Vander Stichele, Caroline and Todd Penner, eds.

*Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*

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This volume is an expansion of the papers first given at the International Meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2002 (Berlin) and 2003 (Cambridge), in the unit “Whence and Wither? Methodology and the Future of Biblical Studies.” The essays struggle with the dominance of the historical-critical method in biblical studies, the heritage of this dominance, and the question of the continued efficacy of the method in the light of its Western/androcentric tendency.

The introductory essay, “Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters” (1–30), by Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, skillfully raises and complicates the question of whether or not it is possible to use the master’s tools to dismantle his house. The authors suggest that, just as feminism and postmodernity have required modernity to get them started and are always indebted to that heritage with all its negative effects, so also postmodern and feminist biblical scholarship are indebted to modernity and to the historical criticism born out of modernity. While these newer methods debate with and move on from historical criticism, the authors indicate that it is postcolonial criticism that really brings the critique of historical criticism to the fore, because it highlights the way in which modernity and its children (historical criticism, feminism, and postmodernism) remain embedded in the colonial structures that have oppressed and marginalized difference. The authors note that there is always some degree of complicity of the newer
methodological tools with those traditionally building the master’s house, so there is always some ambiguity in the efficacy of these newer tools in the project of dismantling. Given the shared heritage of older and newer tools, the authors suggest that both may be (re)constituted in ways that can establish counterdiscourses, as well as facilitate and give voice to resistant communities.

The stated goal of the editors is to allow for the emergence of divergent voices through the discussion and debate that they see to be necessary to move through the complexities of dismantling the master’s house. The first methodological section of the book, which is the most invigorating section of the book overall, certainly does accomplish this goal. At points the debates and disagreements are quite marked, thus accomplishing the goal of disrupting any totalizing methodology. Many of the essays show the limits of historical criticism, while others try to reclaim and retool it. Hanna Stenström’s “Historical-Critical Approaches and the Emancipation of Women” (31–45) uses the story of the Swedish woman Emilia Fogelklous (1878–1972) to demonstrate that historical criticism originally provided an approach that broke open dogmatic theological positions (stances that literally made Emilia ill). In her essay “‘Tandoori Reindeer’ and the Limitations of Historical Criticism” (47–69), Susanne Scholz provides a helpful overview of the movement of historical criticism from a subversive practice to a dominant one with, in turn, more recent opposition to this (colonial) dominance from the margins; Scholz also shows the limits of historical criticism in analyzing several texts about rape in the Pentateuch. In perhaps the most exciting essay of the volume, “Breaking the Established Scaffold” (71–91), historian Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez critiques the historicist model as complicit with dominant structures and argues instead for borderland theories and decolonial imagination—such as practiced by the Zapatistas and articulated by Subcommandante Marcos—which look to the resistant present and the imagined future for transformative potential rather than to any so-called “real” of the past. By way of stark contrast, John W. Marshall rejects some of the central premises of many critiques of historical criticism (e.g., concern with the present), yet his essay, “Postcolonialism and the Practices of History” (93–108), successfully uses historical criticism to show how gender and class were articulated together in the early Christian world; his essay also works to disrupt the gate-keeping norms of canon. The methodological section ends with Vernon Robbins’s “The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation and Its Relevance for Feminist Hermeneutics” (109–28), which provides a response and countercharge to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of rhetorical criticism’s neglect of feminist and liberationist scholarship. Priscilla Geisterfer further mediates that debate in “Full Turns and Half Turns: Engaging the Dialogue/Dance between Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Vernon Robbins” (129–44).
The second half of the book takes up these questions with respect to particular biblical texts, first from the Tanak and then from the Christian Testament. Three of the ten essays substantially engage concerns of the present as a way of disrupting the credibility and hegemonic authorization of “history” (as per Scholz, Vander Stichele and Penner, and Martinez-Vázquez). Thus, in “Sarah and Hagar” (159–78), Judith E. McKinlay reads Gen 16 and 21 through the words of feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray and through the nineteenth-century diaries and writings of the missionary couple Elizabeth and William Colenso about their Maori domestic worker (made pregnant by William and shunned by them both). McKinlay’s reading shows how (female) sexuality is ever used as a site upon which politics and ideology are played out. Madipoane Masenya, in “Their Hermeneutics Was Strange! Our Is a Necessity” (179–94), explores what she calls a bosadi method of reading (that is, an approach that takes up the concerns of South African women and affirms them). Masenya gives a bosadi reading of Vashti’s exclusion in the book of Esther over and against a historical critical approach that simply dismisses Vashti without recognizing her courage and resistance. In “Mothers Bewailing” (195–210), Archie Chi Chung Lee reads the book of Lamentations cross-textually with the writings of the mothers of those killed in the Tiananmen Square Massacre (4 June 1989). Without privileging either set of texts, Lee seeks to counteract biblical scholars’ tendency to diminish Zion’s pain, while also acknowledging the pain of the Tiananmen mothers and affirming their fight against oppressive powers.

