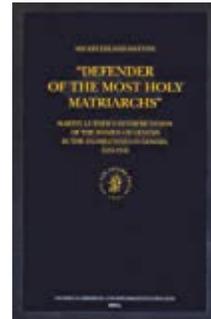




**Mickey Mattox.** *"Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs": Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women in Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesis, 1535-1545.* Leiden: Brill, 2003. 2 app.endices. EUR 124.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-12894-1.



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**Published on** H-German (March, 2006)

### Luther's Not-So-Desperate Housewives

In 2003 Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner-Hanks edited and translated *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*.<sup>[1]</sup> In their introductory comments, they lamented the fact that no full-length study has been devoted to Martin Luther's understanding of women, despite the fact that the reformer had so much to say about women in his various writings. Mickey Mattox's book, *Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs*, published later that same year, helps to address this gap. Mattox's book gives full attention to Luther's important comments on women contained in his later lectures on Genesis, the *Enarrationes in Genesis* (beginning in 1535), yet also includes an analysis of some of Luther's earlier discussion contained in the *Declamationes* (1523-24).

It is important to note that this book is principally a study of Luther and his exegetical method, not really a study on women in the broader understanding of the Reformer. Selecting several of the key women of Genesis allows Mattox to address some important questions related to the role of women in society, with particular attention to Luther's sixteenth-century context. However, Mattox is more concerned with how Luther

was able to blend traditional exegetical approaches to these women, both from the patristic period and the middle ages, with his own particular insights rooted in his evangelical understanding. The consistent thematic refrain is that God, and consequently Luther, was the defender of these "holy matriarchs" (*custos sanctissimarum matriarcharum*), and Luther's exegetical effort was directed towards exculpating these women from any allegations of serious wrongdoing. Mattox locates his own interpretation of Luther somewhere between Gerhard Ebeling,<sup>[2]</sup> who attributed too much to Luther's ingenuity, and James Samuel Preus,<sup>[3]</sup> who clearly emphasized Luther's late medieval context for the interpretation of scripture. More importantly, Mattox rejects the assertion of Otto Zoekler that Luther, in his bibliolatry, simply substituted Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs for Catholic saints.<sup>[4]</sup> Mattox prefers a more restrained position that regards these biblical women as "domestic saints in Protestant dress" (p. 6). Luther adopted from his predecessors a hagiographical interpretation of these biblical personalities; however, his own deployment of what Mattox refers to as his "ascetic exegesis" is what helps to distinguish Luther from earlier commentators. For

Mattox, Luther's approach to these remarkable women is both imaginative, reflecting some of Luther's agility as an exegete; and consistent or better consistently inconsistent (for example, at one point Mattox observes that Luther was not "inhibited by the hobgoblin consistency"; p. 170).

After the introductory chapter, Mattox addresses the important subject of Eve in the exegesis of Luther by looking carefully at both the discussion in the *Declamationes* (chapter 1) and in the *Enarrationes* (chapter 2). (It might be helpful to note here that both the introductory chapter (p. 7) and the conclusion suggest a different chapter numbering scheme than the one that actually occurs in this book, reflecting perhaps an earlier edition of this manuscript.) Beginning with the *Declamationes*, Mattox contends that in many ways Luther was closest to John Chrysostom in his understanding of Eve, agreeing with him that Eve's degree of subjugation is greater after the fall, yet disagreeing with Chrysostom's argument that her weakness and susceptibility to temptation lay in her powers of reason. With his attacks on celibacy already well underway, Luther rejected the Augustinian notion that somehow Adam's fall was rooted in an excessive desire to please his wife. For Augustine pride was the ultimate source of the fall for both Adam and Eve; Luther, on the other hand, linked the "equality" of this first couple to their sin of unbelief. Even in this early commentary Luther was framing his understanding of the "holy household" with Adam as a type of preacher and Eve the listener—in this instance, failing to heed the word of her husband and thus, contributing to her unbelief. The latter commentary on Genesis builds on several of these ideas of Luther, yet with a notable change in his own life circumstances. Mattox concurs with the basic argument of Birgit Stolt, Karl-Heinz Segle and Kris Kvam that Luther's own marital situation and firsthand domestic experience influenced his approach to Eve and Adam in this subsequent Genesis commentary.[5] Mattox argues that Luther asserted Eve's intellectual equivalence to Adam prior to the fall (in contrast to Augustine and others), maintaining that she even shared a form of governance (*socia gubernationes*) with him as developed in the second chapter of Genesis. The fall in Genesis 3 and Luther's further development of his theory of the three social orders (*Stände*) provided Luther with the rationale for Eve's evident inequality with her husband Adam. According to Luther, this third social order, the "political" realm, which was the exclusive province of the male, did not really exist prior to the fall. Part of Eve's punishment was general exclusion from this realm, with further con-

sequences for a more subordinated position in the other two realms (ecclesiastical and domestic). For Mattox, this distinction provided Luther a means for reflecting on his own domestic experience—evident, for example, in his references to his wife Katharina as "dominus"—yet enabled him to maintain a thoroughly conservative posture when addressing woman in society in general.

