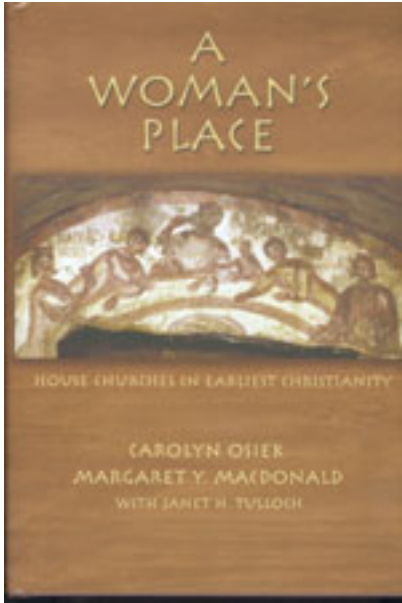


RBL 10/2006



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.

Laura Nasrallah

Harvard University Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

For several decades scholars, especially feminists, have tested new methods and theories in the study of women and gender in early Christianity and in antiquity more broadly. In *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*, Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald, with a chapter by Janet Tulloch, read these topics within the framework of early Christian families. They thus extend the work of a Society of Biblical Literature group of that name that has produced much interesting research in the last half decade or so. (Consider Halvor Moxnes's *Putting Jesus in His Place* and Osiek and David Balch's edited volume, *Early Christian Families in Context*.) *A Woman's Place* also belongs alongside collections such as the new one by Osiek and Kevin Madigan, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, or Ute Eisen's earlier work on the topic, and it builds upon MacDonald's previous study, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*. This volume contains a wealth of references to and information about concepts of the family in the ancient world, and it places an admirably large set of early Christian writings under analysis, bringing them into conversation with contemporaneous "pagan" literature.

The first chapter introduces and challenges three dichotomies commonly used for analyzing women in the early church: "patriarchy versus the discipleship of equals, public

versus private, and ascetic versus domestic life” (1). Scholars have long argued that poverty and outsiders’ suspicions prevented earliest Christians from building free-standing structures early on. Thus the movement originated within households, a situation that, the argument goes, facilitated women’s leadership. The authors rightly challenge this assumption, although at times the rest of the book seems to fall precisely back into this reading. The authors place early Christian women’s leadership within a broader context of women’s leadership in antiquity. Early Christian women’s participation was not unique to Christians (a paradigm the authors rightly understand to reinforce anti-Judaism). This chapter challenges the long-held notion that the house church was private space available for women’s leadership by taking up the lead of scholars who have argued that the boundaries between private and public in the Roman house were more complex than we had previously thought. Moreover, women leaders were not only ascetic; rather, many were married or widowed. The introduction also insists that masculine plural language must be understood to include females and that the cultural framework of the ancient Mediterranean is an honor-shame system; it also offers the welcome, clear statement that women participated in all activities of the Christian house church, from patronage to dining to leadership. The chapter concludes with a list of activities in the house churches and with an overview of the chapters to come.

What this programmatic chapter misses is the opportunity to delineate the authors’ methods for deciding which ancient sources are relevant and the temporal and geographical range that this volume will cover. (The volume is heavily tilted toward the Aegean, Italy, and North Africa and misses material such as the Babatha archive.) Moreover, archaeological evidence of the earliest Christian communities, scarce but available in Michael White’s work (used elsewhere in the book), is absent, and evidence of other cultic meetings in domestic spaces, as with synagogues in Ostia and Stobi or the Dionysos cult in the slope houses in Ephesos, is missing. How do the earliest Christian spaces relate to other physical spaces and thus to kinship and social networks and leadership norms of contemporary cults? Moreover, a clearer articulation of method at the outset would have helped the authors to avoid arguments about what “must have been” and about what is “unlikely.” Because the book has not systematically delineated a method by which one reads information about women with an eye to texts’ attempts to persuade readers and to construct reality, it sometimes argues from “common sense.” Such arguments often distract from the frameworks that we use to analyze ancient texts, as feminist New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza—whose insights about rhetoric are underutilized in this book—has shown.

