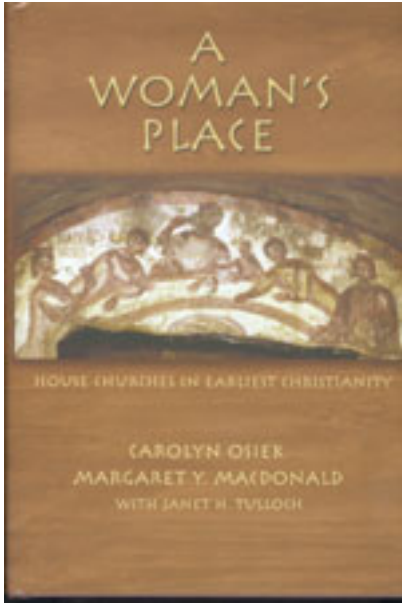


RBL 07/2006



Osiek, Carolyn, and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch

A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. Pp. vi + 345. Hardcover. \$35.00. ISBN 0800636902.

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This book is about *situating* the very fragmentary information we have about early Christian women into a household context. Instead of starting in the literary texts, which often either do not say very much about women or say something about women that is colored by some ancient androcentric agenda, Osiek and MacDonald start with an empty, imagined house and build it up, piece by piece, literary fragment by literary fragment, into a fully populated house, full of Christian women, full of life, color, smell, and sound. It is an imaginative work in the best possible sense, and it has sought out its impressively numerous but tiny building blocks across a very broad (chronologically, geographically, and religiously) range of mainly literary texts. The book also treats this fully populated house as a recipient entity of Christian preaching, asking how particular members of the household, women, female slaves, or children, would have “heard” particular biblical stories dealing with issues such as childbirth, obedience, and model behavior.

The book consists of eleven chapters. In a short opening chapter the authors position themselves briefly in relation to some assumptions and especially three polarities that have pervaded the study of women in the early church: patriarchy versus the discipleship of equals, public versus private, and ascetic versus domestic lifestyles. They also introduce how they understand the basic activities of the house churches as hospitality (including

the assemblies of the *ekklesia*), education (including basic socialization and character formation of children), communication (including news), social and charitable activities, evangelization, and mission.

Chapter 2 uses ancient texts and recent research on the Roman family to draw “imaginary scenes” (18) and then inserts those textual fragments that mention early Christian wives/women more or less in passing into those scenes. This chapter demonstrates how Roman families and households were permeable entities, with people arriving and leaving more or less constantly, and how we therefore cannot assume that male-female missionary pairs mentioned in early Christian literature were necessarily legally married (27).

Chapter 3 situates procreation within the house-church communities, including abortion and child exposure. Again, the point of departure is taken in the perceived reality of children growing up in households that also functioned as house churches. The presence of pregnant, birthing, and lactating women, babies, and orphans must have influenced the house churches and their assemblies.

Chapter 4 deals with the children, especially girls, growing up in the house churches: their care, health, socialization, and education. From Rawson’s research on how slave and freeborn children grew up together, the authors imagine that “it is perhaps on account of the shared experiences of freeborn and slave children that they are so often compared in ancient literature, including early Christian literature” (72).

Chapter 5 deals with the vulnerability of female slaves and builds on existing research (by Glancy, Martin, and others) to illustrate the problems for Christian female slaves and the Christian community’s problem with them. Osiek and MacDonald argue that the expectation that slaves were to be obedient to their masters in everything, including sexual matters, seems not to have been challenged in early Christianity.

Chapter 6 is an exquisite reading of Eph 5 within the context of the *pax Romana* and the Roman Empire more generally. Concerning Eph 5:22–23, the authors conclude that this very “difficult” (content-wise) passage for women illustrates, on a symbolic level as well as on a practical level of household management in a house-based movement, the existence of an *ekklesia* of women (136)!

Chapter 7 discusses the overlap between women heads of households and of Christian assemblies. The chapter shows among other things that the obvious person to preside at a eucharistic meal would have been the host or head of the house in which they met—

which in many cases would have been a woman, since men died, were away, were not Christian, and so forth.

Chapter 8, written by Janet Tulloch, analyzes the representation of female figures in some funerary frescoes in the catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro. Are they abstract personifications or representations of the deceased? Tulloch concludes that the banquet scenes “document the cultural memory of the hospitality provided by female heads of households” (191) and thus further underscores very nicely the arguments of chapters 6–7. This chapter engages with material culture in a more dynamic way than the other chapters.

As the authors point out in the conclusion to chapter 9, the issue of women patrons has been neglected and is in strong need of scholarly exploration, since it is central to the understanding of women’s influence in early Christianity in general and of some women named in the New Testament in particular. This chapter on women patrons in the life of the house churches is a groundbreaking one in this respect, not least because it gives the most valuable and contextually aware interpretation that this reader has seen to date both of Rom 16:1–2 on Phoebe and 1 Cor 1:11 on Chloe. Many scholars have noted in passing only the passages’ terminology of patronage and have declined the obvious implication that Paul actually sees himself as Phoebe’s client. Osiek and MacDonald draw on a rich body of ancient materials on patronage in general and women’s patronage more specifically. The chapter shows how wealthy women, in spite of being excluded from formal power and elective office, still could hold considerable power through the patronage system.

