One of the main contentions of feminist studies is that history has always been his-story and that this situation must be amended by uncovering and writing her-story. To apply this method to the Bible, it is generally necessary to invert the hierarchy of major and minor characters and focus on the supporting cast (Sarah, Rachel, Leah, etc.). Only on rare occasions can this hierarchy be left untouched because women (such as Ruth and Naomi) are already playing the leading roles.

*Women Who Wrestled with God* is the English translation of the second German edition of this work, published in 2000. In it the author, Professor of Old Testament and Women’s Studies in the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn, seeks to uncover “her-story” and the major role of women in the stories of the patriarchs, the exodus, and Ruth.

Despite its name, the book does not ignore men. It gives significant weight to the characters of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, whose adventures are interwoven with those of the women who populate the volume.
The book presents a fascinating gallery of women who differ from one another in many respects: ladies and servants; old (like Naomi) and young (Dinah, Ruth); victimizers (Sarah in Gen 21) and victims (Sarah in Gen 12 and 22, Hagar, and Dinah); active women (Rebecca, Tamar, Naomi, Ruth) and passive women (Dinah, Bilhah). A broad spectrum of human emotions is also displayed, from Rachel’s envy of her sister to Ruth’s devotion and love for her mother-in-law.

Fischer’s book offers fine and sensitive readings of these stories, paying attention to literary devices, pointing out intertextual links among different stories (e.g., 40–42, 108, 112, 142, 144), and noting the importance of how characters are referred to (16, 17, 36, 60, 62). It also devotes serious attention to diachronic issues.

The book comprises eight chapters. In the first chapter, “The ‘Fathers’ and the Beginnings of the People: An Introduction to Israel’s Ancestors,” Fischer challenges the conventional view that Genesis consists of “stories of the Patriarchs” and highlights the women’s significant presence in them. Another conventional notion she disputes is that the women of Genesis act only in the private domain. She argues that in Genesis the private and the national are one and the same, because the annals of the patriarchs’ (and matriarchs’) families are those of the people of Israel. She also maintains, correctly, that the biblical narrative includes authentic accounts of women’s experiences and lets us hear their voices.

In the second chapter, “Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham: Scenes from a Marriage under the Promise,” Fischer emphasizes that the Lord’s promise to Abraham that his numerous progeny will inherit the land cannot be realized with just any woman. Despite Abraham’s plea, “O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!” (Gen 17:18), the Lord insists that the promise was not tendered to Abraham alone but to a couple—Abraham and Sarah (17:19 [27]). Fischer examines various incidents in the lives of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, some of them uncomplimentary to the biblical figures (Sarah’s abandonment by Abraham [chs. 12 and 20], Abraham’s expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael at Sarah’s behest [ch. 21]). Fischer stresses that even though Abraham abandoned his wife, thereby endangering the divine promise, the Lord remains true to his word and saves her from the foreign monarchs, who never touch her. I disagree, though, with her claim that the Lord acts only on behalf of Sarah and not to return her to Abraham (p. 11, on Gen 12; p. 30, on Gen 20). Surely the Lord delivers Sarah also for the sake of Abraham, who merits the return of his wife without her having been violated by another man (thus explicitly in ch. 20, at least).

Fischer nicely discerns the pioneering aspect of Hagar (a character who is trebly inferior, as a servant, as a foreigner, and as a woman) and her special privilege: she is the first person in the Bible to encounter the Lord through an angel and the first to attach a name
to the deity who appears to her (Gen 16:7–13). Hagar is also the only woman who is promised children, a pledge that corresponds to Lord’s promise of offspring to the patriarchs (18–19).

The third chapter, “Rebecca: A Strong Woman with a Colorless Husband,” focuses on the distinctive figure of Rebecca, who joined herself to the promise previously made to Abraham when she agreed, like Abraham before her, to leave her homeland and family and emigrate to Canaan. It is unfortunate that in this context there is no mention of the important contribution by Robert Alter (The Art of Biblical Narrative, ch. 3: “Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention,” 47–62), who shows how Gen 24 deviates from the standard pattern of betrothal stories by inverting the gender roles (it is the bride who draws water for the groom’s proxy, rather than the other way around). Even though Isaac has the formal power to give his blessing to whichever son he deems worthy (though unworthy in the sight of the Lord), it is Rebecca’s behind-the-scenes manipulation that determines which son receives the blessing and continues the dynasty as the bearer of the divine promise. Her choice is confirmed by the Lord when he appears to Jacob at Bethel, presents himself as the God of his father and grandfather, and blesses him (Gen 28:13–15 [65]).

