

Curtis W. Freeman, *A Company of Women Preachers: Baptist Prophetesses in Seventeenth Century England*, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011, 750 pages. \$69.95.

Curtis W. Freeman collects in this reader thirteen texts from seven different authors, all women from various seventeenth century Baptist groups. His purpose is to give voice to what he considers to be an unrepresented group in the history of preaching. Though arranged by author, Freeman groups his selections into three general types: oracular speech, conversion narrative, and controversial tract. In truth, these three broad categories represent a wealth of genres including but not limited to apocalyptic prophecies, private dialogues, death bed scenes, trial narratives, spontaneous prayers, and inspired hymns. The result is a rich tapestry displaying the various modes of contemporary religious expression, which has value in itself, even apart from the sex or denominational affiliation of the authors.

The selected texts, Freeman rightly guesses, are likely to pose problems for a broad range of readers. Those who come to the texts expecting to find empowered women fighting valiantly for their rights and for equality with men will be disappointed to find that the fact of their femaleness is a largely untreated topic. When it arises, it is typically only to acknowledge in some sense the prevailing social understanding of the roles of the sexes. In fact, the women largely eschew the designation “preacher”—which would certainly apply to their activities today—favoring instead terms which might more appropriately suit their station as women.

At the same time, readers who bring to the text expectations that they will find authors who are somehow reluctant to speak because they are women will be equally challenged. The women who wrote the enclosed texts or about whom they are written had no qualms about prophesying in front of political bodies, acting as spiritual counsel for their social superiors, speaking in front of congregations, and even calling down curses on the enemies of God, their enemies, and at least one congregant who interrupted a woman’s sermon.

Instead, what is reflected in the texts are the concerns of Calvinists generally and early Baptists particularly without any truly startling content. The two subjects which are treated most thoroughly are the unmerited gift of salvation by grace and Baptist ecclesiology. Texts like *The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced* and *Choice Experiences of the Kind Dealings of God* functioned not only to edify contemporary Baptists but also as apologies for their shared vision of a God who elects his saints unconditionally and irresistibly out of total depravity. Other works, such as *The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ*, defend the ostensibly anti-establishment positions of the Baptists from contemporary mainstream critique.

Rather than spending time trying to more precisely situate these prophetesses in the greater scheme of the history of the roles of women in the church, Freeman explicitly elects to let the authors speak for themselves. To that end, he presents the texts largely in their original form, after correcting minor printing errors and incorporating the marginalia into the body of the text. There are no explanatory notes, cross-references, or annotations of any kinds. The archaic language (with rare exception) and spelling is retained, as are the authors’ different and at times undecipherable uses of italics. The raw nature of the text and the lack of scholarly apparatus do preserve the unaltered voice of each author as Freeman wants. The unfortunate effect of this policy, however, is that it yields a reader which is, at times, decidedly difficult to read.

The collection is otherwise easy to use and rich in academic resources. In addition to a brief but illuminating introduction, each author’s section contains additional introductory material which situates the text historically and gives a brief synopsis of its purposes and contents. The end matter includes extensive indexes for both Scripture citations and subjects, as well as a full

bibliography of primary and secondary sources for further research. All this makes the work accessible for interested preachers and students of the period, but the lack of editing and commentary on the texts will likely discourage anyone without substantial prior knowledge of the material.

Freeman's collection succeeds in its aims: it gives a pulpit to a class of women preachers that might not otherwise have it. The texts are engaging in themselves merely for the richness of the modes of religious expression contained therein before consideration is even given to the extraordinariness of such vocal women in a time and community which would seem predisposed to silence them. While the lack of academic interaction with the material limits the ultimate usefulness of the work and the scant editing hinders its readability, this volume is still of great value to those within the narrow scope of its interests.

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