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BOOK REVIEW

Diane E. Peters. *The Many Faces of Martha of Bethany*. Ottawa: St. Paul University, 2008. 286 pp. ISBN 978-2-89646-002-1.

In her introduction, Peters shows her intention for writing the book by saying, “Martha is not the one dimensional character that she is often assumed to be by those who know of her only from biblical sources At various times she served as an important role model for those active in the life and work of the Church” (p. 25). This is mostly a history of how the character of Martha has been interpreted and used by the church and various Christians down through the centuries.

The introduction, while informative regarding the format of the book and clear in its statement of the book’s thesis, leaves some fairly large chronological gaps that cause concern. An example of such a leap occurs on pages 12 and 13, where Peters goes from the early church to the medieval period with no comments about the intervening years. This caused me as a historian some concern, but the subsequent chapters laid my fears to rest.

Peters traces various aspects of the perception of Martha’s character through time so that the reader learns about Martha as well as the various groups inspired by her. History can be a tricky thing for many people to relate to but, with Martha—ably interpreted by Peters—as our guide, historical characters from Tertullian to Tillich become accessible. The two appendices at the end of the book are valuable sources that increase the reader’s awareness of how certain groups have written about Martha. However, it should be noted that the author leans heavily on these two sources and, in my mind, more sources would have been appreciated to insure that the opinions shared in the book are indeed reflective of those referenced throughout. The appendices were translated from non-English sources, and Peters herself was responsible for the translations. This could open Peters to the criticism that she interpreted them to fit her own ideas, so it would have been beneficial to have such valuable

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primary sources translated by another scholar.

However, it is chapter eight that proved the most enlightening for me. There Peters, discusses Martha “today,” which is fascinating because it affords the reader a brief overview of some feminist theology from around the globe. The feminist hermeneutic not only illuminates the biblical character of Martha, but also illustrates how women around the world are finding acceptance for their interpretive voices. Through their eyes North American readers can appreciate the power of a woman who owned her own property and seemed more in control of her destiny than most women of her time. Such insights are rarely given about Martha from the pulpit on Sunday.

Some of the ideas about Martha espoused in earlier times could probably not be sustained by biblical scholarship today. However, even making allowances for this, the book would provide an excellent resource for a congregation as it shows that every person deserves to be heard afresh; including (and especially) biblical characters that we may feel have nothing new to teach us. As a pastor I plan to use this book as a resource for a sermon series and Bible study in order to inform and better equip and inspire the women in my congregations.

Dianne Peters accomplishes something rare: she has given a well-known woman a new voice for our age, not by placing words in her mouth but by collecting generations of people who have been fascinated by Martha together in one book so that we can learn from each group. Although the book sometimes falls short in citations, and the way each chapter bounces around the timeline might throw some readers off, I recommend this book as an admirable attempt to bring Martha alive again for another generation of believers.

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