Chapter 2, “Dutiful and Less Than Dutiful Wives,” corrects what the authors evaluate to be a scholarly overattention to ascetic women in earliest Christianity, insisting upon the leadership not only of celibate women but also of women who had no means or

inclination to celibacy. Providing a useful introduction to recent scholarship on the Roman family, this chapter pays sensitive attention to the social insecurities of marriages, unions, or even control over one's own body, depending upon a women's place in society. The chapter focuses on Colossians and Nympha's role, on Prisca, on the stories of Ananias and Sapphira, Valens and his wife (in Polycarp, *To the Philippians*), Hermas and his wife, Justin's Roman matron, and wives as heroines in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace birthing, nursing and infant care, and the education of children within the ancient household. Topics include abortion, infanticide, exposure, and early Christian rejection of all three; a fascinating discussion of birthing, nursing, and infant care draws upon the medical writings of the time. The authors are sensitive to the tragedies of the Roman world, paying due attention to the role of slaves in the household; we find here as well sobering demographics regarding the intertwining of death and birth for both mother and child in the ancient world. Texts under discussion range admirably from Soranus and the *Protevangelium of James* to the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* and the *Life of Macrina*, from Plutarch to John Chrysostom and Quintilian to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*—and beyond. Given their interest in recent research on the Roman family, the authors wish to offer “a deliberate focus on the physical setting of the house church” to think about “the broad scope of women's involvement in the care of children in house churches and the impact of the presence of children themselves in these communities (with a special emphasis on girls)” (70). The authors remind us of the close quarters of the house churches and, influenced by reader-reception theory, provoke us to wonder what might have happened as children ran about and infants squalled. One of the methodological quandaries of the book is evident in these chapters. For example, readers are encouraged to wonder how the story of Jesus' nativity would have been heard in a culture where many infants died (55). On the one hand, this question helps us to think about the material conditions of early Christian families, and we want to hear more from the authors. On the other hand, such a question domesticates and limits a passage that is redolent with references to myths of the births of gods (which the authors recognize) and to the story of the people of Israel.

The fifth chapter, on female slaves and their double vulnerability, draws on an important new direction in New Testament and early Christian studies, found in the recent work of Jennifer Glancy and J. Albert Harrill. It somehow misses, however, Sheila Brigg's work on slavery and the important scholarship of Bernadette Brooten and Stephen Moore on the sex-gender system of the ancient world, even as it recognizes that male slaves are not truly men and female slaves are not women in the understanding of elites in antiquity. This chapter is rich with details from Roman law, non-Christian authors, and rabbinic writings. Although chapter 4 sometimes tends toward a sentimental tone about the bonds

of family, this chapter starkly brings forward early Christian materials that show Christian involvement in slave holding and Christian perpetuation of slave oppression.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to “the politics of marriage” and considers the roles of wives who might hear the household codes. Although the authors are careful to state that they do not want to exonerate the writer of Ephesians, and although in the end they label such ideology both “conventional and countercultural,” they also hypothesize that the rhetoric of the *ekklēsia* as pure bride might have allowed for an increase in women’s honor and perhaps even real power within the community. The writers encourage us to rethink “some of the most patriarchal-sounding texts in early Christian literature” and to consider whether injunctions to marry and bear children might not “[create] opportunities for women to exercise influence in a house-based movement” (132). Engagement with the work of Cynthia Kittredge and Clarice Martin on the household codes, as well as the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza more recent than her *In Memory of Her*, would have encouraged more reflections on method here and elsewhere in the book. The question of whether the feminized, bridal *ekklēsia* lends some authority to women begs two further questions and avenues for research. First, how can we square the pure and submissive bride of Ephesians with *ekklēsiai* more broadly represented as places of tussle and struggle in deliberative discourse in Greek cities, on the one hand, and with our knowledge of women’s roles as leaders and authoritative benefactors in the public square? Second, how does the image of the bridal *ekklēsia* place both women and men in a profoundly passive, feminized position vis-à-vis someone higher in the hierarchy of power?

In chapter 7 we turn to women as “leaders of households and Christian assemblies.” The chapter presents a wealth of evidence, considering women depicted as incarnations of Wisdom and the role of wife as mistress of the house or household manager as presented in the Pythagorean letters, Musonius Rufus, Philo, Plutarch, and other texts. Detailed information about the role of women at meals in the Roman world provides an important context for reading the roles of Christian women as heads of households and as integrated into and leaders of meals. Meals in the Roman world, of course, are scenes not only of food and drink but also of the gatherings of associations and of ritual practice.

