
PART II
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON CHURCH
HISTORY

WHAT DID WOMEN DO FOR THE EARLY CHURCH? THE RECENT HISTORY OF A QUESTION

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The question posed in the title deliberately reverses one that has accompanied me through my academic career: what did the early church do for women? The reversal signals what will prove to be an underlying theme of what follows, namely the role of women in history as objects or as the subjects of action and of discourse. Yet already the question as conventionally phrased highlights different points of stress that reflect where it belongs within reflective historiography, the subject of this volume. Firstly, 'What did the early church do?' The coming of early Christianity, it is implied, brought blessings or perhaps curses, evoking a way of writing church history which goes back to Eusebius and which continues both through Edward Gibbon and through those who still portray the social and religious context of the time as one of the inarticulate search for alternative conceptions of the divine or for alternative social values that Christianity would answer. Secondly, 'for women': thus, a deliberate rejection of any universalizing interpretation of such effects; a recognition, or at least a suspicion, that any apparently universalizing claim is actually spoken from a 'normal' that is already gendered as male; an invitation to ask how women's experience could be recovered, what the sources would look like, and, indeed, whether it can be recovered from the extant sources. Thirdly, 'the early church', chosen here not just because that happens to be the period of my own work but because the origins of the church have a claim for a particular authority, at least for most traditions within the Christian church herself, and because, whatever may have happened thereafter, and whether the thereafter is portrayed as a story of advance or of decline, beginnings matter. Hence in some circles the early church is itself the problem and the question is focused more sharply: what did Jesus do for women? What did Paul do for women? Therefore, fourthly, the 'women' of the initial question are not only those of the period itself, but also those of subsequent genera-

tions, particularly if not only within the Christian church. It is not surprising, then, that many of those who have asked the question, and who have sought to answer it, have been women, a first step in justifying the reformulation of the question as posed here.

It is not only the bias of a biblical scholar that would trace the history of such questions back through, although not simply to, *The Woman's Bible* (1895–8), edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.¹ Cady Stanton's team, consisting entirely of women, subjected initially the opening books of the Bible to a merciless, if to our eyes a somewhat naïve, critique of their representation and expectations of women; but their target was no less those who used the Bible – and indeed who had used it on the one hand to support the campaign for the abolition of slavery and, on the other, simultaneously to exclude women from the platform in that campaign. Cady Stanton herself dismissed any divine authority claimed by the Bible, and she was pessimistic about attitudes to women in all organized religion, but, she wrote, 'the most bitter outspoken enemies of woman are found among the clergymen and bishops of the Protestant religion'.²

Her enterprise was controversial, and not only among those clergymen and bishops. Cady Stanton states that a number of deeply sympathetic women scholars felt forced to exclude themselves from her team for fear of losing any standing they had in the academic community – not an unreasonable fear considering the obstacle-strewn biographies even of some more recent women scholars. Indeed, publication of *The Woman's Bible* was followed by a contentious formal repudiation by the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1896. Thus the question was already posed: what does it mean to interpret as a woman and who is served by so doing?

The Woman's Bible was republished in 1985 when it became something of an icon for the renewed wave of what may loosely be termed 'feminist scholarship on the Bible', an ever more disparate conglomerate of questions and methods.³ It provided such

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York, 1895, 1898; repr. with intro. by Dale Spencer, Edinburgh, 1985).

² *Ibid.* 13.

³ For its range already in 1985, see Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford, 1985); Adela Yarbro Collins, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical*

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scholarship with its own history in opposition to those who dismissed it as driven purely by contemporary fashion, and it heralded studies of other nineteenth-century interpreters of the Bible who were women. The context of feminist scholarship in the 1980s shared some elements with that of Cady Stanton. By then a number of Protestant churches had embraced the ordination of women, with some consciously reclaiming aspects of their own distinctive historical heritage; however, debates particularly within the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church on the question continued to appeal to the Bible and to the practice of the early church. For some the goal was to find and demonstrate support therein for whatever position they championed, for others the exercise provoked or reinforced their questioning of the authority accorded to 'origins', whether these were scripturally or ecclesially inscribed. This preoccupation with office-holding skewed, and arguably still sometimes continues to skew, the scholarly concerns concerning women, leaving unexamined or unchallenged the historical and theological presuppositions of the underlying arguments.⁴ Yet the broader focus was still largely the invisibility of women in so many standard accounts of the biblical and ecclesial record; hence the primary task was still to go woman-hunting, exemplified by the starting point of many a workshop, 'name three women prophets, three women disciples'.

For some this 'act of recovery' was all that was needed to redress the imbalance: the voice of optimism is well represented by Dorothy Pape's triumphant conclusion, written in 1977: 'perhaps the most remarkable instance of Christ's confidence in women was when he gave the first revelation of his risen life to one or more women' – an assertion that well illustrates the persistent question of where agency lies.⁵ Too often such optimism relied on a negative contrast: for example, claiming that Paul gave women more

Studies (Chico, CA, 1985). The explosion of bibliography since means that only key or representative examples will be cited in what follows.

⁴ See, e.g., the tendency to see the primary question as that of the roles or functions women could fulfil: e.g. Mary Hayter, *The New Eve in Christ: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in the Debate about Women in the Church* (London, 1987); Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (ET London, 1987); Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, SNTS Monograph Series 59 (Cambridge, 1988), 3, 219–20; see nn. 24 and 32 below.

