

Travels with Cathie

DOROTHY IRVIN

What a joy it was to be around Cathie! We met seldom, and it was always too short. She had so much information and so many new ideas and insights to share that there was never enough time to do all the discussing we wanted to do. And, underneath the intellectual excitement of learning more about our faith, Cathie always had a related concern for the wellbeing of others.

I first met Cathie and her husband, Richard, in 1978 at a meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature and the American School of Oriental Research in New Orleans. I was giving a research report on spindle whorls, the small stone discs, each with a single perforation, from which all the textiles in the ancient world were made. I had a few of these ancient worked stones, and with me was a drop-spindle spinner, a woman skilled in using these tools, which were perhaps 5,000 years old. We had found sticks to put through the holes and had made working spindles with which the spinner demonstrated to the assembled archaeologists how wool or linen thread was spun. With this thread, all clothing and, in fact, all textiles were woven.

Cathie's interest in women in the Bible and antiquity brought her to this live demonstration of the work to which all women, from slaves and peasants to queens, devoted hours every day in the biblical period. From the "valiant woman" of Proverbs 31, to the weaving of Delilah, to "the lilies of the field, which toil not, neither do they spin," textile production is an important piece of the biblical background concerning women. Cathie and I saw that we had interests in common and exchanged addresses.

Coincidentally, a few months later, I obtained a teaching position at Saint Catherine University (at that time the College of Saint Catherine) in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where Cathie lived and studied classics at the University of Minnesota. She included me in the events of the Evangelical Women's Caucus, and I found out more about the missionary history of evangelical women. We were both working on the archaeology of women's leadership in the early church and from then on exchanged information and photographs.

Cathie and her husband took on the question of women's leadership roles in evangelical churches today, writing significant articles and books on biblical passages, always careful to use the most accurate (rather than the best known) translations of the Greek words. Cathie also wove her knowledge of early Christian archaeology into her study of the biblical text at hand, making a convincing case for women pastors and women senior pastors, always gently stated.

Several years later, Cathie put together a tour of Turkey, concentrating on historical and archaeological information about women before Christianity and in the early church. Twenty or more women, several men, and one small child traveled together on a bus for two weeks through Turkey: Istanbul, Ankara, Catal Huyuk, Hittite territory, Cappadocia, the Cilician Gates, An-

tioch, Tarsus, Iconium, Ephesus, and many other places familiar from Greek mythology and the letters of Paul, with Cathie giving a wealth of information at each site.

For many years, she had had an ecumenical concern, leading evangelical women's groups in the United States into convents for dialogue, so her tour of Turkey included a visit to a Catholic church in Iconium, in honor of Saint Thecla of Iconium, and even to the monastery/museum of Rumi, the famous thirteenth-century Muslim Sufi mystic. We always sang Christian hymns for about an hour when the bus first got going in the morning, and I occasionally read a Hittite tale as the relevant territory flashed by. Our Turkish bus driver said he had never experienced such a happy, good-tempered group of travelers.

One day, we were all sitting together in the garden of a restaurant overlooking the Hellespont strait, enjoying a lovely lunch, when Cathie looked back over many years and told us how she swam the Hellespont (as did Leander, visiting Hero) when she was young. She remained a strong swimmer all her life, practicing every day in summer and participating in an annual long-distance swim every year.

Cathie became the coordinator of the women's biblical study group for the Society for Biblical Literature and put together the annual meeting program for years, assembling women scholars to present their research on many different themes. She began to plan, with other women scholars, the *Women's Study Bible* and the *Women's Bible Commentary*.

The Society for Biblical Literature, although North American, customarily scheduled a summer meeting in Europe for Americans who happened to be in Europe and for European colleagues. One year, I was able to attend, stopping on my way home from a summer excavation in Jordan. What a surprise to meet Cathie in the lobby of a hotel in Heidelberg! She told me a new group was getting started, Christians for Biblical Equality. Today, that group, centered in Minneapolis, has a large international membership and is extremely active in producing and making available a vast amount of information about women in the Bible and early Christianity, counseling women affected by sexism in the

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home or in the churches, and holding educational conferences in the United States and other countries.

