

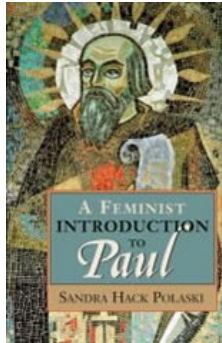
○ REVIEW OF SANDRA POLASKI, *A FEMINIST INTRODUCTION TO PAUL*

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Gillian Townsley reviews Sandra Hack Polaski's *A Feminist Introduction to Paul*. Atlanta, Georgia: Chalice Press; 2005.



Where was this book when I needed it twenty years ago?! As a new Christian struggling to reconcile my feminism with my reading of the New Testament, and floundering in the seas of evangelicalism, this book would have been a life-saver. As it was, I was lucky – I went to theological college and my NT professor introduced me to the works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (in particular, *In Memory of Her*, 1983). Of course, if I had known, there had already been a few books circulating that might have helped me; Caird's *Paul and Women's Liberty* (1972), and the Boldrey's book, *Chauvinist or Feminist? Paul's View of Women* (1976) in particular. Others that helped keep me afloat were Bristow's *What Paul Really Said About Women* (1988) and Keener's *Paul, Women and Wives* (1992). Then, in the ten years between Schottroff's *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the NT* (1993) and *The Feminist Companion to Paul* (ed. Levine, 2004), there have been books a-plenty (not to mention articles) to rescue and reassure those of us trying to hold our feminism and Christianity together when it comes to reading Paul.¹

So what makes this book stand out? Can we really agree with Jon Berquist, who said to Polaski, 'Someone needs to write a feminist introduction to Paul'?² With so many books already available on 'Paul' and 'feminism' why would Berquist feel the need to make such a comment, or Polaski to agree with him? Without wanting to speculate about the mysterious machinations of the publishing industry, I think it is safe to say that this book does indeed stand out – and would be, in fact, a valuable addition to any Pauline reader's library, be they academic, feminist, or otherwise.

While other books tend to be examples of feminist readings of Paul, of writers *doing* feminist Pauline theology, this book takes the reader behind the scenes, to introduce them to the key

writers and issues involved in such readings – to the ‘how to’ of doing feminist theology. We are taken on a whistle-stop tour of all the key Pauline topics you would expect to find in any good introduction to Paul and his writings (the first-century world of Paul's readers, Paul and his churches, locating the centre of Paul's theology, Paul's use of Scripture, pseudonymity and early Pauline interpretation etc.), and introduced to the key feminist scholars and approaches connected with these topics. Along the way, for example, we meet Dale Martin and Thomas Laqueur (on first-century sexuality), Bernadette Brooten and Ross Shepherd Kraemer (on Christian origins and methodology), Antoinette Wire (on 1 Cor), Daniel Boyarin (on Galatians), and Elizabeth Clark (on patristic writers and asceticism). What is refreshing is that almost eighty per cent of the works discussed have been published in the last fifteen years; while there is an appropriate nod to seminal works of the 1980s and earlier, the focus is on current development in feminist Pauline research.

Nevertheless, Polaski is not just a tour-guide in this process – she is also doing feminist theology as she goes. At the outset, the reader is given a helpful overview of various responses one might have when reading Paul. Polaski describes both Rosemary Radford Ruether's and Katherine Doob Sakenfeld's schemas of possible responses from the 1980s and updates them with her own schema comprised of four possible readings; conformist, rejectionist, resistant, and transformational. Overviews such as this are helpful for anyone seeking to work out their own approach to reading Scripture – deciding where one stands on questions of biblical authority and hermeneutics is crucial for any serious Bible reader – or trying to discern the theological stance of the authors one is reading. The reader is then told of the author's commitment to a ‘transformational’ reading of the text (p. 4), and several pages follow which outline that approach more clearly. She openly explains her personal position on the Pauline texts, including her compassion for women who have been hurt through abusive use of those texts, and even admits that Paul ‘still makes me angry on a regular basis’ (p. 11). Her belief, she states, is that the texts stand in ‘a *living* tradition’ and thus her interest is in the ‘*trajectories*’ present in the texts; ‘I look not so much to see where they (and their author and first recipients) *stand*. I look to see where the texts *point!* (p. 11 emphasis original).’ This, she explains, will be the practice she seeks to employ throughout the book.