These two chapters on Eve conclude with a brief overview of the treatments of Eve and women in the thought of other sixteenth-century writers. Many Protestant commentators (such as Johannes Oecolampadius and Simon Museus) concurred with Luther's interpretation of Eve. Some went even further in the role accorded to women. In this regard, Mattox notes the argument put forward by Scott Hendrix on the position of Johann Freder.[6] One notable critic of Luther's exposition of Eve was John Calvin. Calvin maintained his critical distance as he challenged Luther's understanding of other women of Genesis like Hagar and Rachel. Also included in this discussion are the Catholic commentators Politus (Ambrosius Catharinus) and Cardinal Cajetan (Thomas de Vio). A helpful appendix (appendix 2) provides a comprehensive listing of most, if not all, of the sixteenth century "near contemporaries" of Luther who composed commentaries on Genesis.

The next two chapters of the book consider the household of Abraham, beginning with Sarah (chapter 3), then shifting to Hagar (chapter 4). Although Mattox includes a full range of various predecessors to Luther in each chapter, there is a primary basis for comparison as he discusses these various women. In the chapter on Sarah, Mattox continues the concentration on patristic exegesis, while the discussion of Hagar looks in a more focused way at medieval commentators. Throughout these two chapters he argues that Luther's exegesis was "at once deeply Catholic and authentically Lutheran" (p. 3), which is his principle point in the chapter on Sarah. Once again, Luther was closest to Chrysostom in his assessment of Sarah, recognizing her modesty, but above all, praising her faith; clearly she was an example of a domestic saint, like her husband Abraham. Luther, however, reached beyond the church fathers, elevating Sarah as a mother of the church (*mater ecclesiae*), for such was her faith in the divine promise. Even things that others might criticize in the faithful Sarah—such as her laugh when she heard the announcement about bearing future offspring—Luther turned in her favor. For Mattox, these are the exegetical possibilities now open to Luther, especially given his understanding of human beings as *simul iustus et peccator*. In a short excursus into the Trinitarian (and alle-

goristic) interpretation related to Sarah and Abraham's visitors in Genesis 18, Mattox again maintains Luther's essentially "Catholic" exegesis, even though Luther restrained himself from speculating too deeply on this text.

Hagar, as Mattox notes, was a more difficult subject for Luther and for his predecessors. In this chapter Mattox compares Luther principally to medieval exegetes like Nicholas of Lyra or the authors of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, arguing essentially that his questions were the same as theirs: for example, to what extent was Hagar a "true wife" of Abraham? Or, how was one to understand the two divine epiphanies that Hagar experienced? The questions might have been the same, but Luther's answers were rather different, notably in his interpretation of the divine appearances to Hagar. In the first, Luther contended that the angelic preaching contained a type of law and gospel, with Hagar's faithful response identifying her with the true church in contrast to the "ungodly synagogue." Luther's approach to the second epiphany demonstrated even more clearly how willing and able Luther was to serve as the true defender of the women of Genesis, such as Hagar. Following her expulsion from Abraham's household, Hagar's second encounter with the divine messenger revealed for Luther both her true contrition and her triumphant faith, establishing even Hagar, along with Sarah, as a true mother of the church. Here, for Mattox, Luther's exegesis drew heavily on an Augustinian notion that one has to understand the matter (*res*) of the text, without being too constrained by the words (*verba*) or a more literal meaning of the text—one of the deficiencies Luther noted in several medieval exegetes.

The following three chapters of the book address an even more diverse array of characters including the daughters of Lot, Rachel, and Potiphar's wife. Chapter 5 addresses not only the daughters of Lot, but Lot's wife and even Lot himself. In every instance, Luther was able to identify saintly qualities in their all too frail and human actions. Interpreting Lot's offer of his daughter to the hostile citizens of Sodom, Luther sided with Lyra over Augustine, arguing that the threat of homosexual sin was no greater than heterosexual rape. According to Mattox, Luther also defended the incestuous acts of Lot and his daughters, arguing that Lot was essentially unaware of the behavior and that all parties, driven by despair, acted in a desperate fashion in which Luther was still able to discern the seeds of faith. Once again, these figures of the Genesis are at the same time sinners and righteous before God. In this chapter, Mattox compares Luther's interpretation to those espoused by other sixteenth-century

Protestant reformers. As in the case of Hagar, Calvin emerges as the greatest critic of Luther, condemning Lot for his initial offer of his daughters in Sodom, then in turn rebuking Lot and his daughters for their incestuous activity. In his commentary on Genesis, Peter Martyr Vermigli would take a position somewhat similar to Calvin in his criticism of the actions of Lot and his family, while Andreas Musculus adopted a position closer to Luther, defending the daughters in their naming of their children as a sign of their faith.

