Israelite/Hebrew to be buried in the promised land, Sarah, with her (dead) body, is the first to embody, have in-scribed, the divine promise of the land. Such a remark (46) has a body of feminist theory on body and embodiment underlying it, even if the theoretical framework is not directly announced.

Third, it is easier to expose masculine/male bias against women in the Hebrew Bible than to suggest an option for scholarship and for life in a manner that will afford comfort to feminine/female readers, and that while appropriating the veteran masculine/male tools of biblical criticism. Fischer manages to do that. At the end of Fischer’s book, whether the Bible is your, the reader’s, way of life or “just” an interest (of a scholarly or cultural nature), you will see her chosen subject, and beyond, differently. Perhaps you will not be totally convinced that biblical founding mothers are no less significant than founding fathers. You will remember, however, as do rabbinic and normative Judaisms to this day, that mothers matter. This reminder, or so it seems to this reader, is timely, always and everywhere.