⁵ Dorothy Pape, *God and Women: A Fresh Look at what the New Testament says about Women* (London, 1977), 57; see the discussion in Judith Lieu, 'The Women's Resurrec-

status than did Graeco-Roman thought where a woman was, in Aristotelian terms, a misbegotten male, or that Jesus spoke even to women, something a Jewish rabbi would (on this account) never do; Pape's 'Christ's confidence' presupposes the much-repeated generalization that in the first century the testimony of Jewish women was not trusted. By the 1990s the unreflective anti-Jewishness of much feminist scholarship was being catalogued; such denigrations of Jewish attitudes grew out of the anxiety to be able to demonstrate that Jesus or early Christianity was not just different but superior to its peers, and it arose from the failure to read the so-called background sources with the same critical eye as was dedicated to the Christian ones.⁶

A more critical, and sombre, note was sounded by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1983. Her formative *In Memory of Her* counselled a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', a method of reading the sources that questioned any assumption that they straightforwardly replicated 'how it was'.⁷ Women, she argued, have been erased from the record by the conventions of a scholarship that ignores their presence or that turns Phoebe from a 'deacon' (as the Greek is translated elsewhere) to a mere 'servant' or even an ecclesiastically more admissible 'deaconess', and from being Paul's patroness to his 'good friend' (Rom. 16: 1); they have been erased by the patterns of textual transmission and translation that reassigned the apostle Junia's gender as Junias (Rom. 16: 7); they have been erased by the rules of oral tradition and written formulation that ensured that the woman must remain nameless of whom Jesus said, 'wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her' (Mark 14: 9); and they have been erased by the processes of authorization which

tion Testimony', in *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden*, ed. Stephen Barton and Graham Stanton (London, 1994), 34–44.

⁶ See Katharina von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings* (Atlanta, GA, 1994); Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds, *Von der Wurzel getragen: christlich-feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Antijudaismus*, Biblical Interpretation Series 17 (Leiden, 1996). The contribution of Jewish women New Testament scholars to the debate has been particularly important, e.g. Amy-Jill Levine, 'Second Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women: Yeast of Eden', *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), 8–33; Levine is also editor of the *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* series (London, 2001–).

⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983).

excluded from the canon the tale of Paul's feisty disciple, Thecla, while including Paul's injunction to Timothy, 'Let a woman learn in silence with full submission' (1 Tim. 2: 11).⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza's work, in which the hermeneutic of suspicion was to be followed by a critical recovery and remembering of women's stories, if necessary through the use of historical imagination, set a pattern taken up by many since.⁹ Initially much of this work was pursued in anglophone settings; however, before long German scholars, although not all in established posts in faculties of theology, were advocating the recovery of 'Lydia's impatient sisters', albeit with less emphasis on a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.¹⁰ Particular note should be made of one of the early projects of the Institute for Ecumenical Research established for Hans Küng in the University of Tübingen after he lost his authority to teach within the Catholic faculty, 'Frau und Christentum', among whose outcomes was a detailed analysis of Greek and Latin sources on early Christian women by Anne Jensen, *Gottes selbstbewusste Töchter. Frauenemanzipation in frühen Christentum?*¹¹

However by the 1980s biblical studies, like its sister disciplines,

⁸ Thecla is the 'heroine' of a series of episodes within the second-century *Acts of Paul*; these chapters are often treated as an independent unit, 'The Acts of (Paul and) Thecla', although their separate circulation and expansion appears to be a later secondary development: see W. Schneemelcher, 'Acts of Paul', in E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, 2 vols (ET London, 1965), 2: 326, 353–64; Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary*, WUNT 11, 270 (Tübingen, 2009). A critical edition of the Greek text is awaited.

⁹ A parallel course was followed in the recovery of Jewish women; see, e.g., Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Christentums* 41 (Leiden, 1997); eadem, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History*, *Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 76 (Tübingen, 1999).

¹⁰ Luise Schottroff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern* (Gütersloh, 1994), ET *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Christianity* (Louisville, KY, 1995); the reference is to Acts 16: 11–15. See Luise Schottroff, Silvia Schroer and Marie-Theres Wacker, *Feministische Exegese: Forschungserträge zur Bibel aus der Perspektive von Frauen* (Darmstadt, 1995), ET *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN, 1998), who also trace the history back to *The Woman's Bible* (ibid. 3–7), and (ibid. 25) identify the first German scholarly monograph of feminist biblical exegesis as Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Ein eigener Mensch werden: Frauen um Jesus* (Gütersloh, 1980), ET *The Women around Jesus: Reflections on Authentic Personhood* (London, 1982).

