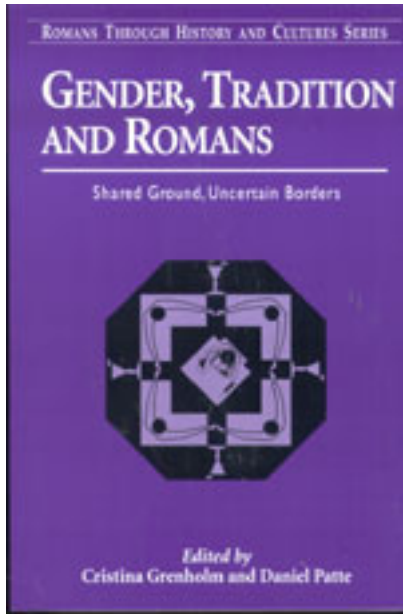


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Gender, Tradition and Romans: Shared Ground, Uncertain Borders

Romans through History and Culture Series

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The editors of this collection of essays are also co-editors of the series as well as its inaugural volume, *Reading Israel in Romans* (2000), while Patte has also co-edited with Eugene TeSelle the second volume, *Engaging Augustine on Romans* (2002). The volumes in this series result from a three-year Society of Biblical Literature Consultation as well as an ongoing SBL Seminar. In their introductory essay to this volume, the editors set forth the purpose of the series (the exploration and affirmation of both the legitimacy and plausibility of divergent interpretations by means of analysis of the overall process of the interpretation of Romans) and the conclusions resulting from their study of the history of reception of Romans (that any interpretation of a biblical text is a result of interconnected analytical/textual, hermeneutical/theological, and contextual choices and that a plurality of divergent interpretations is legitimate, plausible, and valid). They are careful to note conditions that might result in illegitimate (not properly grounded in the text), implausible (not framed in a theologically or ethically meaningful way), or invalid (offering a teaching with negative effects for people) readings of the text but nevertheless are adamant that such value judgments must be provisionally suspended in respectful “reading with” others if we are to avoid “co-optation or (patriarchal) patronizing” (1). The editors go on to discuss the application of an integrated practice of “Scriptural Criticism” (that is, one not limited to exegetes but in dialogue with church historians and

practical theologians) to the subject of gender in Romans. The editors affirm the commitment of all the contributors to the twofold task of advocacy interpretation and affirmation of a plurality of interpretations that are both legitimate and plausible (2). The introduction concludes with discussions of “Choices among Legitimate Analytical Frames” (3–7), “Choices among Plausible Hermeneutical Frames” (8–11), and “Choosing a Contextual Frame” (12–14).

The remainder of the book (thirteen chapters) is divided into four major sections. In part 1, “Mapping Traditions in Romans,” the first chapter, by Sheila E. McGinn, explores the topic “Feminists and Paul in Romans 8:18–23: Toward a Theology of Creation.” Her analysis of this passage of Romans elicits a Pauline theology of creation that not only has many points in common with a feminist theology of creation but, in McGinn’s view, provides a challenge to feminist theology “to reconsider the role of eschatology” (34). In “Judging and Community in Romans: An Action within the Boundaries,” Tan Yak-hwee discusses Rom 14:1–15:13 in conjunction with the Confucian concept of *kuan-hsi* (personal relationship) and concludes that “the teaching of Rom 14:1–15:13 is not restricted to gender-related issues, and can also address issues concerning politics, economics and culture in society” (55). Yeo Khiok-khng’s contribution, “Cross-Tradition and Cross-Gender Hermeneutics: A Confucian Reading of Romans and a Critical Reading of Confusion Ethics,” is written in dialogue with the two preceding chapters. While recognizing the similarities of cross-gender and cross-cultural readings, Khiok-khng comments that Tan’s paper addresses gender-related issues implicitly and proposes a similar approach, but with the caveat that gender, in this contribution, is a hermeneutical frame that undergirds the paper. He then explores the cosmological assumptions of ancestor worship, noting the attempts of McGinn and Tan “to relativize both Romans and Confucius texts, so that the cosmological assumptions of ancestor worship are comprised of culture and religion” (69), but criticizing Tan’s reading as “a charitable reading of Chinese culture” that “unintentionally covers up blind-spots and idolizes culture as divine ... [and] hinders an interpreter from seeing beyond the present reality and the power of the gospel to change one’s perception of that reality” (69). Khiok-khng’s reading results in a recognition of patriarchal structure or domination in both Confucian society and Romans but sets forth “a critical hermeneutic that can bring needed redemption to both the Chinese society and the Pauline Text” (76). The theme of the fourth chapter in part 1, by Cristina Grenholm, is evident in its title: “Feminism and the Ambiguities of Texts and Reality: A Response to Sheila McGinn and Yak-hwee Tan.” Grenholm expresses appreciation but finds the readings not totally convincing.