Chapter 8 moves from literary evidence of women and meals to material culture. In this strong chapter Janet Tulloch argues that funerary frescoes of women raising cups at meals—images from the Roman catacombs—present women as hosts at a banquet, raising glasses and leading in ritual speech/toasting. Tulloch provides evidence of women’s leadership as well as information about meals for the dead in the ancient world and early Christian critiques of overzealous and drunken funerary rituals. Interwoven with this argument is another about a “changed cultural perception of female respectability” as Christian women are depicted both as respectable *and* as engaged in

raising glasses at meals, a depiction that does not usually extend to respectable Roman *matrona*. Yet Tulloch puzzlingly concludes by asserting these women's authority as hosts must derive from their role as those who have "reared children and provided hospitality" (192), information difficult to plumb from the visual materials. Although in this chapter the photographs are fairly clear, the publisher clearly did not prioritize images: other photographs in the book are poorly reproduced and serve as illustrations, rather than presenting material objects as texts for analysis alongside literary writings.

Chapter 9 uses literary and epigraphic evidence to explore the role of women in the client-patron system of the Roman world. It gives a rich picture of ancient women engaged in business, leading religious communities as priestesses and presidents, hosting voluntary associations, and giving lavish benefactions: of women as patrons. This chapter also discusses the role of patronage in early Christian communities, including an analysis of patronal relationship as applied both to Jesus and to Paul. The authors also suggest that while benefaction was once a fluid system among early Christians, as early as Justin and Tertullian the patronage system was consolidated under the bishop. This may be true the majority of the time, but such an approach overlooks evidence we find elsewhere—think of the story of Macrina (which the book treats elsewhere) and her mother in Cappadocia. The authors conclude the women were indeed patrons in earliest Christian communities, using their wealth for the benefit of many, even as some strands of Christianity sought to reduce the powers of women's benefaction.

Chapter 10 turns to women's roles as "agents of expansion" in early Christianity—by which missions are meant, although consideration of Musa Dube's work on missions in New Testament texts is missing. The authors wonder if Celsus was right that women and low-status artisans played key roles in leading the young away from (in Celsus's view) proper behavior and toward the nonsensical teachings of Christianity. The chapter returns several times to Rodney Stark's concept of social networks and wonders how much Christian women were established and extended these networks, especially in the situation of mixed marriages. Important writings that surface are Paul's letters, deutero-Pauline materials and the Pastorals, the *Acts of Thecla*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. It is especially here that a kind of model of devolution of women's leadership appears: The "hierarchical ethical organization" of the *Haustafeln* emerges in the context of persecution and fear; a "cautious" attitude leads to Christian accommodation of women's (and slaves' and children's?) subordination (234). Nevertheless, such restrictions do not necessarily mean the end of women's influence; their influence on the growth of the movement continued even as women's leadership roles were curtailed. It is in the context of their marriages that Christian women might win husbands and could certainly influence children and slaves (238–39). The book does not explain why we should imagine such a restriction of Christian women's roles in the

same century that we see authoritative prophetesses as leaders of the so-called Montanists. Was there a monolithic shift in women's leadership, or were there continuing and plural sites of struggle over women's authority?

As this chapter ends, the book already begins to move toward synthesis and conclusion. The diverse roles of women "as patrons, heads of households, mothers, teachers, and various kinds of ambassadors of the faith" have a "unifying element: household life. The attempt to identify the specific activities of women that contributed to the expansion of the gospel leads time and time again to the household" (243). Yes. But why keep women at home, narrowly defined? The book's title, of course, emphasizes that the discussion is about *house* churches. But the authors rightly insisted in their introductory chapter that reading the house church as private, or indeed the *domus* or *oikos* as private, is incorrect. How could we do so in a world where the household of the emperor became a model for the *oikonomia* of all, where the house was one unit in an interlocking system of power and domination in Aristotle's *Politics*, to reach further back, as the authors know well? Yet even as the authors provide rich data about women patrons and missionaries and leaders in antiquity, we often feel the confines of the walls of the house and the limitation of women's leadership. Thus despite its resistance to the same, the book sometimes assumes a devolutionary model, assuming women's robust leadership at Christian origins, especially within the household and the realm of family, and then a decline of their leadership as public Christian institutions came into being.

In the conclusion the authors discuss their hopes for "historical reconstruction of the lives of early Christian women" (244) and their recognition of colleagues' cautions about the rhetorical-literary construction of these very women. The authors have indeed "discovered more than the dutiful wife" and "more than a static image of obedience and compliance" (245). The authors also have put early Christian materials in conversation with recent scholarship on the Roman family. This is extremely helpful and a benefit to the field. Yet this very strength of the work also leads to its weakness. It is within the framework of the family and the household that texts about early Christian women are read, and thus this book tenses between expanding our understanding of women's strong and authoritative roles in the ancient world and putting many early Christian women back into the *oikos*.