¹¹ Anne Jensen, *Gottes selbstbewusste Töchter. Frauenemanzipation in frühen Christentum?*, *Frauenforum* (Freiburg, 1992), ET in an abbreviated form as *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Louisville, KY, 1996); the difficulties Dr Jensen faced in furthering her scholarly career after the closure of the institute are well documented.

was already experiencing the destabilizing of the unquestioned claims to pure objectivity within the classical ‘historical-critical’ approach – an approach that was fundamental to Cady Stanton’s own enterprise and that had still been normative for those trained in the 1960s and early 1970s, rooted in the exposition of the Bible as a linguistically, culturally and historically circumscribed text. Influences from the social sciences had already endeavoured to position it within a broader social context of practices and ideas, a social context within which women, sometimes categorized along with slaves, animals and inanimate topics such as war or wealth, could be located and analysed. From a more theoretical perspective, the social sciences could also provide models for interpreting changing patterns of authority within which women had become the victims of a perhaps inevitable institutionalization or routinization. At the same time, a newly academically respectable sensitivity to the ‘Bible as literature’, influenced by narratology in literary studies, looked beyond the text as an imprint of ‘how it was’ and invited the lifting of female characters out of its pages, scrutinizing the roles to which they were assigned or seeking to give them names and a voice where the text failed to do so; this approach proved particularly well suited to Old Testament narratives but was also, as shall be seen, to be applied to early Christian ones.¹² Perhaps most incisively there was not simply the acknowledgement that all interpretation is from somewhere, as if this were something of which the interpreter must purge herself, but the celebration of this locatedness. In particular, those who interpreted as women could find their own voice and permission to acknowledge their subjectivity. Thus there was the blossoming of ideological readings, political, post-colonial, feminist, queer, and intersections between these;¹³ for such readings the focus of the interpretative lens was the rhetoric or persuasive effect of the texts, whether explicit or implicit, actual or potential, played out in the history of reception and of application, or available for appropriation. On the one hand these ways of reading have taught a greater sensitivity to

¹² Biblical scholars have favoured their own term, ‘narrative criticism’, for this analysis focused on literary strategies within the text.

¹³ For an overview of these methods in general, see G. Aichele et al. [‘The Bible and Culture Collective’] *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, CT, 1995), esp. the essay on ‘Feminist and Womanist Criticism’: *ibid.* 225–71. Essays in ‘The Feminist Companion’ Series (see n. 6 above) illustrate the various approaches discussed in this paragraph.

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the power structures, including the interpretative power structures, which affect all women's lives; on the other, as scholars have come to acknowledge their own locatedness, western white women do not presume to speak for Latin-American women, or for Korean or for Afro-Caribbean women, nor they for each other. Within these other settings this has often offered mechanisms for those working within the churches to read the texts and to claim from them alternative narratives to that historically associated with the Western church.¹⁴

In this overview, biblical studies has proved useful terrain for outlining the navigational skills demanded by the question with which we started, not least because it is methodologically a highly self-reflective discipline, focused on the close reading of texts. Our access to the early church is almost exclusively through the texts it produced and preserved, although it was part of a world that is much more richly available through material remains and through other textual sources. Answering that initial question, therefore, remains a matter of reading, of how we read, and from where – as well as what we read. In recent decades the interest in what lies outside the conventional boundaries of 'the history of the church', understood as a relatively linear and unfolding narrative centred on institutions, has coincided with the discovery of texts which themselves belong outside those ecclesial (or 'orthodox') boundaries. These, especially the so-called 'gnostic', texts have allowed the exploration of what once seemed mysterious and yet either threatening or seductive territory, although they have sometimes revealed that it is less threatening and less seductive than those within the church had portrayed it.¹⁵

In what follows, the effect of these conceptual and methodological developments as applied to the study of women in the early church, together with the role of women scholars in them, will be explored through three case studies. The first of these is the claim that the benefits that early Christianity offered women, the 'good it did for' them, are attested by the significant numbers of women attracted to it, starting with Phoebe and Junia already mentioned.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis, MO, 2000).

¹⁵ In particular the texts discovered c.1945 at Nag Hammadi: see James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden, 1977).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in his *Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Adolf von Harnack had dedicated a chapter to the spread of Christianity among women.¹⁶ Harnack had some notable predecessors on whom he could draw. The second-century philosopher Celsus charged Christians with targeting women: 'In private houses also we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But when they get hold of children in private and some stupid women ...'.¹⁷ Celsus goes on to imply that these 'victims' are taught to reject the authority of their elders and betters. Similarly, in Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, the Roman opponent, Caecilius, complains that Christians collect together the most illiterate of society and 'credulous women who give way with the weakness natural to their sex'.¹⁸ It is striking that in response Christian apologists do not deny the principle: Athenagoras mimics the categories when he underlines a contrast with the philosophers who delight in syllogisms, etymologies and ambiguities: 'Among us you will find ordinary people, artisans, and old women, who if they are unable to establish by argument the benefit from the teaching, do demonstrate by deed the benefit from the exercise of will'.¹⁹ Such references, taken at face value, easily inspired more complex reconstructions of the past. In 1996 Rodney Stark, adopting a sociological perspective, still quoted Harnack to affirm 'the general truth that Christianity was laid hold of by women', and deduced a 2:1 imbalance of women to men in early Christianity; to this, together with the Christian rejection of abortion and infanticide, he attributed the rapid increase of the number of Christians in society.²⁰

Alongside or behind all this ran a debate as to the explanation for this predominance of women: whether they had least to

¹⁶ Adolf von Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, 2 vols (ET London, 1904–5), 2: 217–39.

¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.44, transl. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, 1953), 158.

¹⁸ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.4, in Tertullian, *Apology, De Spectaculis*, transl. T. R. Glover / Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, transl. Gerald H. Rendall, LCL 250 (London, 1953), 335.

¹⁹ Athenagoras, *Legatio* 11.3–4, in idem, *Legatio and De Resurrectione*, ed. and transl. William R. Schoedel, OECT (Oxford, 1972), 25. Other apologists continue this theme.

²⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), esp. 95–128.

