Gender Roles and the People of God

Alice Mathews | Reviewed by Sarah Lindsay

Alice Mathews’s *Gender Roles and the People of God* is an accessible study of what the Bible says about women, how theologies of women have developed, and the history of patriarchy. If that sounds like a lot to cover in a single volume, it is — but Mathews has brought decades of classroom experience to her text, highlighting key texts and concepts in order to craft a compelling argument that the bible stands firmly against patriarchy.

Although Mathews frames her book as a reexamination of traditional understandings of women’s roles, from the beginning she suggests that a careful reading of scripture does not support the subordination of women. And while her purpose is larger than refuting John Piper and Wayne Grudem’s defense of complementarian theology, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, she frequently uses this book for examples of complementarian thought. *Gender Roles and the People of God* both makes a case for egalitarian theology and highlights flaws in complementarian theology.

Mathews divides her text into three sections: one on the Bible and its depictions of women, one on the theology of women, and one on the history of patriarchy. The final section, on history, is the weakest in the book: Mathews is not a historian, and it shows. She is, however, a careful reader of biblical texts, as is evident from the introductory chapter of the book.

This opening chapter discusses how to read the Bible, reminding us that we cannot read without a hermeneutic. Mathews uses the example of slavery and its nineteenth-century defenders to show the danger of reading the Bible in a way that ignores historical and cultural contexts. She concludes this chapter by arguing that “Whenever our interpretation leads to injustice, oppression, or structural violence, then the very heart of the Bible is repudiated” (30). This statement signals her commitment throughout this book to showing how Christianity should liberate women.

Mathews begins part one (“Stand-out Women in their Patriarchal Worlds”) with a cogent reading of Genesis 2-3 that locates patriarchy in the fall, rather than God’s original creation. The following chapters look at women in the Old and New Testaments, showing how women rise above patriarchal norms to be true *ezer* companions to men. Mathews’ examples will be familiar to anyone who has studied women in the Bible, but her engaging style and keen insights provide new angles to consider.

Part two (“Assessing the Theology behind Gender-based Hierarchy”) turns to theologies of women. She begins by addressing the “clobber text” of 1 Timothy 2, arguing against interpreting this passage as a universal prohibition on women preaching. She then dives into an in-depth study of the word typically translated “head” (*kephale*) in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5. This chapter presents the many possible translations for *kephale* that make it difficult, if not impossible, to interpret “head” as “superior.” Finally, this section addresses the theology of the eternal subordination of the Son, a theology of the trinity that views the Son as eternally in submission to
the Father, recently promoted by several complementarian theologians.

This section of the book shines. Mathews has a gift for taking complex theological arguments and presenting them clearly. The chapter on the eternal subordination of the Son is especially helpful, as she not only explains the debate but clearly develops why our theology of the Trinity matters for our understanding of women and men.

In the final section ("Historical Realities that Still Challenge Women"), Mathews makes the point that patriarchy has shifted as western culture has changed and developed, but has not disappeared. The chapter on the "Cult of True Womanhood" is a fine survey of how the idea of women as the angel in the house arose in the nineteenth century and then was repackaged in the mid-twentieth century as the biblical prescription for womanhood.

However, the first two chapters of this section — which cover the late Roman Empire, medieval period, Reformation and Enlightenment — are weak on several fronts. I support Mathews’ overarching point that patriarchy has endured even as Western culture has changed, but her history of women in the church has significant gaps. In these chapters, Mathews relies on dated sources rather than the rich scholarship of women that has emerged over the last thirty to forty years. Additionally, although she never states this explicitly, she suggests that women were better off after the Reformation; this assumption leads her to downplay the many women who participated in medieval theology and overstate the shift in views after the Reformation.

Although some patristic and medieval writers, as cited by Mathews, denigrated women as uncontrollably sinful, other theologians and writers disagreed, in large part because of the role played by women in the New Testament. While medieval women could not participate in the scholastic theology of the universities, they could produce mystic theology. Mystics, both men and women, experienced God directly and many of them spent lifetimes writing theologies about their experiences. Women mystics, as well as the many writers who insisted that women (even married women) could be virtuous, render Mathews’ suggestion that the medieval church “demonized” women (174) overly simplistic.

Mathews contrasts the Reformation to the medieval period by claiming that “The Reformation removed the stigma under which women had lived for centuries” (181) — specifically, the stigmas of witch or whore. But this is at best a mischaracterization. The witch hunt craze was as strong in Protestant Germany, England, and America as it was in Catholic areas. As for the stigma of sexual insatiability, that persisted as well. The Reformation certainly shifted from glorifying the virginal Mary to glorifying the wife and mother, but women who failed to fit these molds were still witches and whores, heirs of Eve.

The flaws in these two chapters do not invalidate the excellent presentation of egalitarian theology throughout the rest of the book. I still highly recommend this book for readers new to egalitarian theology, and those of us more familiar with this topic will find rich insights and new angles on old arguments.
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