Chapter 4, “Rachel and Leah: The Founders of the House of Israel,” deals with the first emergence of Israel through the story of the triangle of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. It notes the suffering that Laban caused his daughters and Jacob by marrying off his daughters to the same man, amplified by the fraudulent circumstances of Leah’s wedding. Each sister-wife lacks what her sister is blessed with: Leah lacks Jacob’s love, and Rachel lacks children. Fischer’s assertion that “Rachel is fighting for God, so that God will give her fertility as well” (77) clarifies the title of the book (it should be noted that, according to Fischer, the women, unlike the men, wrestle on the same team as the Lord and not against him). But does Rachel really struggle with the Lord? In her resentment of her barrenness she does not pray to the Lord but addresses a peremptory demand to Jacob: “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Gen 30:1). Similarly, one can dispute Fischer’s claim that just as Jacob wrestled with God (Gen 32), so too his wives conduct their struggle for fertility with the Lord (88). Closer to the mark, in my view, is Ilana Pardes’s insight (Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach [London, 1992], 65) that whereas Jacob’s wrestling with the angel is a real physical combat, Rachel’s invocation of the name of the deity, “I have fought the wrestlings of God with my sister” (Gen 30:8), is merely figurative and indicates the intensity of her contest with her sister.

The fifth chapter, “Dark Sides of the Family Chronicle,” begins with the rape of Dinah, a passive victim whose voice is never heard and whose ultimate fate remains unknown, and concludes with the resourceful Tamar, whose initiative made her the mother of the tribe
of Judah. It also deals with Bilhah, with whom Reuben slept (with or without her consent is not clear), and Judah’s wife, the daughter of Shua, about whom Fischer notes that her name is not reported because she was not destined to continue the Judahite line.

Chapter 6, “Subversive Women at the Beginning of the People in Egypt,” presents the heroic figures of the women in the first chapters of Exodus and their decisive role in saving the people and especially Moses, their future deliverer. Fischer juxtaposes the female opposition to violence, which is subversive and nonviolent, with Moses’ “male” method of reacting to violence, which initially involves counterviolence—killing the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew (Exod 2:11–12 [123–24]). She argues that Moses’ rescue of the daughters of the priest of Midian expresses his transformation from a killer to a helper, because he avoids conflict with the shepherds (125, 126). It seems, however, that the verb va-yoshi’an “rescued them” (Exod 2:17) does indicate a clash between Moses and the shepherds, though the Bible did not choose to speak about it at length.

The seventh chapter, “Naomi and Ruth: The Unconventional Women Ancestors of the Royal House of David,” addresses the most female-oriented story in the Bible, a book that is named for a woman and whose protagonists are women, one that describes the experiences of women, including a daughter-in-law’s boundless devotion and love for her mother-in-law. Fischer highlights Ruth’s parallels with Abraham and with Rebecca: a willingness to leave her homeland, her birthplace, and her mother’s house and to go to Canaan. She ought to have noted the differences between Ruth and Abraham, though: Abraham emigrated in response to a divine command, after being promised a glorious future, including numerous offspring (we must not forget that he was childless when he received this injunction), whereas Ruth is commanded by her heart, motivated by her devotion to her mother-in-law, even though the latter warns her that she is compromising her hopes of remarrying and establishing a family. The chapter offers many first-rate literary distinctions but could have been improved by reference to Ilana Pardes’s Countertraditions in the Bible (ch. 6: “The Book of Ruth: Idyllic Revisionism,” 98–117).

The last chapter, “Women Who Wrestled with God,” steps back to take a broad view of the decisive role of those women who struggled with God (i.e., alongside him or with his help) to found Israel (in Genesis), to keep it alive (the beginning of Exodus), and to establish the Davidic line (Ruth).

There are several inaccuracies in the book that should be corrected in a future edition. Fischer argues that Sarah does not need to be tried by the binding of Isaac (Gen 22) because she has already faced trials in chapters 12 and 20 (43). Those chapters present Sarah as a passive victim, however, rather than as a person facing a test. The assertion that Tamar “sees marriage with a brother-in-law as an institution that provides for
widows, and not as the continuation of male rights beyond death” (112), is indeed possible but far from inevitable. It should be noted that according to the Hittite law code (§193), the father of a deceased man could enter into a levirate marriage with his son’s widow. Fischer mentions and accepts Jopie Siebert-Hommes’s view that Moses was rescued by twelve women—the two midwives, his mother, his sister, Pharaoh’s daughter, and the seven daughters of the priest of Midian; she adds that the twelve women correspond to Jacob’s twelve sons (114–15). In fact, it was Moses who saved Jethro’s daughters, not the other way around. Only Zipporah saved his life after they were already married (Exod 4:24–26). Fischer notes that “the last plague will strike every son” (118), when of course she meant every first-born son. She also writes that “Ruth’s marriage to Mahlon was childless for ten years” (140), though we really do not know how long Ruth and Mahlon were married.

Another criticism is the book’s lack of an index of verses cited, scholars referenced, and topics and even more so of a bibliography. The method used of citing a work in full when first referred to and thereafter by a short title only may be appropriate for an article but is not reader-friendly in a full-length book.

Despite these flaws, the book is certainly to be recommended to all those interested in the Bible, both laypersons and scholars, especially those interested in its female characters and in feminist Bible studies.