

Curtis W. Freeman (ed.), *A Company of Women Preachers: Baptist Prophetesses in Seventeenth-Century England, A Reader*, Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2011, pp. 824, hb. £66.99, ISBN: 978-160258318-4

Freeman's reader outlining seventeenth-century women's contributions to Baptist theology, also charting the tradition of female preaching and prophesying, is a much-needed addition to current scholarship and will serve to stimulate further interest in the oft-neglected writers he has included. The published works of seven Baptist (or in Katherine Chidley's case Separatist) women that appeared in the period 1641-1689 are considered in an intended revisionist history of the origins of the Baptists, where women were prophesying in their congregations alongside their male contemporaries. Beginning with *The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ* (1641), Chidley's confident reply to the criticisms of heresiographer Thomas Edwards, Freeman includes published writings by Sarah Wight, Elizabeth Poole, Jane Turner, Anna Trapnel, Katherine Sutton, and Anne Wentworth. Although Anna Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* has recently been edited by Hilary Hinds (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), Chidley's complete works by Katharine Gillespie (Ashgate, 2009), and Sutton's and Wentworth's in *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print, 1550-1700* (Routledge, 2004), this edition conveniently and illuminatingly presents the works in one place, with invaluable scriptural, as well as name and subject, indices. It is particularly encouraging to see Jane Turner's conversion narrative, which has received very little critical attention, next to Anna Trapnel's comparatively familiar prophecies. It is unfortunate that not all Trapnel's works are represented in some form in the study. Although her 990-page Bodleian folio of prophecies given in 1657-8 would not have been practical to include, an extract might have given some indication of Trapnel's later work which is not available in any modern edition to date.

The real interest of Freeman's reader is in charting the emergence of women's preaching and prophesying, which he does in a thorough 41-page historical introduction: 'Preaching Women among the Early Baptists'. Referring to a variety of resources including contemporary church records, hostile responses, and male and female Baptist writings, Freeman provides an account of the cultural milieu in which these prophetesses proliferated. Despite the complex theological background to the period and his subjects' wide-ranging backgrounds, the introduction to their work is clear and engaging reflecting the radical nature

of each text. However, Freeman includes evidence of General (Arminian) Baptists as well as Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists, but does not deal with the issue of why the six women represented by the study are of the latter persuasion and not the former. In his attempts to draw in twenty-first-century readers, Freeman also blurs the words ‘preaching’ and ‘prophesying’ which has the effect of implying that Jane Turner, who advised her congregation through the shield of her conversion narrative (a more acceptable way of publishing a woman’s advice), preached out loud in front of her congregation. A more nuanced reading of the various ways in which these women communicated through voice and print would have further enriched this important study.

By way of introduction to each woman’s work Freeman includes a biographical and contextual note, setting each work in its congregational background. These are mostly useful, although sometimes repetitive when read alongside the introduction, and would benefit from presenting a more detailed explanation of what is at issue in each of the women’s works. In accordance with the editor’s approach to ‘let these prophetic women speak for themselves’ (ix) in representing these works, original spelling, punctuation, and italicisation have been retained, and marginal notes are presented in parentheses at the point they appear in the original text. Although running headings give a summary of what the text beneath is saying, the reader is left to interpret of their own accord without glossing of any kind. Because of this, the reader is left wondering what the benefit is of presenting the texts typed up in preference to reading images of the original works, or looking on the *Early English Books Online* database (all the works in this study appear there with the exception of Anne Wentworth’s *Englands Spiritual Pill* (c. 1679)).

Despite these reservations, Freeman’s work is an engaging historical account of women’s place in seventeenth-century Baptist life, and is a valuable addition to scholarship in church history. Such a work will stimulate interest in these texts from scholarly and ministerial backgrounds and, to borrow from Freeman’s preface borrowing from Sarah Wight, is surely ‘but a taste now of what shall be’.