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BOOK REVIEW

James F. McGrath. *What Jesus Learned from Women*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021. x + 311 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5326-8060-1. \$35.00.

It is unfortunately the case that there is not enough scholarship out there which is both accessible and readable for the general public on women in the Bible, much less who were in and a part of the life of Jesus. Fortunately, James F. McGrath's recent somewhat genre-defying study *What Jesus Learned from Women* (2021) has struck shelves and sought to fill this gap in a readable and detailed analysis.

The book is split up into twelve parts, chs. 1 and 12 being the introduction and conclusion to the study. Each main chapter (chs. 2–11) begins with a curious work of creative fiction to elaborate on the main point and nature of what will be discussed in each chapter, presenting interactions between women and Jesus. The women that the author presents in each chapter range from Jesus' mother to a woman caught in adultery. The introduction further opens up discussion on the nature of the title of the book and study. McGrath puts forth the theological point that, if Jesus was "fully man," he had to have the limitations of a man, and, therefore, he must have had to learn things from women in his life; a man who knows, sees, and is present in everything (i.e., who is a classical theist deity) is not fully human (1–3). This particular theological perspective of the book will no doubt cause some controversy, though it is one worth exploring and is logically a coherent step in thinking of Jesus as human and God. Each chapter tends to explore various women in Jesus' life and then how they relate to specific things which Jesus learned specifically *from them*. Jesus is a full human interacting entirely with and learning from the women in his life. For instance, ch. 1

focuses on all the things which Jesus could have learned from his mother, while the chapter on Joanna (ch. 11) focuses on what he learned from women occupying places of authority.

There are many things which are praiseworthy in this book, which will be addressed below. But there are also a number of issues which should be addressed. First, there is a notable absence of any discussion of the Pauline mother of Jesus (Gal 4:4) that I could find. This is a largely minor issue since it is brief. However, the passage is also the earliest-ever mention of Jesus' mother, if not by name, and is one that has often been neglected in these discussions. It is further noteworthy that, while the Pauline Jesus is not mentioned as having an earthly father of any kind, he is consistently referenced as a descendant of David (Rom 1:3) and more, to which we might glean the following question: Did Paul consider Jesus' Davidic ancestry as being via Mary? If so, what would this mean for Mary and her part in early Christianity and her role in the life of Jesus even further? Another issue is in regard to McGrath's methodology. While McGrath undertakes literary and historical criticism, the methodologies for doing so are not laid out clearly. There are more statements about what his methodology is *not* rather than what it *is*, which makes it difficult to discover what McGrath's particular framework is. Of course, since this book is partly aimed at a lay audience, this can explain some of the issues; however, this still forms a notable flaw for academics reading his book in the end.

Another comment on his work worth noting is that, despite the fact McGrath sees creative writing as necessary for academics, the theological questions such as "Can God use creative writing?" or, if God can use creative writing, "Can parts of the New Testament be thought of as creative writing?" are not asked. The answer may be yes, for example, concerning the Matthean infancy narrative. McGrath points to these as "scripture historicized" (5). But pointing to them additionally as "creative writing" would hold an entirely new theological weight in this book (which is oriented to accommodate Christian readership) because McGrath uses creative writing throughout. Noting that parts of Scripture could be fiction is a potentially

theological point in validating McGrath's use of fiction here and it leads to interesting questions about how to think of Scripture. As a very intertextual study, combining fiction writing, New Testament studies, and (to an extent) feminist gender theory, McGrath seems to have bypassed an opportunity to (at least briefly) explore the theological landscape more. McGrath does address the necessity of using fiction as an academic tool for learning, teaching, and reconstruction (8), but not really as a theological tool. Could the Gospels contain or have large parts of deliberate fiction inspired by God? Could they be creative writing works, or even novels (see Randal Helms, *Gospel Fictions*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989)? If the Gospels contained creative fiction, how important is fiction then in our analysis as well? Because this intersects with the historicity of the events, the literary nature of the Gospels, and Christian theology, all of which McGrath comments on, it is surprising that this was not explored somewhat further.

On the positive side of things, the book is extremely engaging, well-written, and, most importantly, respectful of the voices of women in the New Testament, and it is perhaps one of the most creative ways to emphasize and rediscover them in a largely patriarchal world. As McGrath noted, with regard to the New Testament, it is necessary to understand that these ancient texts were written by and for men, and the roles of women were restricted by a patriarchal culture (12–14). Of all the books which have often been written about women in the New Testament, McGrath's stands out specifically because, instead of making women as objects to be taught and as those who are to receive knowledge or simply describing how they participated in the Christian movements belonging to Jesus, McGrath emphasizes the way in which Jesus, the son of God, was transformed by women in his life as he was fully human. They are elevated to positions of authority and importance, instead of as tools of the masculine. McGrath's reconstructions—though I am not entirely convinced by them (Adele Reinhartz's comments on the book would describe the present reviewer in the “minimalist” camp) as to what the historical Jesus was like and what he learned are plausible. But the lack of clearly defined

methodology hampers the arguments for them in the present reviewer's opinion. The present reviewer cannot help but endorse McGrath's use of creative writing as a method that academics should use, and further sees the historical fictions, which McGrath wrote, not only as very tasteful and well-written, but (to use somewhat elitist terminology) as good *literature*. This method of using both creative fiction and scholarly analysis makes the work (whatever one's opinion on the methodology) thoroughly engaging. On a merely technical level, I found no grammatical or citation errors in the book. The only shortcoming here would be the lack of a Scripture/general index, which would have been helpful with his project, since there are many aspects that one may have wished to search quickly and fluidly.

This book is, in the present reviewer's opinion, a necessary read for any scholar wishing to engage in interdisciplinary looks at the New Testament, especially looking at the roles of women in the New Testament: Who were they?; what did they do?; who did they influence? It not only gives us new methods for thinking about how to explore historical studies via fiction, but also protects us from treating women merely as objects receiving the teachings of a person. Instead, they are active agents. Most of all, they are human beings who have not only made their mark on history but on Jesus himself. McGrath's attempts at realizing and portraying this should be inspiring for future studies on the issue. The shortcomings of the book might mean that it may not be convincing to many historical Jesus scholars, but what it argues for and attempts to demonstrate is nonetheless still important to engage with, and thoroughly invigorating.

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