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A Feminist Companion to Mark

Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings 2

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This volume is the second in a new series that brings together essays of scholars both seasoned and new, from diverse cultures and contexts, using feminist approaches to New Testament texts and other early Christian writings. Of the eleven contributions in this volume, some are new, some have been previously published, and others are a revisitation of previous work. The rich diversity in feminist New Testament scholarship is evident in the questions raised, the methods used, and the conclusions reached by these authors.

It is entirely fitting that the leading essay be that of Joanna Dewey, since she was among the first contemporary feminists to engage the Gospel of Mark. In her contribution, “‘Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take up Their Cross’: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8.34 in Mark’s Social and Narrative World” (23–36), she first gives an excellent survey of twenty-five years of feminist scholarship on Mark. She sketches the changes in the kinds of questions and methodological approaches taken up by feminist scholars and the changes in contexts of interpretation and in the academic climate toward such analyses. She then examines Mark 8:34 in the context of first-century views of suffering, Markan understanding of the inauguration of God’s rule and its impact on suffering, the cross as one particular type of suffering (i.e., persecution for the sake of the gospel), and, finally, first-century understanding of “self” and what it would mean to renounce one’s self. She

shows that when read in the context of the first-century cultural world and the larger narrative of Mark, Jesus' instruction to deny oneself and to take up one's cross "is not an exhortation to suffering and victimage in general. It is an exhortation to remain faithful to Jesus and the rule of God in face of persecution, even execution, by political authorities" (35–36). Dewey's essay makes an outstanding contribution toward unmasking interpretations of the cross that reinscribe victimization of oppressed persons.

In "Simon Peter's Mother-in-Law—Disciples or Domestic Servant? Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Mark 1:29–31" (37–53), Deborah Krause challenges previous utopian interpretations of Simon's mother-in-law as a disciple and minister, showing that these do not take into account the context and the object of Simon's mother-in-law's service. This woman's service is in her family home, to a general group of people; it is not a transformative choice that accompanies her newfound discipleship. Krause concludes that Mark's Gospel preserves a variety of traditions: some depict women in traditional roles of domestic servitude, while others show them in liberated roles of discipleship and ministry (e.g., Mark 15:40–51). Krause's nuanced approach to the ambiguities of the text offers a needed correction to those interpretations that would like to see in the Gospel a consistent utopian movement toward equality in the early Jesus movement.

Wendy Cotter brings her expertise in source criticism and Greco-Roman literature to a study of "Mark's Hero of the Twelfth-Year Miracles: The Healing of the Woman with the Hemorrhage and the Raising of Jairus's Daughter (Mark 5.21–43)" (54–78). She demonstrates form-critically the extraordinary attention that Mark gives to the woman with the hemorrhage and then shows how through the lens of the Greco-Roman world the story depicts Jesus as surprisingly free from the need for public honors and from the need to dominate women. Cotter then outlines how the raising of Jairus's daughter echoes stories known to Mark's readers about Asclepius, Heracles, Isis, Elijah, Elisha, Apollonius of Tyana, Empedocles, and Asclepiades. She shows that the Gospel aligns Jesus not with human heroes with healing powers but with deities who have power over life and death. While biblical commentators frequently call attention to such parallels, Cotter's insights about the differences in the portrayal of Jesus' character are incisive.

In a similar vein, Dennis R. MacDonald, "Renowned Far and Wide: The Women Who Anointed Odysseus and Jesus" (128–35), explores the parallels between the anointing of Jesus in Mark 14:3–9 and the *Nipta* (washing) of Odysseus's feet by his nurse Eurycleia. He proposes that Mark wanted his or her readers to see that the anointing and recognition of Jesus was more profound and perspicuous than that of Odysseus.

In “A Gentile Woman’s Story, Revisited: Rereading Mark 7.24–31” (79–100) Sharon Ringe returns to her earlier work, “A Gentile Woman’s Story” (in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* [ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985], 65-72), acknowledging that in her previous attempt to “rehabilitate” the Jesus portrayed in the story and to seek a reading more appreciative of the role of women in the early Christian movement she had overlooked analysis of her own reading context. This new essay is not simply a tinkering with her previous work but a completely new endeavor to look at the reader’s context, the structure and literary context of the narrative, and the social contexts of early Christian communities that read the text. The results are not nearly as immediately satisfying as those of her previous study, in which the woman emerged as a positive role model and Jesus as initially sexist but ultimately teachable. Now multiple ambiguities, perplexities, and discomfiting questions remain. This essay is a superb example of the directions in which a more mature feminist biblical scholarship has moved. Ringe “claims no definitive answers, but only a place in a conversation that must continue” (100).

Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera takes up Mark 7:24–29, “The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Perspective” (101–10). For her the primary purpose of the pericope was to address the issue of purity, an interpretation that the editor of this volume convincingly countered in her essay, “Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Women” (in *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies* [ed. D. R. Bauer and M. A. Powell; SBLSymS 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996], 379–97). However, Rebera’s insights from her postcolonial Sri Lankan perspective on the power of women’s voices and the implications of the text for multireligious and intercultural dialogue and respect are most significant.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon’s article, “The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers” (111–27), which originally appeared in *CBQ* 53 (1991): 589–604, examines Mark 12:41–44 in six different narrative contexts, revealing an embarrassment of riches for interpretation. She aptly shows that the task of interpreters is not always to clarify but to complicate, which then requires dialogue, listening, and speaking.

Hisako Kinukawa, “Women Disciples of Jesus (15.40–41; 15.47; 16.1)” (171–90) offers a revision of what was originally a section of her book, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 90–106. After studying the verbs linked with discipleship, she concludes that the women depicted by Mark are true disciples, ready to devote themselves to life-giving suffering. They continue to challenge readers who avoid joining the struggles of the oppressed. For this reviewer Kinukawa’s essay needs to be read in tandem with that of Dewey so as to be clear that only a certain kind of suffering assumed by women can be deemed “life-giving.”

Kathleen E. Corley, "Slaves, Servants and Prostitutes: Gender and Social Class in Mark" (191–221) approaches the same texts as Kinukawa and uses a historical perspective to investigate gender and social class. She concludes that Jesus' women followers most likely participated in meals with him and traveled with him. It is unlikely that any were prostitutes. They may have been hired servants or slaves, not from a wealthier class, as Luke suggests.

Marianne Sawicki's contribution, "Making Jesus" (136–70) offers a most intriguing and engaging analysis of Mark 14:3–9. Sawicki's expertise in anthropology, archaeology, and Greek culture results in a fascinating interdisciplinary study that both brings alive the details of the text and leads her to reconstruct seven stages of historical development of the narrative. She proposes an older layer based on women's catechesis that has been overlaid with a motif of sacrifice, which has assimilated the former. She intends her sketch to be tentative, meant to promote further discussion. She has provided rich fare for such.

In the final essay, "The Failure of the Women Who Followed Jesus in the Gospel of Mark" (222–34), Victoria Phillips argues that the failure of the women disciples to deliver the message of the young man at the empty tomb is not equivalent to the male disciples' failure; not accepting an order from a strange man who has no claim on them is not the same as failing one's teacher after promising loyalty. Phillips offers an interesting new perspective, but she needs to distinguish between the narrative world of the text and what she seems to take as historical event.

The book concludes with an excellent sixteen-page bibliography; indexes of biblical, rabbinic, classical, and other ancient references; and an index of authors. This volume is a must for students and scholars of Mark. It is an excellent compendium of some of the best in feminist scholarship on the Gospel of Mark.