Chapter 10 deals with women as agents in the expansion of Christianity. The chapter constructs a range of diverging scholarly opinions concerning the involvement of women in the expansion of Christianity and points out that, since the house church was a key unit in Christianity and the house was a woman’s place, women must have been important agents in Christianity’s success. Chapter 11 is a concluding chapter where the main new insights of the book are summarized and highlighted.

A few of the fascinating new insights of this book have already been mentioned. There are many more of them, and the book also raises a range of important issues for the project of feminist reconstruction of Christian origins that space prevents me from fully discussing here. I will thus only highlight two sets of issues and voice one minor disappointment.

Osiek and MacDonald are quite aware of “the problem of drawing historical conclusions based on texts in which women are represented in such a way as to further the agendas of male authors” (222). If there is anything we learned from the linguistic turn, it was that

our two-thousand-year-old written texts cannot be read as transparent windows into ancient realities in any straightforward manner; they first must be analyzed on their own terms as literary or rhetorical texts before we can find out what they might yield in terms of historical information. Having taken on board the literary-rhetorical, textually, and gender-critically aware secondary literature of the past fifteen to twenty years, Osiek and MacDonald now put this into service for their project of historical reconstruction of early Christian women in a bold but careful and responsible way. And it is, as expected, not necessarily stories about or discourses on women that are the most useful for their project. Rather, it is the numerous taken-for-granted comments on women made offhandedly in passing.

The authors thus take their starting point outside the text, in ancient women's imagined experience of the house, Christianity, and life in general. This is a necessity for such a project, because if the aim is to reconstruct ancient women, the literary texts more often than not turn out to be male mirrors rather than windows to women's reality. Literary-rhetorical studies of particular texts on the one hand and sociohistorical reconstructions on the other are mutually dependent projects and often spill over into each other, but they are not identical, although they are often confused in feminist exegesis and feminist studies of Christian origins. Osiek and MacDonald successfully switch between these modes through the book and let them generously spill over into each other. In the more exegetical-literary chapters the authors retain a relatively optimistic belief in the texts' ability to function as windows.

A book will never fulfill all of a reader's justified or unjustified hopes, so also this one. After having read the whole book about "a woman's place" in the "house churches," this reader still had difficulties envisaging the house church of this book as a *place* and to grasp how exactly the authors envisage the spatiality and materiality of such places. The house church is impressively described in social community terms, but these terms conflict to some extent with the spatial terms also employed. The house church is explained as "the center for worship, hospitality, patronage, education, communication, social services, evangelization, and mission" (9). Do the authors envisage that *all* these activities took place in the same house, so that the house church should be envisaged as some kind of multifunctional monastery or the kind of vast mansion that many scholars believe was not at the disposal of most (lower-class) early Christians? Were the *ekklesiai* that met in baths and laundries still house churches? When is "house church" synonymous with *ekklesia*, when not? In this book a house church is a house church every day, all day, but what then distinguishes it from an ordinary household? Thus the house church described as a social unit remains a bit unconnected to the material dimensions the authors see as the determining factors for the development, expansion, and success of early Christianity.

In relation to the polarities mentioned in chapter 1, this reader felt the book was especially groundbreaking in its contribution to the debates on ascetic versus domestic lifestyles in early Christianity. Whereas patriarchy, the notion of a discipleship of equals, and the private-public distinction have been questioned and much discussed, the focus on asceticism in early Christian gender studies has remained so hegemonic that it functions in an almost self-legitimizing manner, which is always a danger in a scholarly context. In the sober words of the authors, “in books on women and Christian origins, wives do not usually have a starring role” (17). The achievements of the book in this respect are fourfold at least.

First, starting in women’s imagined reception of Christianity rather than in the texts of the male authors, the book reminds us that the ascetic women highlighted in the androcentric texts probably constituted a minority among early Christian women. Second, this means that whenever we encounter women’s names in the sources without any immediate mention of a husband, we cannot simply assume that the women in question were ascetic. In fact, as the authors point out, “in light of that culture’s obsession with classifying women by sexual status, it is striking that so many women are named in the Pauline and Ignatian letters and elsewhere without such designation” (5). Third, the book argues quite persuasively that, since the house churches were the “matrix” of early Christianity, domestic women played a very crucial role. Fourth and last, having established this early Christian matrix, the book is in a position to deconstruct the perceived opposition between ascetic and domestic women, since ascetic women also had households as their base (such as in the case of Thecla). In the multifaceted households in question, the full range of women were present, from the prototypical freeborn woman of the house to the concubines, divorcees, and widows, itinerant ascetic missionaries, itinerant married missionaries, wet-nurses and midwives, various types of servants and slaves, young girls, and so on. Furthermore, many women fluctuated between sexually ascetic and nonascetic states, often not even under their own control. The book presents many details in this area, details that seriously challenge the picture as a whole. One example is the discussion of the young widows mentioned in 1 Tim 5:14, who clearly need to be urged to remarry. Osiek and MacDonald point out that perhaps it was not the case that they were inspired by asceticism but rather that they “may have been motivated by a desire to maintain control over the affairs of their children” (26), a control they would lose upon remarriage. Many similar examples could be mentioned, examples that show how the authors bring feminist reconstruction of Christian origins a large step forward by paying full, competent, and critical attention to the remains from the ancient Mediterranean context, as well as to the secondary literature that evaluates their possible value as historical sources.