John Lee Thompson. *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, his Predecessors, and his Contemporaries*. Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, CCLIX. Geneva: Droz, 1992. Pp. 308.

The past decade has witnessed a new debate arising in the field of Calvin studies and the entire area of early modern women's history — was John Calvin a proto-feminist, especially regarding the role of women in the church? While such a question might seem absurd to those familiar with the rabidly misogynist rhetoric of Calvin's disciple, John Knox, in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) — researchers have been puzzled by ambiguities in Calvin's copious writings which sometimes suggest a more equitable role for women in the governance and activities of the church, yet at other times seem to dismiss entirely women's contributions. The groundwork for rethinking Calvin's position on women originated with André Biéler's *L'homme et la femme dans la morale calviniste* (Geneva, 1963). His readings tried to refute the traditional charges of misogyny and argued that Calvin viewed women as "fundamentally equal" to men, while "functionally subordinate," essentially to satisfy the demands of society (Biéler, 36-38). But others have since gone further, trying to incorporate Calvin into the context of sixteenth-century proto-feminism, specifically Jane Douglass, whose *Women, Freedom and Calvin* (Philadelphia, 1985) moves from this moderate interpretation to suggest a complete re-interpretation of Calvin as a champion of women's equal right to participate fully in church and society. Her interpretation, based largely on Calvin's classification of women's silence in church, headcovering, and exclusion from teaching as matters of *adiaphora*, would put Calvin at the forefront of sixteenth-century feminism. But is this correct?

John Lee Thompson has constructed his book (developed from his 1989 doctoral dissertation) to examine the exegetical groundings for all of Calvin's writings upon the role of women, from the Old Testament to the New. Where Jane Douglass saw novelty and innovation in Calvin, Thompson sought comparison with late antique, medieval and contemporary exegetes to see how truly radical Calvin appeared. His methodology has filled a gap in the literature and also serves to answer the question, "Where does Calvin fit, in the broad range of literature, on the role of women in the church?"

The answer that emerges time and again from Thompson's study is that Calvin was rarely unusual in his views on women. Whether considering Eve as both the image of God and the model for wifely subordination, to which Thompson devotes two full chapters, or the roles of women in the Old and New Testaments, Thompson meticulously presents the major historical and contemporary opinions to illuminate Calvin's own view. Only twice do we see areas where Calvin admits of great variation, first in regard to the biblical story of Sarah. Here, Calvin's ambiguous treatment of her demands to Abraham seems to admit of a public venue for women, although he clearly attacks the possibility of women's leadership (p. 185). Second, where Calvin illus-

trates the doctrine of adiaphora, the subjects of women's teaching and women's headcovering are prime examples, as Jane Douglass had previously noted. Is he opening the doors to women's involvement? Not in Thompson's view:

Some things are never decorous, Calvin implies, and women teachers are among them. Whatever his contemporaries might have thought about Calvin seeming to open the door to women teachers, they would have been no less impressed by how quickly Calvin's exposition also shut it again, and made it fast. More likely still, none of these thoughts ever crossed their minds (p. 274).

Thompson's most troubling point is determining how the exegesis relates to Calvin's experience with contemporary "exceptional" women. Was it only social pressure which inspired Calvin's "respectful" response towards aristocratic women as correspondents, or was it because he truly approved of their involvement in the church? Did the examples of women preachers such as Marie Dentièrre of Geneva have any real influence upon Calvin's religious thought? Thompson concludes that any relationship between Calvin's "exceptional" female contemporaries and his exegesis is slim indeed: his "proto-feminist" exegesis dates from before most such notable contacts and changes not at all over the years (p. 62).

Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah illuminates the reformer's highly technical exegesis by placing it in the contemporary and historical context. As a work of women's history, it is chiefly concerned with the history of men's attitudes towards women — a limited, but not a limiting focus. Thompson has so well contextualized Calvin's commentary that his book explains a great deal about the Reformation commonplaces regarding women's roles. Less than approachable for an undergraduate, this work would suit the generalist who wishes to deepen an understanding of the process and results of Reformation biblical studies or attitudes towards women, while provocatively continuing the revision of Calvin studies which Biéler and Douglass began.

JANICE LIEDL, *Laurentian University*