Part 2, “Challenging Gendered Traditions in Romans and Its Interpretations,” begins with Pamela Eisenbaum’s “A Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman: Jesus, Gentiles, and Genealogy in Romans.” Although acknowledging some parallels between Jesus and

Abraham in Paul, Eisenbaum regards the Adam-Christ typology as more significant (each inaugurates a new age). However, being a “son of god” is achieved only when God bestows that status by adopting a person as an heir. “It is an act of grace, generated by God the Father who sacrifices his first born on behalf of others who will become his children as a result” (123). The second study in this section, by Teresa J. Hornsby, deals with a somewhat different topic, “The Gendered Sinner in Romans 1–7,” concluding that “Paul’s imaging of God as masculine not only creates gendered ambiguity, particularly for men ... but engenders the concept of ‘sinner’ as already more feminine” (157). Thus “perfect masculinity cannot exist until after death when men (like Jesus) are rid of their bodies” (158). Elizabeth Castelli’s contribution, “Gender and Ideology Critique in the Study of Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Response to Pamela Eisenbaum and Teresa J. Hornsby,” expresses a basically positive response to the two preceding chapters.

Part 3, “Gender and the Authority of Romans,” opens with an offering by the co-editors, “Choices of Interpretation: Regarding Gender and the Authority of Romans,” that introduces the three subsequent essays, which deal with responses to the treatment of gender issues in Bernadette Brooten’s *Love between Women* (1996) and Francis Watson’s *Agape, Eros, Gender* (2000). Elizabeth Clark, in “History, Theology, and Context,” concludes that the approach of Brooten “yields a Paul unfriendly to her own political agenda; for Watson, a ‘theological’ reading ... ends with softening ... harsher features in a way that renders them more ‘usable’ by some Protestant Christians of the present” (203). David W. Odell-Scott, in “Patriarchy and Heterosexual Eroticism,” argues that Brooten’s and Watson’s claims “that Paul assumed or employed models of ‘active/passive’ or ‘initiative/response’ to characterize male/female gender identification and heterosexuality” are without foundation in the text (218), concluding “that at the very least, his [Paul’s] negative assessment of homoeroticism is not patriarchal” (224). The final contribution in part 3, “New Perspectives on Paul: New Perspectives on Romans in Feminist Theology?” by Kathy Ehrensperger, moves to a critique of other feminist interpretations of Paul, among them those by Elizabeth Castelli and Elsa Tamez, evaluating them as traditional interpretations reinterpreted from a feminist perspective. Ehrensperger associates herself with “feminist theologians who emphasize relatedness as basic and central for life on earth and amongst human beings” (246) and whom she views as exhibiting similarities with Paul’s theologizing. She concludes: “being in dialogue with Paul on this issue could be illuminating and inspiring for all those involved in the contemporary quest for an ethics and a theology of mutual relationality in difference, be it in the realm of gender, intercultural or interfaith relations” (246).

Part 4 consists of two concluding essays that reflect on the entire discussion from slightly different perspectives. Sarah Heaner Lancaster, in “Scriptural Criticism and Religious Perception,” considers a notion of religious perception expressed in the “Overture” to the

first volume in this series, which is in the background of the discussion in this volume, although less explicit. She judges that, although it still has areas requiring further clarification, the method of scriptural criticism “holds promise for enabling analysis that can enhance conversation about and with the Bible” (281). In “Scriptural Criticism and Feminist Interpretation of Romans,” Cynthia Briggs Kittredge observes two approaches at work in the discussion: “feminist reconstructions of religion” and “feminist critical theory of religion,” which have the potential to work in complementary fashion; however, she comments that scriptural criticism is not currently as effective a model as it could be. Nonetheless, her final statement, with which I wholeheartedly concur, is appreciative of the intensive scholarly effort evidenced in this collection: “Scholarship on Romans as a whole would be greatly strengthened by engaging with the issues and insights raised in the conversation with these scholars” (268).