She and many of her family members sometimes traveled to Italy in the summer, an event that included her grandchildren, her students at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and others. She had additional information to give on visits to the usual well-known catacombs and churches in Rome, and she included lesser-known sites, such as the underground sanctuary of the Cumaean Sybil near Puteoli and the funeral fresco of Bitalia, a fifth-century woman bishop shown celebrating the Eucharist, in the Catacomb of Saint Januarius in Naples. She skillfully positioned herself to block the ithyphallic fresco of Priapus from the eyes of her grandchildren as they entered the house where he is pictured, in Pompeii, and there were study sessions every evening in the hotel as the grandchildren discussed what they had seen and pasted the postcards they had chosen at each site into their scrapbooks.

For many years, Cathie had been conscious of the way the message of Jesus was sometimes twisted to seem to say that God gave males authority to dominate women and even physically abuse them. She could not read the Scriptures that way, and she early on became an advocate for abused women, teaching from the New Testament that abusive behavior was not part of the word of God. Early on, she worked with other women to provide protection for abused women and to reassure them that the good news of our salvation did not include approval and acceptance of mistreatment from family members. Jesus never said anything like that. This resulted in the founding of PASCH—Peace and Safety in the Christian Home—and several books on the subject. She also became a consultant to the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston when it wished to start a program for avoiding domestic abuse.

Her specialization in women's lives and women's values in the Bible and early Christianity, as well as her ecumenical outlook and willingness to collaborate with those of other denominations, resulted in her being asked to be part of a team helping the Sisters of Mercy of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a Roman Catholic women's religious order, to envision, on the basis of the Christian past, what the future might hold for them. She spoke to groups of these nuns in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Los Angeles.

When she announced a study tour of Egypt, principally for her students at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, but also for others, two of my friends and I quickly signed up. I had heard Cathie, at one of the early meetings of Christians for Biblical Equality, tell how she noticed, when she began college, that the workers in the dining hall, the cleaning staff, and the building and grounds maintenance crews did not go to church services on Sunday. They told her it was because they had to work on Sunday morning. She quickly reserved a room for Sunday afternoon and led them in Bible study and worship. They responded eagerly, and this project continued throughout her four years of college.

Her alertness in noticing the needs of African Americans and her ability to carry out a solution stayed with her throughout life. The focus of the Egypt tour was the Christian history of Africa, particularly for African Americans, who formed a large majority of the group.

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We began by exploring current Christianity, the Coptic Christians, who have enthusiastic participation in Christian worship and education in spite of the fact that, as Christians, they are restricted by law to the job of garbage-pickers and must live steeped

in the smell of the garbage dump.

We went by plane to Aswan and returned north on a Nile cruise ship, extremely comfortable and extremely well fed. In the evenings, Cathie presented slide lectures studying skin color and social status depicted in the tomb paintings of the pharaohs and their families and entourage in the historic temples and other buildings along the Nile. We found that the Egyptian artists had shown people in several different shades of skin, sometimes with people of different colors in the same working or social group. Pharaohs and the royal family, in fact, often showed variation from black to tan to yellow. Cathie did not find that this variation in color was tied to social status. On the contrary, the early Egyptians saw and painted differences, but did not use them as a way of grading people. This insight impressed all of us as a proof that color could be admitted and admired without being used negatively.

As we went south and came to Nubia, the African Americans in the group changed in their own eyes. They became happier and more self-confident. For them, the sight of black people, in the majority and in their original homeland, was liberating. At certain moments, blacks, whites, and Asians had tears of joy running down their cheeks as the realization hit them that people need not be captive to racial prejudice. Our changing mood was noted in the morning prayers and song sessions on the bus.

Some brought African clothing out of their suitcases and blended in with Africans on the street. Others bought bright garments at stands set up near where the ships docked. The group became much more colorful. Non-Africans bought a few items, too, and put them on.

Cathie's emphasis on Christianity in Africa, going back to the earliest records of evangelization in the book of Acts—Philip's instruction to Queen Candace's eunuch from Cush, and Prisca's instruction of Apollos of Alexandria—and following it through the Byzantine period to the Copts of today, made it clear that Christianity was not a "white man's religion" imposed on slaves to keep them silent. It was a most ancient heritage of the black people of Africa who could be confident that the message of Jesus was their own, brought to them almost two thousand years ago. Cathie's conviction, nurtured and acted on since her teenage years, had once again been realized.