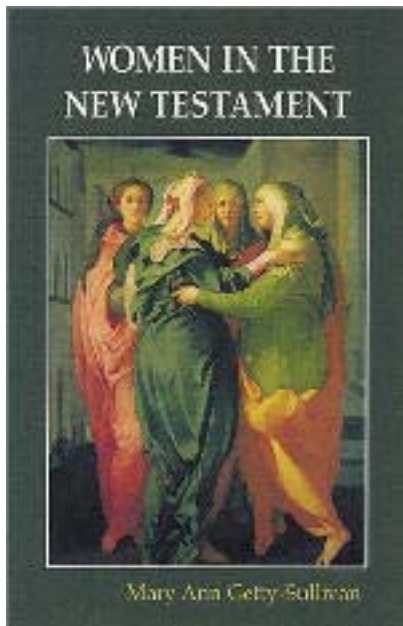


RBL 08/2003



Getty-Sullivan, Mary Ann

Women in the New Testament

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. ix + 269. Paper. \$7.95. ISBN 0814625460.

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Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan presents a readable, sincere, faith-based perspective on the actions and attitudes of women in the New Testament, ranging from women who knew and interacted with Jesus to those active in the earliest church communities. Readers who expect a thorough discussion of feminist methodologies and interpretations of the accounts of women in New Testament texts might be disappointed; instead, she offers the women's stories as models (both positive and negative) for contemporary women of faith.

Getty-Sullivan's approach is thematic: she groups the women as "Women of Expectant Faith," "Women Changed/Healed by Jesus," "Women of Prominence," and "Women Disciples." Within each category she considers one woman's story at a time. She begins each with an introduction to the pericope, then either offers an excerpt from the text (or texts, when parallel accounts exist) or suggests passages to read and concludes with an analysis of the account. This analysis can include a summary, exegesis, comparison with other stories, historical contextualization, personal application, and/or mini-homily. For example, in the section on Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, she begins with a comparison of the

infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, then suggests reading the infancy narrative in Luke and 1 Sam 1:1–2:11 and proceeds to read the actions of Elizabeth for usable models. She is very thorough—she includes a discussion of the mother of the sons of Zebedee—but not exhaustive, and one could not use this as a type of dictionary, à la Carol Meyers, Ross Kraemer, and Toni Craven, *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

While Getty-Sullivan's purpose is clear, what she accomplishes is less so. In what seems to be an auspicious introduction, she asserts that "women's stories in the Bible often function as a kind of *anticulture*, an underground swell that could not be suppressed" (ix, emphasis added). She is not surprised that the biblical writers neglected the feminine perspective; she is surprised that it was not erased (ix). However, this seemingly radical statement is more than a little contradicted by her ultimate trust in both the authors of the biblical texts and in the integrity of the biblical message. In other words, while she implies the use of a hermeneutic of suspicion (10), she offers only superficial examples and criticisms of patriarchy and rarely applies the patriarchal critique to the texts themselves. In fact, the women's stories as she interprets them usually *support* the biblical culture rather than act as some sort of cultural resistance. For example, she often mentions that women were identified and defined by their relationships to their husbands or sons (135, 153), but in the cases where this is relevant she continues with the discussion of that text as if that knowledge did not affect her interpretation at all. She does not seriously question the motives of the authors or consider the possibility that a woman might be simply a cipher or a tool to make a point. She does bring up discrepancies in biblical texts, particularly between Gospel accounts and between Acts and the Pauline Epistles, and fortunately, her readings are not dependent on a belief in inerrancy. However, these theoretical reflections, like her observations of patriarchy, seem to have no effect on her understanding of the text itself as trustworthy. This allegiance to the authority of the text and the priority of the production of positive models of faith overrides any subversive tendencies. Thus the example set by the women discussed is always about faith or the lack thereof—not about empowerment or courage, subversion or resistance.

There are other related drawbacks. First, because I prefer more explorative, thought-provoking material, I missed any discussion of controversies or competing readings. Footnotes and references are used sparingly, and her interpretations are almost always consensus. She includes no overview of

feminist theory or indication of how she might fit with others who have considered the subject, although she uses feminist sources tentatively and refers occasionally to Elizabeth Castelli, Kathleen Corley, and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.

Second, although the book ostensibly searches for role models in the actions and attitudes of women in the New Testament, this is not always its end result. She frequently starts a section with a woman and ends with the men; the chapter on women who interacted with Jesus is really about the transforming power of Jesus, not the women, and the portion on Lois and Eunice collapses into a discussion of Timothy. Similarly, discussions of historical and cultural background that spin out of the circumstances of women being examined are often not applied back to those women.

Third, Getty-Sullivan operates with an unstated and somewhat arbitrary distinction between “real” and fictional women. Her text includes nothing about the whore of Babylon or women mentioned in Jesus’ parables, even though one might argue that those fictional characterizations tell us much about what the New Testament writers expect from women. Indeed, the authenticity of some “actual” New Testament personalities is not certain. Mary, for example, is such a pastiche of Hannah and other women from the Hebrew Bible, as even Getty-Sullivan acknowledges (31–35), that her character hardly seems “real.”

Certainly this book is not an important one in terms of scholarly interpretation, but it presents appealing and accessible information about early Christian women that will no doubt reach readers who are less likely to read more theoretical authors. Examples include her chart comparing the accounts of the anointing woman in Luke, Mark/Matthew, and John (107) and a thoughtful introductory discussion of the problem of anti-Judaism in the Gospels (60–61). So such a book would be appropriate in a women’s Bible study or a general introduction to the subject matter for those not quite ready for all-out feminism. Getty-Sullivan also supports the important feminist argument that the fact that the roles of women were not completely suppressed suggests their vitality and importance in the early Christian communities. Even for someone looking for something more academic, its ultrapositive attitude and faith perspective can be uplifting.