This collection had its origins in a 2001 SBL session of “Women in the Biblical World.” Contrary to its title, most of the volume does not consist of humor about women in biblical worlds but of sober analysis of humor in biblical and apocryphal texts involving women, either as the authors or as the objects of that humor. Biblical humor, like other humor, is not always funny; it can be tendentious, mean-spirited, and downright cruel. But, as Athalya Brenner notes in her introduction, biblical humor serves not only, or maybe not even primarily, as entertainment. Rather, it functions as a didactic tool, as social critique, and as a key to understanding the roles of women and men in the biblical periods.

Part 1 of this anthology consists of essays about biblical humor. In his article, “Those Riotous—Yet Righteous—Foremothers of Jesus: Exploring Matthew’s Comic Genealogy,” F. Scott Spencer explores the links between comedy and piety in Matthew’s Gospel by looking at the comic features of the four women—Rahab, Ruth, Tamar, and Bathsheba—mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, and finally, at Mary, Jesus’ mother. Building on Ed Greenstein’s analysis in his article on humor and wit in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, Spencer looks at the elements that make these women’s stories humorous, including incongruity, festivity, and spontaneity, as well as ingenuity, inferiority and
inelasticity, and imperceptibility. He concludes with a brief discussion of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:26–30) and suggests that in this periscope Jesus plays the fool, that is, the inferior, inelastic male authority who must be persuaded to conform to woman’s will. Finally, Spencer calls for healthy sense of humor as a first step toward the “higher righteousness” to which Jesus called humankind and which he embodied (30).

Mary Shields’s article, “‘More Righteous Than I’: The Comeuppance of the Trickster in Genesis 38,” continues with the trickster motif as it emerges in a sequential reading of Gen 38. In Shields’s view, Judah, rather than Tamar, is the true trickster, as evidenced by his role in selling Joseph into slavery. She speculates that Judah may well have taken the lead in deceiving Jacob about Joseph’s fate. In turn, he is tricked himself.

Shields’s rather earnest tone demonstrates the adage mentioned by Kathleen O’Connor in her article on “Humour, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther,” namely, that explaining jokes is the best way to kill them. O’Connor intends to do the same (53) and begins by commenting on the comic features of Esther, such as irony, exaggeration, and turnabouts. She then turns to comic aspects of the king and government and, finally at Esther’s humor as a survival strategy for its audience. O’Connor argues that the book’s humor would have served to address and alleviate their fear in a situation of domination and oppression and to summon resistance to bullies and bombasts, to governments, to civil and religious institutions.

One of the most interesting and insightful pieces in the book is Toni Craven’s “Is That Fearfully Funny? Some Instances from the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.” Rather than explaining the humor in the apocryphal texts, Craven introduces anecdotes and experiences that address and contemplate humor and our reactions to it, such as the role of prior expectations that, for example, kept audiences from recognizing or appreciating the humor in Arthur Miller’s play Resurrection Blues. Craven suggests that in the apocryphal or deuterocanonical works it is the pervasiveness of suffering or struggle, much of which is extreme to the absurd, that provides an opening for humor. One of this reviewer’s favorite examples, though not mentioned by Craven, occurs in the book of Tobit, in which Tobit is blinded by bird-droppings when he is napping outside after undertaking an inordinate number of burials. For the authors and audiences of these works, as for our society after the events of 9/11, humor is an outlet for anxiety and a shield against the forces that threaten us. Craven leaves us with a new commandment: You shall not forbid yourself to laugh.

Kathy Williams’s article, “At the Expense of Women: Humor (?) in Acts 16:14–40,” looks at the theme of women’s ineptitude in Acts against the background of Greek
literary productions (with a side glance at modern phenomena such as “dumb blonde” jokes). Williams suggests that Luke’s Hellenized audience would have found these women’s depictions conventionally amusing, rather than misogynist and distressing, as they might read to us today. She illustrates this point by analyzing Acts 16:14–40 in the context of works by Menander, Plautus, and Terence, in which a virgin is raped and the male rapist refuses to take responsibility. While Acts does not portray a sexual rape, Williams argues that Paul abandons her by silencing her and rendering her economically useless. While the passage may struck early audiences as humorous in the same way that New Comedy was humorous, Luke’s, and Paul’s, treatment of the servant girl is no laughing matter.

Athalya Brenner’s study, “Are We Amused? Small and Big Differences in Josephus’ Representations of Biblical Female Figures in the Jewish Antiquities 1–8” argues that Josephus, usually seen as serious and pompous, should be reread for traces of humor, through which he reveals his tendentious approach to the biblical text. She conducts a dual search, for humor in Josephus and for humor about Josephus. Brenner notes that Josephus does not treat biblical women characters uniformly. In some cases he minimizes women’s roles compared to the Bible, for example, by rendering some named women anonymous, but in other cases he expands their roles, as he does for David’s wife Michal (Ant. 6.215–219; 1 Sam 19). Similarly, Josephus transforms some female figures into stereotypically feminine objects of derision, while elevating others. Brenner suggests that by examining Josephus’s narrative moves, we can perceive that Josephus deconstructs himself as a Judeo-Hellenistic male, with his own biases, none of which Brenner finds particularly amusing.

Gale a. Yee “Oooooh, Onan!’ Geschlechtsgeschichte and Women in the Biblical World,” is a tour de force, easily the funniest and, for those of us who are not au courant with the contemporary discourse on onanism and masturbation, very educational as well. Abounding in puns and double entendres, here, finally, is the humor that the subtitle of this book promised us readers. Gale Yee’s essay allows one to conjure up the riotous performance at the SBL session in 2001, and poems at the end, while not of equal quality or humor, demonstrate the ability of biblical humor to stimulate attempts at humor among otherwise serious students of the Bible.

Part 2 of the book consists of responses, two essays, and some poems. In her reflections upon the essays, entitled “Women’s Humor and Other Creative Juices,” Amy-Jill Levine reflects upon the ways in which these scholarly accounts of biblical women have also spilled the seeds of their own undoing. Levine argues that each of these accounts permits a reactionary reading that makes sport of the men involved as well as the very elements that the stories appear to reinforce. For example, Spencer’s readings of women in
Matthew also, implicitly, suggest that in all cases men face a challenge to their sexual prowess; normal procreation is irrelevant if not a nuisance. With regard to the Apocrypha, Levine is less disturbed by their use of humor to confirm gender roles than to condemn alternative religious practices. She notes that “The apocrypha is not the first collection to offer ‘dumb pagan jokes’, and nor will it be the last.” (125). Esther Fuchs’s response, “Laughing with/at/as Women: How Should We Read Biblical Humor?” suggests that we ought to seek out, and to celebrate, laughter that is not at or with but by women.

The volume’s appendix is a collection of poems, called “Babble/Bible Light: On Some Women.” These are of varying quality and humor, but they do help to balance out the book by injecting a lighthearted note.

The audience for this collection would include biblical scholars and any others interested in the intersections of humor, women, and the Bible. For the most part, the essays are accessible and not overly fraught with jargon, yet at the same time at least some do engage with critical theory in an illuminating way. While the book may not always amuse (hence the question that is the book’s title), it succeeds in showing the equivocal and ambiguous nature of humor as it applies to representations of women in the Bible, a conclusion that coheres well with those reached by feminist biblical scholars more generally.