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lose, most to gain, or indeed whether it was to be attributed to what Caecilius called 'the weakness natural to their sex' and to what some since have seen as a natural affinity between women and religion.²¹ Earlier scholarly accounts were content to appeal to the offer of equality inherent in the teaching of Jesus or Paul, often, as already seen, reinforced by a negative reading of Jewish and Graeco-Roman attitudes to women.²² Applying sociological theory to the Pauline letters, Wayne A. Meeks used theories of status dissonance as a primary model for explaining the number of 'upwardly mobile' members of the churches mentioned therein; among these were women who found in Christianity avenues towards the status that the conventions of Roman society denied them.²³ Such views also coalesced with the then strong interest in the household as the primary context of early Christian association and in an (often over-simplistic) modelling of the private, the sphere of women, versus the public. They enabled the argument that it was as the church moved in to the public sphere, or became consciously sensitive to its public perception, that opportunities for women became progressively curtailed, and that such anxieties may already be identified within some New Testament texts (e.g. 1 Tim. 5: 3–16; 1 Pet. 3: 3–6).²⁴ It is striking that this attempt to negotiate through social theory the conventional boundaries of the canon partly mimics the theological concerns in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly within German Protestant New Testament study, over the emergence of 'early catholicism' (*Frühkatholizismus*), identified as the move beyond the 'apostolic age' to the idea of

²¹ On this and what follows, see further Judith M. Lieu, 'The "Attraction of Women" in/to Early Judaism and Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Conversion', *JSNT* 72 (1998), 5–22, repr. in eadem, *Neither Jew nor Greek: Constructing Early Christianity* (Edinburgh, 2002), 83–99.

²² So, e.g., Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitude to Women and their Roles as Reflected in his Earthly Life*, SNTS Monograph Series 51 (Cambridge, 1984); idem, *Women in the Early Church*.

²³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT, 1983), 16–25; 70–3.

²⁴ See, e.g., Susan Heine, *Women and Early Christianity*, 124–46; Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York, 1993), 155–76; Ulrike Wagener, *Die Ordnung des 'Hauses Gottes': Der Ort von Frauen in der Ekklesiologie und Ethik der Pastoralbriefe*, WUNT II, 65 (Tübingen, 1994). A more nuanced picture of the early period is presented by Carolyn Ostek and Margaret MacDonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN, 2006).

the church as institution and as agent of salvation, and evident, according to some, already within parts of the New Testament.²⁵

Yet attention to the deliberate rhetorical fashioning of these texts cautions against citing them too quickly as evidence for the position of women; they belong within explicit polemic or apologetic, and they draw on what were established and unquestioned *topoi*. Women, it is assumed, are by definition irrational and gullible; from the polemical perspective of Celsus or of Caecilius, they are, therefore, hardly good advertisements for the intellectual or social credentials of the new religion. More importantly, in Roman thought the control of women in private is not a private matter: entrapping them in private households undermines the proper ordering of society, while according them status is a recipe for social collapse; an appeal to women is a potent symbol of subversion. Conversely, for its apologists, women represent the accessibility of the Christian message and its preachers' refusal to rely on the sophistry often criticized in popular philosophical teachers; they also represent its practicability – it leads to action, and women can act, their behaviour demonstrating its practical and beneficial effect, in a manner that some contemporaries were also claiming for women's study of philosophy. These women do not belong to the world of head-counting but to that of polemical point-scoring, and it is the apologetic negotiation of conventional values that first demands exploration.

A second case study develops and complicates such a picture, taking as its representative the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas in North Africa at the beginning of the third century.²⁶ This martyrdom account, widely seen as near-contemporary, is not only conventionally named after the two women, even though it also tells of the deaths of their male companions, but also incorporates the diary of Perpetua told in the first person; this has often been treated as authentically representing a woman's voice, a rarity in the ancient, as well as in the not-so-ancient,

²⁵ For this deliberate renegotiation of canonical boundaries, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, 2 vols (New York, 1993–4), which includes forty 'Christian' texts.

²⁶ Most commonly cited is the convenient, albeit not critical, Latin text and English translation by Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, OECT (Oxford, 1972), 106–31; see now the detailed study with text and translation by Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York, 2012).

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world.²⁷ Herbert Musurillo may have had this story particularly in mind when he wrote in the introduction to his corpus of Martyr Acts:

Foremost, of course, is the portrayal of the martyrs' courage in the face of the most vicious torture and humiliation, a courage shared by both sexes, by both slave and free, as though in fulfillment of Paul's pronouncement in Galatians (3: 28), *For you are all one in Christ Jesus ...*²⁸

This appeal to the conventional model of female liberation was echoed by William Frend in 'Blandina and Perpetua: Two Early Christian Heroines' (1978): 'Christianity provided scope for the human need of achievement and daring for a cause. Those who joined found themselves in a close-knit society without social or sexual distinction ... In the equality practised by the Christians many women found their chance of self-fulfilment'.²⁹ In recent studies, Perpetua and that other eponymous heroine, Thecla, have become iconic both of early Christian women and for contemporary women in the church, as is witnessed by the number of popular as well as of scholarly translations and discussions of the texts.³⁰ For many they embody the role of women in the early church, and what 'the church did for women'. Conventionally they have been prime examples for 'recovery and remembering' as advocated by Schüssler Fiorenza, offering an alternative memory or narrative for women; such a view was encouraged by the readiness to accept Perpetua's diary as authentic, and by the attempts to discover within the 'Acts of Paul and Thecla' and other Apocry-

²⁷ *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 3–10 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 108–19); see Patricia Wilson-Kastner et al., *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (Washington, DC, 1981), 1–32; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Perete (†1310)* (Cambridge, 1984); so largely still Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York and London, 1997); and, with due caution, Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*.