Perhaps the place where Polaski is at her most creative regarding this transformational approach is in the chapter on Paul's theology (chapter 5: Paul the Iconoclast). She considers the notion of locating the centre of Paul's theology and notes that while many scholars attempt to find such a ‘core’, her interest is almost exactly the opposite; she suggests that it is in exploring the ‘seams’ or inconsistencies in Paul's arguments that we might discover clues to ‘the growing edges of his theology’ (p. 83). She goes on to explore the notion of ‘new creation’ in Paul's thought, including the metaphor of ‘birthing’ which is fundamental to it, and proposes that this concept can be seen as ‘Paul's theology in a nutshell... foundational to the formulation of Paul's theology... a grounding conviction’ (p. 84). Eschatology, ecclesiology, Paul's use of Scripture, and contemporary ethics are all then explored in light of this over-arching trope of new creation, although Polaski constantly reminds the reader that ‘while we may be able to find a theological ‘centre’ of Paul's thought... the primary focus is not on the centre, but the edges’ (pp. 91-92).

I would have liked to see Polaski be a little more creative in her discussion on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 however (pp. 54-56). Despite showing elsewhere that she is aware of current research on the various aspects of Pauline theology, Polaski falls into the common trap of viewing this

passage as being solely about the Corinthian women, and thus offers little on this passage beyond what a reader would find in a traditional commentary. Even a quick scan of Thiselton's monumental commentary on 1 Corinthians (NIGTC, 2000) would have given Polaski some interesting ideas to explore; to begin with, the very first paragraph of his commentary on this passage makes it clear that this text is about *both* the men and the women, and that alone ought to allow for some interesting feminist comment.

Polaski concludes with a call for her readers to share with Paul in the struggle to work out the gospel, acknowledging that while we often see Paul himself 'fall short of full expression of the principles he professes' (p. 122), this task is an essential part of the Christian calling. This book, then, is a useful tool for those thinking women and men who are committed to engaging in this struggle within the local church. Polaski's pastoral care for her readers is as evident as her academic expertise, a combination which will both encourage and enlighten such readers, and hopefully prevent many from floundering in those seas of doubt and despair which threaten to engulf anyone trying to be both Christian and feminist.

ENDNOTES

- 1 There are, of course, many other books (and articles) we ought to highlight; Scroggs' 'Paul and the Eschatological Woman', *JAAR* (1972, 1974), Pagels' 'Paul and Women', *JAAR* (1974), Collins' (ed.) *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (1985), M MacDonald's *The Pauline Churches* (1988), Witherington's *Women in the Earliest Churches* (1988), & *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (1990), Wire's *The Corinthian Women Prophets* (1990), Castelli's *Imitating Paul* (1991), Kraemer's *Her Share of the Blessings* (1992), Newsom & Ringe's (eds.) *Women's Bible Commentary* (1992, 1998), Mitchell's *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (1993), Schüssler Fiorenza's (ed.) *Searching the Scriptures Vols 1&2* (1993, 1994), Boyarin's *A Radical Jew* (1994), Boyarin & Ocker (eds.) *Galatians and Gender Trouble* (1995), Kroeger et al (eds.) *The Women's Study New Testament* (1995), Martin's *The Corinthian Body* (1995), Schottroff's *Lydia's Impatient Sisters* (1995), Gundry-Volf's 'Gender and Creation in 1 Cor 11.2-16', in Adna et al (eds.) *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche. Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher* (1997), Kraemer & D'Angelo's *Women and Christian Origins* (1999), Washington et al (eds.) *Escaping Eden* (1999), Dornisch's *Paul and Third-World Women Theologians* (1999), Kahl's 'No Longer Male: Masculinity Struggles Behind Galatians 3.28?' *JSNT* (2000), Kroeger & Evans' (eds.) *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary* (2002), Moore & Anderson's (eds.) *New Testament Masculinities* (2003), Levine's (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (2003), Larson's 'Paul's Masculinity', *JBL* (2004), Ehrensperger's *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged* (2004), Vander Stichele & Penner's *Her Master's Tools?* (2005). Broadening our scope beyond Paul would clearly allow mention of other critical scholars, such as Brooten, Tribble, Clark, Eilberg-Schwartz et al. This particular list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative.
- 2 Polaski cites this comment from Berquist as the inspiration for writing this book; /Acknowledgments/, ix.