Comparisons primarily with other sixteenth-century commentators continue in chapter 6 (on Rachel), and in chapter 7 (on the wife of Potiphar). Luther's exegesis of Jacob's wife Rachel, although "strained and speculative" according to Mattox (p. 197), had a clear influence on other sixteenth-century Lutheran exegetes. For Luther, Rachel was a saint and even a theologian, tested by trial in a fashion that recalled the Apostle Paul's word in Romans 8 about the spirit crying out and groaning in human weakness. Moreover, Luther defended Rachel's theft of the idols of her father Laban, noting some moral lapse on the part of Rachel (and her sister Leah), but with greater blame accorded to the unbelieving Laban. This particular incident serves as a point of comparison as Mattox considers eleven other Lutheran exegetes who commented on Rachel. Closest to Luther, and with rather substantial comments on Rachel, was Nicholas Selnecker, who argued in an allegorical fashion that at times the church (i.e., Rachel) must despoil the world (i.e., Laban) of its wealth in order to sustain its own efforts. Selnecker even counted this somewhat questionable action of Rachel among the "heroic works" of the saints (p. 215). In contrast to Selnecker and Luther, Johannes Brenz criticized Rachel's action, seeing it as evidence of pervasive inclinations to idolatry within the cultic environment of ancient Israel. Brenz was more inclined to elevate the humility of Rachel's sister Leah in his commentary on these incidents. The final chapter on the wife of Potiphar provides comparison between Luther and sixteenth-century Roman Catholic exegetes. To identify this chapter with Potiphar's wife, however, is slightly misleading. Joseph is really the primary character here, and his response to the wife of Potiphar is the greater issue at stake; even Potiphar received more attention than his wife from most commentators. For Luther, Joseph's undeserved suffering and his unjust trial allowed the reformer to probe a familiar theme—the hidden action of God. Joseph's subsequent work with the household of Potiphar, converting them all, pointed to his faithfulness as a preacher. In terms of Joseph's rela-

tionship with the wife of Potiphar, Luther regards the patriarch's actions as entirely blameless. Here Mattox also contrasts Luther with some medieval Jewish exegetes, who at least suggested that Joseph's personal "primping" might have provided the occasion for the incident with his master's wife. Turning to Roman Catholic exegetes, Mattox notes first the comments from the *Glossa Ordinaria* and those of Lyra. Both framed the questions in essentially the same fashion as Luther did later, and their insights carried further into subsequent Roman Catholic exegetes like Jerome Oleaster and John Ferus. Ferus offered the most extensive comments on the wife of Potiphar and several elements of his commentary (published in 1572) suggest at least an awareness of Luther's work. Both of these chapters, therefore, establish the influence of Luther's Genesis commentaries within both the Protestant/Lutheran and Roman Catholic worlds.

In concluding the book, Mattox observes that Luther's interpretation was "traditional" but not necessarily "conventional"—a point he has made effectively throughout this book. *Defenders of the Most Holy Matriarchs* offers an insightful analysis into how Luther went about the exegetical task: drawing on predecessors from the patristic and medieval periods, adding his own color and speculation to these narratives and thereby influencing subsequent commentary on these texts. Some additional insight into Luther's more general understanding of women is provided by this text, but as noted in the study by Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, a fuller understanding of Luther's position on women requires the additional perspectives provided in sources like the Table Talk, occasional pamphlets and even the sermons Luther preached on these and similar texts. Luther's general views—and perhaps the greater degree of his inconsistency—become more evident when one looks be-

yond the more limited world of the biblical commentary. Nevertheless, a book can only accomplish so much and this text certainly probes the exegetical insights it was intended to discuss.

#### Notes

[1]. Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2]. Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung. Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1942).

[3]. James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

[4]. Otto Zoekler, *Luther als Ausleger des Alten Testaments, gewÄ¼rdigt auf Grund seines grÄ¼sseren Genesis-Commentars* (Greifswald: N.p., 1884).

[5]. See the discussion on pp. 69-74, and see further Birgit Stolt, "Luther on God as Father," *Lutheran Quarterly* VIII (1994), pp. 383-395; Karl-Heinz Selge, *Ehe als Lebensbund. Die UnauflÄ¼slichkeit der Ehe als Herausforderung fÄ¼r den Dialog zwischen katholischer und evangelisch-lutherischer Theologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999); and Kristen Kvam, "Luther, Eve, and Theological Anthropology: Reassessing the Reformer's Response to the Frauenfrage (Woman Question)," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1992).

[6]. Scott Hendrix, "Christianizing Domestic Relations: Women and Marriage in Johann Freder's *Dialogus dem Ehestand zu Ehren*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992), pp. 251-266.

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**Citation:** Jeffrey Jaynes. Review of Mattox, Mickey, "Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs": *Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women in Genesis in the Enarrations in Genesis, 1535-1545*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

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