²⁸ Musurillo, *Acts*, liii; as is frequently the case, the Pauline 'neither Jew nor Greek' is dropped.

²⁹ William Frend, 'Blandina and Perpetua: Two Early Christian Heroines', in J. Rougé and R. Turcan, eds, *Les Martyrs de Lyon (177)*, Colloques internationaux du Centre national de la recherche scientifique 575 (Paris, 1978), 167–77, at 175.

³⁰ This was the motivation of Wilson-Kastner, *Lost Tradition*; see also Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN, 1983), 78–88 (Thecla), 97–106 (Perpetua). For scholarly editions see nn. 8 and 26 above.

phal Acts motifs of folklore and oral transmission that might point to circles of women tradents and so to the recovery of women's voices.³¹ However, for many others, rather than embody Galatians 3: 28 they stand at a turning point after the first flush of liberation brought to women by Jesus and perhaps sustained by Paul. Instead they represent the paths, the only paths on this view, along which supposedly 'real women' were able to achieve status within the church once access to the formal leadership roles, perhaps occupied by Phoebe or by Junia, had been firmly locked against them.³²

The first of these paths was that of martyrdom: along with Perpetua is Felicitas, who in addition to being a woman was also a slave; eight months pregnant, by the grace of God (as the account has it) she gave birth prematurely, and so did not have to miss her appointment with martyrdom. A little earlier, at Lyons there was the slave-woman Blandina of Frensd's article and a certain Biblis.³³ Elsewhere the aptly named Agathonike ('good victory') spurns the crowd when they reinforce her gender and proper role: 'Have pity on yourself and on your children'.³⁴ Positivists here will, with Musurillo, note this prominence of women, and, if indeed the blood of the martyrs was seed, their significance for the growth of the church; certainly their names are preserved, unlike those of so many other women, and they are promised an equal crown of glory. There are hints in the account of Perpetua that they too shared in the extraordinary power to bring about reconciliation

³¹ So, e.g., Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, IL, 1980), 95–109; Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY, 1987). Beate Wehn, 'Vergewaltigte nicht die Sklavin Gottes': *Gewalterfahrungen und Widerstand von Frauen in der frühchristlichen Thekla-Akten* (Königstein, 2005), 51–3, still largely follows Burrus. On the title of 'the Acts', see n. 8 above.

³² See n. 24 above. Others, maintaining the primary concern with office-holding, have argued that evidence for women fulfilling roles of recognized authority can be uncovered for several centuries, although often masked by ambiguous terminology or by negative polemic: Ute E. Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum: Epigraphische und literarische Studien, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 61 (Göttingen, 1996), *ET Women Office-holders in the Early Church: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville, MN, 2000).

³³ In the account of the 'Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne' preserved by Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.1.3–2.1 (text and translation in Musurillo, *Acts*, 62–85).

³⁴ *The Martyrdom of Carpus, Pappylus, and Agathonike* 43 (Greek), 6 (Latin) (Musurillo, *Acts*, 22–37, at 28–9, 34–5). For the motif of an appeal to a mother's compassion for her children, see *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 6 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 113–14); 2 Macc. 7: 25–9; 4 Macc. 8: 20; 14: 11 – 16; 25; Luke 23: 28.

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or to offer forgiveness that was accorded to the confessors, those imprisoned to await martyrdom.³⁵

The second path, on this model, was that of asceticism. Perpetua only tangentially represents this, for she is married and the mother of a child; however, she does reject conventional expectations, not only by denying her father's authority but also by readily surrendering her child for others to care for, while, strangely, her husband is entirely absent from the narrative. Thecla serves as a better example. After eavesdropping on Paul's preaching, a message of self-denial and of hope of resurrection, almost literally entranced she resolutely rejects her fiancé and all other attempts at physical domination, and, after many an adventure and, some would say, an increasing independent subjectivity (including baptizing herself), she adopts a celibate lifestyle, perhaps even the style and dress of a man, and spends her future as an itinerant teacher. In her ascetic vocation she would in subsequent generations have many heirs (or heiresses), as through a range of narratives and then other testimonies women maintained their independence and acquired status through their embrace of celibacy and asceticism. Such narratives become particularly significant from the fourth century, where they have become the subject of close study, although there are dangers in assimilating second-century concerns to those of this later period.³⁶

Thirdly there is the path of ecstatic behaviour, in time perhaps of mysticism. Perpetua herself is the recipient of prophetic and transformative visions; however, such behaviour was particularly associated with the second-century prophetic movement, originating in Phrygia, among whose founders were two women, Priscilla and Maximilla.³⁷ Subsequently the movement ('Montanism') was named after their male associate, Montanus, but, at least in the eyes of some, it maintained a reputation for the recognition it gave women. Other women credited with visionary experiences, which gave them authority as teachers of divine revelations,

³⁵ *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 13 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 121–3).

³⁶ See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith* (Lewiston, NY, 1986); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealised Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 1996). On Thecla's heritage, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, OPCS (Oxford, 2001).

