

## ○ REVIEW OF CAROLYN OSIEK AND MARGARET Y. MACDONALD'S *A WOMAN'S PLACE*

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Jennifer Bird reviews Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald's *A woman's place: House churches in earliest Christianity*, with Janet H. Tulloch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

In this truly collaborative work, a growing trend that I find refreshing, Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald seek to bring together the work on women in the house churches and on early Christian life, a task I think they have achieved. What I consider to be their most significant contribution, which is supported by the evidence and discussion presented in chapters 3 to 9, is that as the household managers the women would have influenced and participated in the house churches in significant ways.

Their introduction addresses three polarities that have 'pervaded' scholarship in these realms. First, in the patriarchy versus discipleship of equals debate they suggest that there was a greater social freedom for women – not, however, 'liberation' in the modern sense (2) – already at work in the culture/society. Various strands of Christianity did or did not pick up on this social movement – those who did were giving it a religious meaning or motivation. Second, regarding the public versus private space, they maintain that the house church was a space of 'crossroads' (4) and suggest that we keep in mind the difference between social invisibility and the lack of women's presence. Third, with ascetic versus domestic lifestyle concerns, they note that in light of the desire to label women according to their sexual status, it is striking that so many women are named in the Pauline and the Ignatian letters without such designation (6).

Additionally, there are three working assumptions that MacDonald and Osiek believe must inform our investigations: first, the issue of how masculine language masks the presence of women; second, that the honor/shame system functioned differently from region to region; and third, that there were many components of the new movement that were focused upon activity in the house churches (1). There is one other working assumption that seems to pervade their work, which is that the Roman social expectations, being a bit more lax or progressive than the Greek, are the standard by which they determine what the possibilities might be within the household roles and dynamics. At times I wonder if this standard is more than we can expect in some of the Mediterranean regions, but as they note, there is no way to know for sure.

In chapter 2, 'Dutiful and less than dutiful wives', they note how little we actually know about the lives of early Christian wives, and 'what little we do know is of questionable value for understanding the distinctiveness of early Christianity, or for finding evidence for ancient emancipatory trends' (17). This disclaimer noted, I still think that the reader would do well to keep in mind this issue of how much can actually be claimed based upon the evidence, as she/he reads. Osiek and MacDonald are, I think, quite right to point out that much of what women would have been doing we should not expect to find documented. But a quotation such as, 'Each family unit was a locus for evangelization, including – perhaps especially – the mixed marriage' (15), causes me to raise the same caution back to the authors: why place so much emphasis on this particular piece, simply because it shows up in two different Pauline or Pastoral letters? Differences in the details set aside, this chapter reminds the reader that though the household

codes seem to address what might sound like typical nuclear families, the family relations were actually quite complex.

Chapter 3, 'Giving birth: Labor, nursing and care of infants in house-church communities', does much to paint the picture of bustling and busy scenes as the backdrop for house church meetings, which may alter the reader's view of the way the context may have influenced references to nursing and childrearing. This new backdrop also suggests that the meetings had a predominance not simply of women, but mothers, wet nurses and children. It brings the church meetings, even daily encounters, into the midst of the realities of family matters.

Chapter 4, 'Growing up in house-church communities', invites the reader to consider the perspective on the world that children have. How did children perceive the space of the house churches in relation to their own homes? Were they one and the same? Was it like visiting a friend's house, or were the house churches places they went on a regular basis for teaching and training?

Chapter 5, 'Female slaves: Twice vulnerable', raises, and makes no claims to answer, the question of sexual relations between masters and slaves. Since honor could not be ascribed to female slaves, thus chastity and shame had no meaning in relation to them (97), and the 'celibacy of slaves would be an economic liability' for the household (117), would Christians begin to behave differently in this realm, or was the idea of slaves as property too deeply entrenched to change immediately? What we can determine is that the discourse of complete obedience of slaves to masters was not changed in the Christian texts (112).

Chapter 6, 'Ephesians 5 and the politics of marriage', addresses how Ephesians 5:22-33 is a clear example of women's lives becoming the subject of ideological discourse. Their main point here is that the application of the household code serves to both show the Christians' continuity with the culture as well as their efforts to resist or counter it, by the association of the *ekklesia* with women/pure brides. If, in countering the social expectations, Osiek and MacDonald see the Christian communities as challenging male-female relations, this would have been a great time to clarify this connection and in which ways they see positive contributions along these lines. Given Osiek's previous work on Ephesians 5:22-33 (Osiek 2002), I would have benefited from an explanation as to how the use of women (their bodies, the construct of 'woman', the idea of a sexually pure woman) in this kind of discourse is actually more beneficial than detrimental.