The rest of the essays in the volume reconfigure historical criticism and use it to point to ancient gender and postcolonial issues (as per Marshall), with varying degrees of attention to the present. So, for instance, Kristin de Troyer, in “‘And They Did So” (145–58), and Ann Graham Brock, in “Scribal Blunder or Textual Plunder?” (253–64), both use textual criticism to show up power and gender dynamics in the development of canonical texts and also to counter the usual privileging of particular texts and variants (and their theologies) over others. In “The History of Women in Ancient Israel” (211–31), Esther Fuchs critiques Carol Myers’s historical work in uncovering women’s power in ancient Israel, arguing that it does not take the patriarchal context of the texts seriously and does not recognize that the telling of history is above all an interpretive task. Roland Boer and Joseph A. Marchal, in their respective essays “No Road” (233–52) and “Military Images in Philippians 1–2” (265–86), both use historical criticism (Boer’s is a Marxist version) to show that the texts of Ezra-Nehemiah and Philippians are born out of dissent and resistance. Marchal shows that Paul’s hierarchical discourse of military obedience, possibly written as a response to dissent, could have negative effects on the present, if it is not read with a large dose of suspicion. Vander Stichele and Penner, in “Paul and the Rhetoric of Gender” (287–310), show how, in 1 Cor 11, Paul establishes his own masculine superiority by grounding gender distinctions through recourse to the
Greek philosophical concept of nature; like Marchal, they caution against reading “with” the text instead of against it. Finally, Jorunn Økland comes back to the theoretical questions of the volume’s first section in her essay, “Why Can’t the Heavenly Miss Jerusalem Just Shut Up?” (311–32). Økland combines feminist theory with traditional philology to show how resistance and difference speak through the dominant language of John’s Revelation.

This volume will be of benefit to scholars, especially as read in conversation with those whom the authors cite, such as Musa Dube, Kwok Pui-lan, Fernando Segovia, R. S. Sugirtharajah, and Vincent Wimbush, who have been largely responsible for initiating postcolonial and postcolonial feminist critiques of historical criticism. In many ways, this book seems to be, as Athalya Brenner indicates in her response “Epilogue” (333–38), a post-Christian, Euro-Oceaniaic-American response to, and negotiation with, these critiques. Perhaps it would have been appropriate to acknowledge this overall orientation of the book (with the exception of the few postcolonial authors), although to be fair the editors may have been trying to avoid the modernist traps of identity politics. Certainly, it is important for scholars in positions of privilege to acknowledge and take up the concerns voiced from the margins, as this volume does. The essays show honest engagement and struggle to come to terms with both the positive and negative effects of biblical scholarship’s reliance on the historical-critical method. Her Master’s Tools rightly casts scrutiny on the heritage of patriarchy and Western-centricism from which historical criticism has grown and insists that this heritage can no longer be ignored in ongoing scholarship and pedagogy.