Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second through Fifth Centuries

Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes | Reviewed by Jason Eden

Scholars and informed Christians alike are well aware of Clement of Rome, Saint Augustine, and other “church fathers.” But what about those “church mothers” who likewise contributed to the growth and development of early Christianity? Women, such as Thecla, Perpetua, and Helena Augusta supported monastic communities with financial gifts, engaged in theological discourse and study, and inspired generations of believers with their examples of piety and devotion. Yet, before now, these important women have received relatively little attention from theologians and historians. Fortunately, the authors of this superbly researched study have helped readers better appreciate the importance of notable ancient Christian women, particularly in terms of the ways they shaped Christian belief and practice in the Late Roman Empire.

A lack of written sources makes it impossible for scholars to compile coherent, complete, authoritative biographies of the important Christian women who lived from 100-500 A.D. Indeed, most of the available evidence about these women comes through the pens of male authors, further obscuring women’s experiences and perspectives. For example, readers must learn about Monica through the writings of her son, Augustine. What might come as a surprise to many readers, however, is that Augustine wrote glowingly about his mother’s ability to educate others about God and her theological conversations with men and women. Likewise, Jerome wrote positively about Marcella’s leadership and teaching, particularly when she pushed back against the heresy of Origenism. Repeatedly, throughout this book, men affirmatively describe women who possessed respect, authority, and theological insight in the ancient world.

In those cases when it is possible, archeological evidence and the writings of women themselves inform the authors’ analysis of early Christian women. Art found within Roman catacombs depicts women breaking bread and participating in religious rituals, for example. Other women, such as Eudocia, wrote extensively about various religious topics. Some of these texts have survived, and it is clear from the available documents that at least some elite women in the ancient world studied their Bibles extremely carefully. Not only this, but they shared their perceptions and interpretations of Scripture with other Christians through poetry, letters, and stories.

In many cases, it is extremely difficult to pull together a clear narrative of these women’s lives. For example, the experience of Thecla, a renowned martyr, received significant attention among early Christians, but it is impossible to separate fact from fiction in available sources. Did a friendly lioness and bolt of lightning rescue her from being killed by beasts in the arena, or were these poetic inventions? At times, the authors are unable to find enough evidence to firmly answer such questions. On the other hand, there are cases when the authors, through painstaking research, corroborate or disprove certain accounts. When analyzing Helena, the mother of Constantine, for example, the authors explain why it seems clear that she visited Jerusalem but why it is doubtful that she discovered the so-called True Cross of Christ. The authors always carefully describe the available sources and explain to readers why they might believe or disbelieve portions of these stories.
Whatever the truth may be in regards to specific details of women’s lives, the authors conclusively show that stories about women, such as Thecla, helped inspire the creation of artwork, shrines, and even a church. Consequently, the book convincingly demonstrates that women’s experiences, whether real or exaggerated, could inspire and shape Christian expression in ancient times. Similarly, the book shows that Helena’s contributions to early Christianity, both real and imagined, were substantive and influential. Overall, the authors’ tone is balanced, nuanced, and source-driven. They tell as much as they responsibly can without coming across as polemical or one-sided.

As the authors present their conclusions, they pay extraordinarily careful attention to scholarly debates regarding relevant issues. When analyzing Roman catacomb art, for example, they carefully summarize the views of important scholars, being sure to mention that some view the images as evidence for women distributing the Eucharist while other experts view the same images as evidence only for women participating in private funeral rites. When addressing each issue or person, the book explicitly ties the authors’ own analysis of available documents to that of other scholars.

Although at the outset the authors indicate that feminist scholarship and a desire to better remember Christian women informs their study, this book is more descriptive than prescriptive. That is, the authors do not explicitly offer support for egalitarian theological interpretations of Scripture. Yet, that is not really their goal or the nature of their subject matter. By informing readers about the complexity of early Christian women’s lives and contributions, the authors complicate simplistic arguments about the historic role of women in the faith. Clearly, women were not silent or unimportant in the early church. They certainly did much more than raise children, manage households, and obey husbands, as important as these activities were in the ancient world. Women in early Christianity sang songs in churches, educated others about the faith, inspired other men and women through their living witness, and provided leadership to the early church in a myriad of ways. There is the distinct possibility they once served the Eucharist and, through their financial support of scholarly activity, fueled theological disputation in the early church. These realities provide much needed insight regarding how the direct inheritors of the apostolic church handled gender issues.

Overall, this is a well-researched and highly nuanced text that will inform theologians and historians about a neglected topic. Although culture and society have seemingly always tried to restrict women’s opportunities and voices within Christianity, it is refreshing to learn that women exercised agency, wielded influence, and shaped conversations even within the highly patriarchal environment that existed in the Late Roman Empire.

---

DR. JASON EDEN earned his PhD in history from the University of Minnesota. Currently, he is a history professor at Saint Cloud State University. His wife, Naomi, recently earned a graduate degree in gerontology. Together, they are currently studying how attitudes regarding the aging process shaped relationships among early American Christians.