By the time the reader gets to chapter 7, 'Women leaders of households and Christian assemblies', the argument has been made and is here reinforced: women were quite familiar with running the household on their own and men expected them to do so quite well. My one concern here is that, in the effort to indicate the extent to which the women/wives were considered competent and given much authority in the households, Osiek and MacDonald overlook what I see as the enduring need of men to have the ultimate authority, as evidenced in the texts. They point out that according to Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* (III.10; VII.1-17), the husband was the one who would teach his young bride all the additional skills she needed in order to be an efficient manager of the household, but that this must be understood in light of the 'patriarchal assumptions of author and reader that the wife will only be as good as the husband teaches her to be' (147). Yes! Point well taken. But I think we need to keep in mind the *ultimate* involvement of the men even in this realm that is taken care of by women.

The inclusion of chapter 8, 'Women leaders in family funerary banquets', by Janet Tulloch, whose area of expertise is in visual art, was quite fortuitous. Tulloch addresses eight third and

fourth century murals of banquet scenes in the catacomb known as SS. Marcellino e Pietro, which is located in the funerary district outside of Rome. These murals are relevant for this study, and for early Christianity in general, because of the role attributed to women in them. After briefly discussing the events of funerary banquets, and their social implications, including the role of wine in these rituals, Tulloch then explains how the use of visual-rhetoric theory leads to her conclusions regarding the importance of these murals. The cup-raising gestures of women, accompanied by the ‘agape’ and ‘irene’ (peace) wishes – notably, bilingual – have been interpreted in various ways over the past century. Tulloch maintains that, pure and simple, it implies leadership on the part of the women in this essential ritual that commemorated their forebears, and ensured purification for the living, as well as continuity, order, and prosperity for the empire (168). Leadership in this ritual, then, implies that women had respected and prominent roles within the family and household.

One final significant contribution to the overall thesis of this book is that ‘[a] new visual index of women’s status and morality was developed for Christian female believers’ (192). As Osiek and MacDonald have suggested, the Christian movement was part of the change in male and female relations. Though they do not address this initial claim again at the end of the book, something I would have liked to have seen from them, Tulloch offers an enticing glimpse into this possibility.

In chapter 9, ‘Women patrons in the life of house churches’, they offer a survey of the voluntary patronage system in Roman society, women’s exercise of patronage, the role of patronage within early Christian communities and the role of Christian women within the patronage system. It is significant for their thesis that it is this type of network of asymmetrical relations that scholars perceive was the foundation of the early Christian communities (210).

In chapter 10, ‘Women as agents of expansion’, while noting the multiple roles that women did fill, Osiek and MacDonald indicate that the evangelistic roles could be distinguished by the reference to ‘partners’ and ‘coworkers’ within the Pauline material. While there may have been a great deal of overlap between those co-workers in the faith and those who held house churches in their homes, Osiek and MacDonald note that the most significant aspect of outreach, in their estimation, was through the marriages between Christian women and pagan men.

The mark of a good book, for me, is one that invites further work based upon the premise it provides. What struck me time and again as I read was the need to address the economic implications of their discoveries. I think of this realm from two perspectives. The first is in terms of the leap from the gospel accounts of the ‘Jesus movement’ and the desire for social justice (in particular in light of their chapter on patronage) to the Pauline missions and church developments. The second is of the economic implications of moving forward, as the house churches morphed into something quite compatible with Imperial rule.<sup>1</sup> What does all of this imply about (a lack of?) continuity between the Jesus movement and what is recorded in the letters?

While I may not agree with all of their alternative interpretations, their suggestions *do* challenge my preconceived ideas and deepen the image I have of early house churches. They have certainly met their goal of creating a greater awareness of the implications of the complexities of family and household dynamics for house church groups (250). In much the same way that Ched Myers’ book, *Binding the strong man* (Myers 1988), highlighted the grassroots aspect of the gospel message, this book has the potential to bring into view the role of women and children

in the households of these grassroots movements. To be sure, there are still two distinctions with which we must contend: the differences between the lived reality at the time and the recording of it within the texts, and the differences between what might have been 'intended' as recorded in the Christian canonical texts and how those texts were to be interpreted over two thousand years. Osiek and MacDonald have done us a great service in the progress toward opening our understanding of the possible roles of women in the early Christian movements. But just as Myers' tome indicates a significant difference between the gospel account of Mark and the way many churches today envision the initial Jesus movement, we must be careful to tend to not only the possible 'original' state of things but to the subsequent development of women's roles as well.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In fact, this is an issue I intend to take up to some extent in my dissertation on 1 Peter.

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## REFERENCES

- Myers, Ched. 1988. *Binding the strong man: A political reading of Mark's story of Jesus*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.
- Osiek, Carolyn. 2002. 'The bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A problematic wedding'. *Biblical theology bulletin* 32 (1): 29-39.