³⁷ See Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge, 1996).

included Philumene, to be discussed below. Prophetic inspiration is not easily constrained by ecclesiastical legislation, and some have traced the phenomenon (or ‘problem’) back to the women whose veiling Paul tortuously demanded (1 Cor. 11: 2–16).³⁸ From a social-scientific perspective, comparisons have also been drawn with other examples of the manipulation of non-institutionalized power by women in male-dominated societies with tacit male consent, through claims to visions, contact with the spirit-world, frenzied behaviour or supernatural powers.³⁹

As might be expected, the comparative benefits for women of these three – martyrdom, monastic asceticism and charismatic exuberance – as channels for female self-expression and self-determination in the early church can be evaluated in negative as well as positive terms.⁴⁰ However, they also provide a bridge to the third case study, often seen as an alternative route, namely the path beyond the boundaries of the emergent or what many now call the proto-orthodox church. Two women may serve as initial representatives; the first would be the nameless virgin who, according to the heresiologist Epiphanius, was corrupted by the second-century arch-heretic Marcion, who ‘cheated her of her hope’ and thus initiated his headlong fall from grace.⁴¹ The second, also a virgin, would be Philumene, whose ‘revelations’ persuaded an erstwhile pupil of Marcion, Apelles, to yet further error.⁴² These two women are but the tip of an iceberg: polemics against other marginalized, or ‘heretical’, groups, particularly those more recently lumped

³⁸ On the situation in Corinth, see Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis, MN, 1995); Jorunn Økland, *Women in their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space*, JSNT Supplement Series 269 (London, 2004).

³⁹ For social-scientific analysis of the phenomenon, see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (London, 1989).

⁴⁰ So already Gail Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation: Female Saviors and Formative Christianity* (Louisville, KY, 1992); Ross Shepard Kraemer, ed., *Maenads, Martyrs, Mystics, Matrons: A Sourcebook of Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia, PA, 1988; 2nd edn, *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* [Oxford, 2004]).

⁴¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.1.4, in *Epiphanius II*, ed. Karl Holl, 2nd edn, ed. Jürgen Dummer, GCS (Berlin, 1980), 94.

⁴² For texts and discussion, see Roman Hanig, ‘Der Beitrag der Philumene zur Theologie der Apelleianer’, *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 3 (1999), 240–77, who notes how she, too, shares the fate of other women, as her independent contribution is forgotten in later tradition.

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together under the label 'gnosticism', routinely charge them with the seduction, intellectual and physical, of women, as well as with advocating unbridled sexual licence. Again, some have taken this at face value. Robin Lane Fox writes: 'Tales of promiscuity of heretical teachers enjoyed a wide currency and the theme became a standard accusation. They were a distinctive Christian slander, as women were particularly prominent in Church life, but perhaps we should not always dismiss them. The afternoons were long in a Gnostic's company.'⁴³ Others, however, have probed more deeply; some have asked what it was about 'gnostic' ideology that accommodated and attracted women, whereas others have suggested that, conversely, it was precisely their defence of female roles that helped damn as heresy an otherwise theologically innocuous movement such as Montanism.⁴⁴ Once again there is a complex analogical relationship between the sense among many contemporary women, including academic theologians and church historians, of marginalization within current ecclesiastical structures, and the renewed fascination with sources representing these marginalized forms of early Christian experience.

Taken at face value, each of these roles open to and adopted by women – martyrdom, asceticism, and charisma, if not heretical flight – could well be construed not as what the church did for women but as what women did for the church; through them women sustained possibilities of countering what some would decry as a burgeoning and stultifying monochrome institutionalization. Rather than Schüssler Fiorenza's 'memory of her' it might appear preferable to speak of 'her memorializing of other possibilities'. Yet is it possible to take these women and their stories at face value, recovered, reclaimed and recelebrated? Even within the framework of more historical approaches, assumptions such

⁴³ R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth, 1986), 311; it is unclear whether we are to imagine a long lazy afternoon, the male (?) Gnostic teacher surrounded by his adoring female devotees, or the sexual dalliance that would be a welcome relief from long philosophical disquisitions – although why should only women be likely to succumb to either?

⁴⁴ On the dynamics of the association between heresy and women, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, 'Heresy as Women's Religion: Women's Religion as Heresy', in eadem, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York, 1992), 157–73; Wagener, *Die Ordnung*, 219–21. On the later period, see Virginia Burrus, 'The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome', *HThR* 84 (1991), 229–48.

as those regarding the accessibility of women's voices behind the Apocryphal Acts or the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* have proved difficult to sustain in the light of the complexities of textual transmission or of close readings attentive to the dominant point of view.⁴⁵ Recognition of the rhetorical strategies at play, as already seen in the first case study, militates against treating polemical writers such as Epiphanius as neutral commentators offering reliable historical information, while study of the 'gnostic' texts themselves has shown them to be no more women-friendly than their 'orthodox' counterparts.⁴⁶

Moreover, a more substantial challenge has come from approaches influenced by Michel Foucault, as mediated through Peter Brown, and developed in particular by scholars (often women) in North American departments of religion.⁴⁷ As they have emphasized, each of these early Christian women bears not only the weight of their personal histories (if indeed these can be recovered), but that of the multiple fundamental perceptions about women which intersect in their representation and most particularly in their bodies. For what holds together the different 'paths to female self-realization' is their focus on the bodies of women; their empowerment comes about through their mastery over, or their rejection of, their bodies, through their emancipation from them, even to the extent

⁴⁵ The issues are well illustrated by the range of highly nuanced readings in Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, eds, *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford, 2012). Particularly influential in recent reconsideration has been recognition of the structural and thematic, and so, potentially, the generic, similarities between these writings and the Hellenistic novels of the same period, which increasingly have been interpreted not as 'women's literature' but as reinforcing conventional values: see Virginia Burrus, 'Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance', *Arethusa* 38 (2005), 49–88; Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London, 1995).

