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Ben Witherington III

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BEN WITHERINGTON III

Edited by Ann Witherington



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This book is dedicated to my wife, Ann, my co-worker and life partner whose skills in editing, formatting, typing, and criticizing my ideas and efforts have made this book and the previous two monographs it is based on possible. She embodies those same virtues, talents, and faith that we find in the various first-century Christian women discussed in these pages.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To date I have written two SNTS monographs: *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 1984) and *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). The first book was based wholly and the second one partly on my doctoral work at the University of Durham, England, under the direction of the Reverend Professor C. K. Barrett. My deepest gratitude goes to him as both teacher and friend.

My wife, Ann, was primarily responsible for the final draft of this book. While I transliterated and edited the technical material, it was she who rewrote the material into its present form for the general public.

Much of the financial support for my earlier works was provided by A Fund for Theological Education, based in Marshall, Texas, under the leadership of Dr. Ed Robb. This present volume has been prepared while teaching at Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, Ohio. I would like to acknowledge the support of both institutions.

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PREFACE

Women and the Genesis of Christianity condenses my two previous monographs, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* and *Women in the Earliest Churches*, in order to make them accessible to a wider audience that is not familiar with the technical jargon of New Testament studies, or the Greek, Hebrew, and various other languages needed for New Testament research.

In order to achieve this goal I have left out a great deal of the technical discussion and detailed footnotes found in the previous two works, especially in regard to matters of textual criticism, grammatical details, and the historical plausibility of this or that narrative. Those wishing to pursue such matters are advised to consult my two monographs. Much of this work is the synthesis of the ideas of a great many people besides myself, and their work is liberally cited in the monographs. I regret having to now leave out so much of the deserved citation.

In addition, I have transliterated the Greek into English, and then explained its probable translation in the course of the discussion. Further, when citing articles or books that have Greek words in their titles, I have transliterated these as well.

In this work I intend to discuss all the crucial New Testament data involving women, but since the subject is “Women and the genesis of Christianity,” I have not gone beyond the canonical period as I did in the last chapter of *Women in the Earliest Churches*. It is hoped that the reader will gain a new perspective on the part women played in the beginning days of the most remarkable movement in human history.

The author of Ecclesiastes knew what he was about when he said, “Of the making of books there is no end” (12.12). Indeed, it can be said that this applies especially in areas of interest to contemporary

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readers such as, for instance, the study of women and the Bible. In the wake of various movements in the twentieth century, especially in Western nations, that have led to women having more freedom in regard to voting rights, choice of vocation, and educational opportunities, it is not surprising that women's religious roles have been written about extensively.

What is surprising is how seldom the subject of women and the Bible has been fully addressed in such books even by those who are perfectly capable of doing so. What we actually find when we survey the available resources is: (1) purely popular books written by those who are not historical and/or biblical scholars, and thus are incapable of assessing the real historical issues the Bible raises; (2) purely technical books, impenetrable to the average reader, that cover only a portion of the data; and (3) books written by those who are so passionately traditionalist or feminist in their approach that their personal interests and biases skew the interpretation of the data, or tend to lead the writer to highlight only that portion of the material which favors his or her own views on matters such as women's roles in the Church, and especially the question of women's ordination. Sadly, most of these last sort of books are forms of propaganda, attempting to claim either Jesus or Paul or the New Testament writers as a whole for one's own cause. Usually, such books shed more heat than light on the subject.

There is both room and a need for a book written *by* a biblical scholar and historian, but written *for* a more general audience and written *after* all the detailed scholarly historical research has been done. This book distils most of my earlier research and, I hope, presents it in a form that will prove useful to the general public. I openly admit that during the fifteen years I have studied women and their roles both in the Jesus movement and in the early Church, my own views have changed on various important matters, and I am under no delusion that what is presented here will be seen as the final or definitive word on the subject of women in the beginning of Christianity. I do hope that my readers' curiosity will lead them to read on and to seek out the more technical studies behind this book.

I should also add that I am a committed Christian who takes seriously the canonical authority of the whole of the Bible for the Church. This study would not have been undertaken if I were not

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convinced that the New Testament in particular has something vital to say about women and their roles in society in general and in the Church in particular, even today. I believe that the Bible must be allowed to have its say. It must be carefully read; all of the relevant data must be considered; and historical and practical judgments should then be made on the basis of a patient hearing of the sources. This is, of course, no new view for the Christian Church. Furthermore, Western society in general has historically agreed that the Bible does have something relevant to say about pressing personal and ethical issues in any and every era.

Certainly, the Bible has been one of the most formative of all books in the West in regard to views about a whole host of subjects including male–female relationships, the family, sexual morality, and women’s roles and functions in various fields including religious ones. The Bible has been the basis of our law codes. It has shaped our view of the nature and structure of such important institutions as marriage and the family. It has established the very pattern of our work week and informed our view of work in general. Western codes of honor, civility, and hospitality have all grown out of the Bible, as have the majority of Western charitable institutions. The Bible in general and the New Testament in particular have shaped our view of what good government should look like, as well as our views on the proper relationship of Church and State. Indeed, it has fundamentally shaped our views on good and evil, the natural and the supernatural, and the real and the unreal. Even for those who may have little or no connection with what has been called organized religion, the Bible’s views on women and their roles may prove illuminating, not least because in the West we live in societies that have been shaped in so many ways by that Bible.

For those who read this book carefully, it will perhaps be surprising to discover how “the more things change, the more things stay the same.” Jesus and his followers lived in a culture that was excessively patriarchal, but there were various reform movements about and one of them was early Christianity. Living as we do in an era when many of the basic assumptions of a traditional patriarchal approach to life and work are again being challenged

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and various attempts at reform are underway, it is interesting to see *how* Jesus and Paul among others set about reforming the social structures of their day. It is very clear from the New Testament that the Kingdom Jesus and the early Christians believed they were bringing in was not a *purely spiritual* one, if by that is meant one which has no bearing on basic social relationships and conditions. Jesus and the early Christians were indeed interested in the redemption of whole persons, not merely souls, and this entailed a certain reformation of the patriarchal structure of society, so that for Christians the family of faith rather than the physical family became the basic unit of social identity and identification. I would suggest that it was in part because Christianity was not just another social movement, that it has not merely endured but has grown as a movement of worldwide impact over the course of its nearly twenty centuries of existence.

There are a host of areas on which the historical study of the New Testament material dealing with women and their roles has a bearing. One may consider, for instance, women's studies in general, which is becoming an ever more popular field for research at colleges and universities, especially in the West. It has been rightly recognized that in the West those who seek to do women's studies without at least incorporating in it a study of the impact of biblical material do so at their peril, in view of the impact of the Bible on society as a whole. Or again, the modern feminist movement, which has some of its roots not only in the Christian Church but also in various Christian social action movements, has a need to understand and explore its biblical roots. Or again, in regard to the vexed issue of women's ordination in various denominations including the Church of England, if purely emotional or prudential or political factors are not to dictate the course the Church will take, then biblical data will have to be assessed and duly weighed.

I am convinced that by analogy much of what Jesus and the early Christians said and did and the principles by which they operated are still applicable today. This is especially true for the Church as it seeks a more equitable approach to male–female relations in general and the roles of women in the Church in particular. I also believe that all of us, *if* we ignore the biblical

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data, would be impoverished in our attempts to understand human sexuality and relationships. Thus, this book should be seen as an invitation to all who have any interest in why we as men and women live as we do in modern society to consider the relevance and effect that the New Testament has had and perhaps should have on our society.