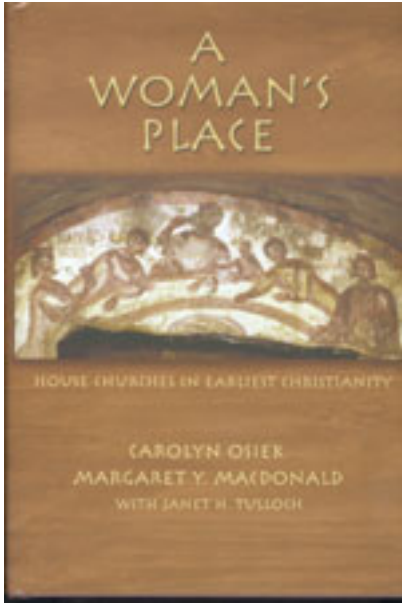


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**Osiek, Carolyn, and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch**

***A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity***

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

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In this highly recommended work, Osiek and MacDonald examine the everyday lives of women in the New Testament. This includes all the diverse roles, responsibilities and stages of life that women experienced: birth, childhood, marriage, child-bearing, motherhood, wet-nurses, nannies, slaves, wives, widows, and grandmothers. The title for their book is highly indicative of its content and approach. The house-church movement is the lens through which they explore the lives of women in the early church, and it is through the lives of these women that we come to learn more about the nature of the primitive church. In fact, they argue that the earliest Christian documents give us certain insights into the lives of women during this period that are not found in other literature.

The two dominant themes that run through the book are as follows. First, as opposed to the current interest in female ascetic movements, Osiek and MacDonald focus on the lives of married women and widows in the house churches. They argue that the contributions married women made to the church have been overlooked and that the roles they played as married women made a more significant impact on the church than did single women. Second, the attention they give to the lives of ordinary women allows us to grasp “what women were doing most of their time and to savor the atmosphere of the communities” (247).

In the introduction, the authors position their work along three axes that have played a central role in feminist studies: patriarchy versus a discipleship of equals; public space versus the private domain of the house; and ascetic movements versus the domestic life led by most women. In each instance the authors thread a third way between these polarities. For example, instead of taking the side of legal scholars who claim that Greco-Roman culture was a patriarchal society or the opposing camp that argue Jesus instituted a community of equals, Osiek and MacDonald take the position that the church participated in a contemporary movement toward greater freedom for women (cf. Bruce Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 2003).

Chapters 2–10 can be roughly outlined as sketching the chronology of a woman’s life from birth to maturity. The exception to this outline is chapter 2, which focuses on wives and may have been given this position of prominence due to the significant role marriage played in the first century. Even though the evidence we possess about women from that time frame is very limited, Osiek and MacDonald present a well-supported argument for the significant role that women played in the early church. In particular, they argue that we need carefully to differentiate between the ideal views on marriage presented in the New Testament and the complicated reality of marriage in the first century.

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on maternity, the rearing of children, and growing up as a child in a house church. In this regard the authors offer us a very important reminder as twentieth-century Westerners: “To a much greater extent than is the case for modern western women, ancient women’s lives were determined by the realities of procreation” (50). If women are underrepresented in classical literature, female children are perhaps the most underrepresented group. In this regard the chapter on “Growing up in the House-Church Communities” is a welcome contribution to our understanding of the Greco-Roman world. The amount of attention, time, and energy that was given to childbirth and raising children within that culture suggests how highly valued a woman’s ministry within the church as caregivers and educators would have been.

Chapter 5 reminds us of the tragic lives that female slaves led. According to Aristotle, a slave was to be ruled by a master and a woman was to be ruled by a man. Thus a female slave was doubly dominated and twice vulnerable! The life of a slave was characterized by having no ancestry, lineage, or hope of inheritance (since her family ties could be broken, and often were, at any time). Because females slaves stood outside the honor/shame value system of that culture, issues of sexual propriety simply did not apply to them. They were property and were completely sexually available to the people who owned them. This raises questions for Osiek and MacDonald concerning how Paul’s admonitions for a slave to be obedient in everything and his sexual ethics would have been received by the house churches.

The marriage code in Eph 5:22–33 is examined in the sixth chapter through two lenses. The first is reading the larger text of Ephesians as a resistance document against Roman imperial ideology. The second is to read the section on marriage from the perspective that a married couple was often portrayed as a microcosm for the larger society. Thus the Christian couple should be seen as an apologetical ideal representing the unity, love, and purity of the church to the communities in which they lived. But this raises an interesting paradox. Marriage is presented in very conventional terms in a letter that is calling for a countercultural lifestyle.

Chapters 7–9 draw our attention to the roles women played as leaders and patrons in the church. Even though most of the ancient evidence in this area comes from male authors, they give us surprising insights into how much authority women exercised over their households. If the house was the woman’s domain, then this has profound implications for a primitive Christian movement that was organized around households. Janet Tulloch’s contribution (ch. 8, “Women Leaders in Family Funerary Banquets”) inquires what we can learn from eight frescos depicting Christian funerary banquets from SS. Marcellino e Pietro in Italy. This chapter presents an interesting case study in how to read a work of art and the problems attendant in doing so. Tulloch contends that these frescos depict real women hosting banquets and leading those who attended in remembrance toasts and, as a result, portray the changing roles that women played within society and the images. The ninth chapter examines how the backbone of the Roman social system, patronage, provided means for women to exercise authority through informal social networks.

In the penultimate chapter, “Women as Agents of Expansion,” the authors synthesize the various topics covered in the book into a composite picture of how women functioned within the early church. Based on a theory of social networking, they argue that it was their roles as wives, mothers, and widows that opened certain avenues for ministry for women that greatly enhanced the expansion of the church. It was through these conventional roles that women exercised unconventional ministries. “Among the most fascinating information emerging from this survey is the ever-present suggestion of danger. These women were clearly taking risks for the sake of the gospel” (228).

Before I discuss what I perceive as the strengths of this work, let me briefly mention two minor weaknesses. The first is that the authors often seem to reach conclusions based on common sense. This could simply be a stylistic feature of the book, since they often mention how there is not much by way of evidence for a particular topic they are discussing and the very meticulous manner by which they argue their case. The second is definitely a stylistic feature of the book: there is a fair amount of redundancy within the text.

Having said that, *A Woman's Place* provides a thorough and multifaceted portrait of the lives, roles, and ministries of women in the primitive church. But it accomplishes far more than that. Because Osiek and MacDonald examine the lives of women within the context of the larger Greco-Roman culture, the reader is exposed to many of the dominant elements within that culture: honor and shame, slavery, marriage, houses and household management, structure of the early church, and the common lives of everyday people. Their interaction with not only key biblical passages but a carefully chosen corpus of classical texts (e.g., Plutarch, Soranus, Celsus, Shepherd of Hermas, 1 Clement, *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, and *Acts of Thecla*) provides an introduction to those texts and also a model for how this material shapes our understanding of the house church. Finally, they do an excellent job presenting in a clear manner the complex lives of women within the house church. As such, *A Woman's Place* is especially well-suited to be a required textbook for a New Testament survey course, especially one that focuses on the book of Acts through the epistles.