⁴⁶ The role of women in the sects he denounces is a recurring *topos* in Epiphanius, and he routinely transfers such claims between different groups when his earlier sources are silent. On the place of women in 'gnostic' texts, see Karen L. King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Philadelphia, PA, 1988); for more recent nuancing, see Anne McGuire, 'Women, Gender, and Gnosis in Gnostic Texts and Traditions', in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds, *Women and Christian Origins* (Oxford, 1999), 257–99; Trevett, *Montanism*, 151–97, is cautious about the evidence that women had more status in Montanism.

⁴⁷ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988). Included here would be a number of those whose work is cited in footnotes to this essay: Elizabeth Clark, Virginia Burrus and Elizabeth Castelli, and from the UK Averil Cameron and Kate Cooper.

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of the elimination of the feminine body and of the acquisition of a male persona, through experiences which are at once 'out of the body' and yet perceived as dangerously and excessively bodily. Sensitivity to the narrative strategies reveals how as readers we are not allowed to avoid this: the watching crowd are moved by horror as they observe Perpetua and Felicitas, 'one a pampered young girl, the other fresh from child birth, her breasts still dripping milk', just as they are by the beauty of Agathonike after she has removed her clothing; as Perpetua hastens to cover her thighs exposed by the heifer's ripping of her tunic, because she is more concerned for her modesty than for any pain, readers are sucked into the voyeurism of the text.⁴⁸ Perpetua rearranges her dishevelled hair, while Thecla offers to cut hers in response to Paul's anxieties about the temptations her beauty will bring her; there is a studied ambiguity in the authorial comment that through Blandina 'Christ demonstrated that what among men is considered cheap, ugly and contemptible merits great glory before God'.⁴⁹

Reading the narratives from this perspective locates them, and their women, not (just) within a Christian trajectory but within the history of ideas, not confined to patristics but within the study of late antiquity. They exemplify and manipulate the conventional association within Greek thought of the male with the rational, and of women with the irrational, with the passions, and with domination by the body. Yet the apparent simplicity of such a binary model is deceptive and could mask deep ambiguities: men may act as if controlled by the body and may become feminized, while no less dangerous is the woman who becomes deceptively masculinized. Hence recent study has increasingly recognized that for (the invariably male) authors of antiquity discourse about women is not 'just' about women. In the words of Lévi-Strauss, taken up by a number of historians of late antiquity since, men use women to think with.⁵⁰ Within text and ideology construc-

⁴⁸ *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 20.1–5; *Martyrdom of Carpus* (Latin) 6.4–5 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 129, 35 respectively).

⁴⁹ For Perpetua, see n. 27 above; 'Acts of Thecla' 3.25 (*Acts of Paul*, ed. Schneemelcher, 359–60). For Blandina, see *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.17 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 67).

⁵⁰ On the use of Lévi-Strauss, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2011), 128–9. For the broader polemical application of such gendered associations, see Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York, 2006).

tions of woman are inextricably implicated in constructions of the normative self, i.e. the masculine self. Yet, consequently, they are no less implicated in shaping the in-group and identifying outsiders; this ranges from the way women behave or are controlled, seen as a mark of the character of society, through to language of sexual fidelity and (in)appropriate sexual relationships as a metaphor and measure of national integrity, and to the exploitation of the endangered woman or unwomanly woman as providing a space within which the possibilities of resistance or negotiation open to a minority group are explored (as in the biblical cases of Esther and Judith). If narratives of early Christian women provide fruitful material for analysis within this literary and ideological framework, those women themselves begin to lose their hard-won subjectivity as individual historical actors.⁵¹

This development should not be seen as the triumph of 'Hellenism over Hebraism', either within early Christian thought or in the primary allegiance of its modern scholars. The sensitivities of feminist biblical study again may provide a further interpretative lens, just as Scripture itself undoubtedly made its own contribution to early Christian ideologies of women. Of particular importance is the pervasive association within the Scriptures, Jewish and then Christian, of women with both sexual infidelity and religious infidelity, themes that are themselves inextricably intertwined both as supposed cause and effect and as reciprocally informing metaphors: Solomon's wives; folly touting her wares in the market place in the wisdom literature; the errant wife whom the prophet Hosea or God will brutally strip bare for her infidelities; Jezebel in 2 Kings; and her later colleague, the whore of Babylon. It is as heir to this tradition that the virgin seduced by Marcion should be placed, through a line that includes another virgin described two centuries before Epiphanius by Hegesippus when he introduced his account of the roots of heresies: 'For this reason they used to call the Church a virgin, for it was not yet defiled by vain reports'.⁵² From the same stock, in the account of the martyrdoms at Lyons, the church is the virgin mother – that most ambivalent of impossible ideals – a mother who experience: no pain at the

⁵¹ See Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York, 2004), 61–7, 138–43.

