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Review of Michelle Osherow, *Biblical Women's Voices in Early Modern England*. Farnham: Ashgate 2009, 202 pages, ISBN 978-0-7546-6674-5.

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In her contribution to the series, 'Women and Gender in the Early Modern World', Michele Osherow explores the influence of biblical images – both male and female – on gender-related discourse in early modern England. She argues that the significance of the Bible, notably the Old Testament, can hardly be overestimated in this period that was clearly characterized by an intense interest in the significance of the biblical text for the individual believer on the one hand, and a widespread construal of the English nation as the new children of Israel on the other.

Osherow shows that, contrary to the common perception that biblical texts were exclusively (ab)used to promote female silence and submission in this period (and even up to today), women found inspiration and empowerment through the example of biblical characters. The examples presented in the book range from female translators of the Bible to women's rights activists, and finally to Queen Elizabeth I herself. In each case, the discourse of biblical women – and in one case, a man – serves to 'open the lips' of the female early modern reader.

The first chapter focuses on the psalm translations by Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, and construes the latter as a 'Renaissance Miriam'. Osherow convincingly traces the narrative of Miriam, both as a poet and singer for YHWH and a woman chastized for raising her voice, in Sidney's rendering of several psalms. As the equally talented sister of a famous

brother (Philip Sidney), Mary probably found it easy to identify with the fate of her biblical namesake. And while she shows more modesty than the self-asserted female prophet of the Exodus, she does develop a distinct voice and 'undermines the traditionally masculine posture of the psalmist by adopting a more feminine pose' (p 36).

In the second chapter, Osherow moves on to Hannah and her psalm as a model for private prayer. She shows how, in this case, the biblical woman was cited as an example for female *and* male believers to promote the Protestant practice of individual and silent prayer.

Chapter 3 explores the significance of the Deborah/Jael narrative as a model for female authority – a delicate issue in a war-ridden country ruled by a Virgin Queen. Citing several poems and pageants from the period of the reign of Elizabeth I, Osherow claims that rather than just confirm the possibility of a female ruler, the example of Deborah is actually used to inform the queen of the expectations of the people: '[I]f, indeed, Elizabeth's rule is directed by God, then her people have cause to expect the same sort of bounty under Elizabeth as that enjoyed by the Israelites during Deborah's reign.' Osherow then moves on to other aspects of the Deborah narrative taken up by writers in early modern England: the notion that women could speak with prophetic authority, and that God himself was 'an advocate of the weaker sex' (p 99). 'In this way', says Osherow, 'attacks against women become blasphemous' (p 99).

The most intriguing case-study is reserved for the fourth and final chapter. Here, Osherow investigates a case of biblical and early modern 'cross-dressing' by reading David as 'the symbol for an emerging awareness of early modern feminine potential' (p 111). David, she argues, shows traces of femininity in the biblical text itself: despite all military achievements, he is also always the musician and poet. Like women, David is an unlikely hero, whose strength is in faith rather than weaponry. The feminine side of David, Osherow argues, is further enhanced as women's rights activists such as Rachel Speght refer to him as a model for their own struggle.

All in all, Osherow's well-researched volume provides multifaceted and at times surprising insights into the potential of biblical narratives to 'open women's lips' – in early modern England, but equally so today. Perhaps the most promising of Osherow's case studies in this regard is the 'feminine David', a figure whose gender indeterminacy even very early 'feminists' appear to have recognized and put to use in creative ways.