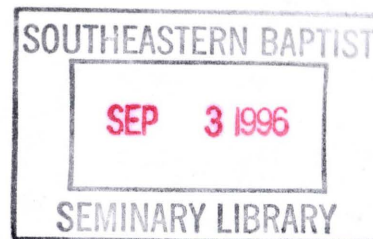


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Rigorous scholarship and feminine viewpoint packaged in new Woman's Study Bible

By Dwayne Hastings

Thomas Nelson Publishers has staked plenty on the fact that women are different than men. The Nashville, Tenn.,-based publisher recently unveiled what many are calling its most unique Bible product ever -- The Woman's Study Bible -- a Bible specifically prepared for women.

Frank Couch, vice president of the Bible division of Thomas Nelson, said in a recent luncheon meeting in Raleigh, N.C., the Woman's Study Bible may be the "finest product Thomas Nelson has produced in its 200 years of existence."

Pre-release sales of the Bible to bookstores set new records for Thomas Nelson, a presage of the market's high level of interest for the "niche" study Bible, he said.

Couch, who has personally edited six study Bibles and worked with five different translations of the Bible, pointed out that 85% of the people who purchase Bibles are women.

"There has not been a significant study Bible on the market written by women, even though most of the people doing Bible study are women," Couch explained.

The Woman's Study Bible was not only created and edited by women -- the copy-editing, design, paste-up and type-setting of this Bible, in the New King James Version translation, was totally done by women.

The vision for this Bible -- for women and by women -- came to rest nearly a decade ago in the heart of Dorothy Patterson, whom Thomas Nelson pegged as the Bible's general editor at the project's genesis in 1990.

Patterson, who had assisted in the production of the Believer's Study Bible and the Criswell Study Bible as well as contributing to Zondervan's Women's Devotional Bible, was cautious about stepping into another such project.

"I made it clear at the outset to Thomas Nelson Publishers that I wouldn't be interested in doing just another Bible to sell to women. The only thing I was interested in was a really unique product that would draw women into the Word of God," recalled Patterson, whose husband is president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The Woman's Study Bible project did not lack for intensity -- five years in the making and a product of superior scholarship dovetailed with a feminine viewpoint -- the end result is a work that is crafted to speak to women even if they have never owned a Bible, said Patterson, who is an adjunctive professor of Christian family ministry at the Wake Forest, N.C., school.

"Perhaps the uniqueness of the Bible will prompt women who have never gone to church or opened a Bible to discover there is a Bible specifically designed for them. It is a Bible edited by women who believe God has something to say to all women."

The project brought together more than 80 women from a rich diversity of occupations, denominations and ethnic backgrounds to create a Bible with scholarly annotations and topical notes that bear special sensitivity to women's interests, as well as features on women's contributions to biblical archaeology and theology.

"We wanted to produce a product that would meet the needs of women who are seeking to

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have a word with God," Patterson explained, stressing this was not just a Bible for Southern Baptists.

"I wasn't as concerned about how the reader was going to come down on every doctrine as I was for her to come to the Lord. For that reason, we elected in the beginning to work with great denominational and cultural diversity among our contributors," Patterson said.

This Bible is distinctive in the way it keys into Scripture passages which are of special interest to women, said Janice Meier, a professor of Old Testament at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Meier, who was the consulting editor for the Old Testament on the Woman's Study Bible, said, "While the Bible contains a wealth of general information in the annotations and its descriptive portraits of biblical women, it is rich in its far-ranging topical notes on subjects such as femininity, the biblical concept of womanhood, battered wives, parenting and the like."

The portraits of women in the Bible should provide a valuable resource said Rhonda Kelley, who served as managing editor of the Woman's Study Bible. "These character sketches of the major and minor women in the Bible are visually set apart with cross references to other study helps and texts in the Bible," she noted.

"Contemporary women can identify with these women in the Bible and how God spoke to them," continued Kelley, who is professor of speech and communication at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. "The Woman's Study Bible reinforces the personal nature of God's Word."

In a style that recalls illuminated manuscripts that were handcrafted by medieval monks, the Woman's Study Bible features ornate raised letters and original artwork throughout its pages, Kelley said. "You can even tell from the front cover the study Bible is by women for women," she remarked, "It looks different!"

Most commentary work over the centuries has been done by men, noted Sharon Gritz, professor of Greek and New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas, and a contributor to the Woman's Study Bible.

"Now that isn't necessarily bad," Gritz hastened to add. "It's just that women might want to know more about a particular Scripture verse that a man is not necessarily interested in exploring in depth."

This study Bible will have a unique appeal to women agreed Marsha A. Ellis Smith, adjunctive professor of Old Testament and associate vice president for academic administration at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

"All study Bibles are helpful but none have delved into specific women's issues to this degree," she said. The wide variety of women from the various evangelical traditions will enable this Bible to reach more women, Smith offered.

While those involved in the project were from diverse backgrounds, a common link was their high view of Scripture, related Smith, who provided commentary on biblical archaeology for the Woman's Study Bible.

"This is the bond that held all of us together," she said. "Each woman involved in this project sees the Bible as the inspired Word of God, authoritative and binding on their lives."

"That is the common thread," echoed Patterson. "Each contributor stands under the Word of God, seeking to direct women back to God's Word."

"It was important to me from the outset that this Bible be marked by distinctive exegesis," Patterson insisted, "pulling out of Scripture what God intended, rather than reading into it our own whims." It was critical the integrity of God's Word be maintained, she said.

God's message is straightforward and clear, Patterson said, "Not only does God see women as his creation of great worth, but he sees them individually in their needs and daily challenges." That assurance is priceless, she added.

"Women are equal in value in God's eyes but different in their role in the kingdom," Kelley suggested.

While the Woman's Study Bible has been prepared for a feminine audience, it is not a feminist work, Patterson elaborated.

"I think it would be quite presumptuous of us to decide that we're going to change the way God has chosen to communicate to us," she said, noting the language within the Woman's Study Bible is not what is termed today as "inclusive language."

"Certainly any theologian would say that God is neither male nor female. He's God. He's beyond us. For whatever reason, and I don't think we really have to be told what those reasons are, God chose to reveal himself to us in masculine terms. He chose to call himself Father," Patterson said.

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The Woman's Study Bible is not a feminist volume, she continued. "It is not a volume that was written to be a political volume; nor was it written to polarize women, but rather to pull them into the Word of God."

The publication of this volume affirms the truth of Scripture that states that women have a role to fill in the evangelical community, Gritz said.

"Women have a place in scholarship and academia," she continued. "This Bible affirms the traditional values of the evangelical community that says women do have a place in kingdom work."

Among the more than 80 women who contributed to this volume were: Dale Evans Rogers; German theologian Etta Linnemann; Joni Eareckson Tada; Gigi Graham Tchividjian, daughter of evangelist Billy Graham; Beverly LaHaye; Kristina Hemphill, daughter of Ken Hemphill; Jill Briscoe; Edith Schaeffer, wife of the late Francis Schaeffer; and Elisabeth Elliot.

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[Debbie Moore at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary contributed to this story.]

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