⁵² Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.22.4.

death of her offspring but only at their failure to embrace death; those who recanted are described as miscarriages or abortions, those who finally renew their faith are 'reborn': 'the Virgin mother experienced great joy as she received again living those whom she had aborted dead'. Metaphor and person coalesce in the opposite direction when Blandina, tortured and executed after many of her fellows, is herself described as 'like a noble mother encouraging her children'.⁵³ 'Virginity as Metaphor', to quote the title of an essay by Averil Cameron, draws on (in both senses of the verb) the bodies of women, although not only on those of women.⁵⁴

In the midst of her torture Blandina is tied, spreadeagled, to a stake. Those who watch, in the words of the account, see in the form of their sister, 'he who was crucified for them'.⁵⁵ Does Blandina become male, as Perpetua did in her dream, and as (in a different way) does Thecla, or does Christ lose gender specificity, incarnated in her? Accounts of martyrdom also describe the tortured and disfigured bodies of the male Christians, although without any comparable attention to their masculine features. The submissive body, not just marked by physical weakness but openly embracing weakness and suffering, was within Graeco-Roman culture, and perhaps not only there, deeply ambiguous. It has often been noted that the women martyrs are eulogized for their 'manly' bravery – the terms share a common root; Blandina is pointedly likened to 'a noble athlete'.⁵⁶ This does not only, as often supposed, open a door, even promotion, for women, but it also provokes a radical reimagining of the recognizable signs of the pre-eminent athlete and of the physical manifestation of their prowess. Once again this can be understood as 'men using women to think with': the women of these narratives provide a less threatening space for reconceptualizing masculinity as well as femininity within early Christian discourse.

⁵³ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.45, 55 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 77, 79). Such imagery of the church also draws on biblical traditions of Jerusalem as barren mother whose children are restored, and of the church as bride (Isa. 54; Rev. 21: 2). It also intersects with the topos of expected motherly love noted above (n. 34).

⁵⁴ Averil Cameron, 'Virginity as Metaphor: Women and Rhetoric in Early Christianity', in eadem, ed., *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989), 181–205.

⁵⁵ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.41 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 74).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1.18; subsequently (1.42) she is said to 'have put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete' (Musurillo, *Acts*, 67, 75).

Therefore, if the question with which we started has broadened out into the study of masculinity and indeed of constructions of gender, it is not only following the trend from women's studies to gender studies;⁵⁷ nor is it adding further topics to a shopping list of discrete items – along with animals, money and war – as sometimes treated in other, including ecclesial, settings. It has become ever more evident that the question of women belongs to the inner logic or deep grammar of the church's self-understanding. With this we have moved from what the church did for women to what women, past and present, have done for the church.⁵⁸

Given the theme of this volume as the church's interpretation of its past, some reflection is merited, not least because many of the later stages of the journey here traced have been trodden mainly outside of confessedly ecclesial settings. Even where the particular association of women with martyrdom, asceticism, charismatic behaviour and perhaps life on the margins of the church has been treated as a window on their real experience, there has been vigorous debate regarding whether and in what ways these women did provide for their contemporaries, or do provide for subsequent generations, models of liberation, or whether they merely reinscribe definitions of femininity that need to be challenged. Seeing them as at every turn characterized by their bodies can only intensify such debate. There can be no doubt in subsequent church history, and even to the present, that the valorization of suffering and anxiety about woman's body have been deeply ambivalent for women (and not only for women); such valorization has given (real or supposed) meaning to an often enforced submission or passivity, but it has also demanded acquiescence in the face of various kinds of abuse and of easily inspired guilt about any protest against it.⁵⁹

Finally, many have followed the journey through with increasing anxiety: having started with the desire to rescue women from the

⁵⁷ Here again studies of Christian and also Jewish material were embraced in a move that was already taking place in classics; see, e.g., Lin Foxhall and John Salmon, eds, *When Men were Men: Masculinity, Power, and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (London, 1998); Maria Wyke, ed., *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford, 1998).

⁵⁸ A further dimension that cannot be explored here would be the multiple inter-sections with the gendered ways in which God is conceptualized.

⁵⁹ See already Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, 'Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation', in Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation*, 96–107.

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obscurity if not erasure in which they had been submerged and by which they had been silenced for centuries, have we – particularly women scholars – returned them there, the real women at any rate?⁶⁰ Arguably the discussion has not simply returned to the position challenged by Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutic of suspicion, namely of tacit acceptance of the erasure of women by male authors, transmitters, translators and scholars.⁶¹ Neither does the recognition that the authors of our sources are (almost exclusively) men, and that the women of their texts are *their* women, equate to the naïve and dismissive truism that 'they did not know about feminism and so it is pointless looking for it there', for that mantra is to resort to a narrow proof-texting attitude to Scripture and to the past. If the concern is with 'real women' there is something to be learned both from and for contemporary debates about whether, or how far, we acknowledge and affirm the decisions of women who by our criteria submit to male-dominated norms and values; how far we dismiss them as disempowered, oversocialized into submission; and how we recognize female agency and the multiple ways in which women negotiate society's expectations, contribute to these, and manipulate, reinforce or transform them.

What have women done for the church? They have posed the question and they have shown that the answer still lies ahead of us.

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⁶⁰ See Elizabeth Clark, 'The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the "Linguistic Turn"', *ChH* 67 (1998), 1–31. Several of the scholars cited in these notes have become increasingly cautious about attempting historical recovery in their more recent publications: see the review of scholarly development and a personal perspective in Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 3–28.

⁶¹ One very patent by-product has been the increased sensitivity to gender issues in translation of the Scriptures as well as in scholarly analysis.