

not to cast these philosophers and theologians in a new light, but to show how they participated in a grand conversation about the very essence of human nature. Readers from all backgrounds will find themselves engaged in this spirited conversation, pondering the relative merits of the partisan arguments advanced over the long course of Western thought. Intended by Givens or not, most readers will find it hard to escape a subversive conclusion: in their efforts to safeguard theological conformity, Western religious leaders have repeatedly condemned some of our most inspiring visions of humanity's relationship to the divine.

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Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life. By **Lynn H. Cohick**. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009. 351 pp. \$26.99 paper.

The focus of this book is made clear by a careful reading of the title: This is a book about women in the world of the earliest Christians and not a survey of references to women in early Christian texts. Distinguishing her work from previous studies on women in the Gospels or the Pauline Churches, Lynn H. Cohick describes her volume as a "prolegomena to the study of New Testament women" (24). She is especially interested in the story of the average woman recovered through detailed analysis of pagan and Jewish sources mainly from the time of Alexander the Great's conquests to the turn of the first century C.E. New Testament texts are considered at various junctures with an emphasis on comparison, but they are not the main focus of this book.

The book is deeply and self-consciously a historical study and not a theological one. Cohick is critical of failures to engage in proper interpretation or historical scrutiny in an effort to safeguard canonical authority, but also of extreme skepticism about the ability of texts to reveal significant information about real women's experiences. Her historical approach is amplified by other methods including the use of social-scientific models and literary critique, but she is explicit about using "sparingly the hermeneutics of suspicion, the interpretive approach that questions the objectiveness of the author's description" (27). From feminist critiques she draws important insights on gender construction, but particularly important, especially in light of many recent studies, is her statement: "I reject the

postmodern conclusion that rhetoric is reality and the attending corollary that history is lost behind this veil. Although texts and even inscriptions follow customs of propriety, I maintain that these pieces of information are attached to retrievable history" (28).

The chapters are organized largely in terms of the following major categories: familial relationships, religions and occupations, and benefaction and patronage. Chapter 1 is focused on a woman's role as daughter in relation to both parents and siblings, but also includes discussion of infanticide, maternal bonds, and inheritance rights and how the marriage of daughters affected the family dynamics more broadly, including social standing. Chapter 2 concentrates on the ideal wife—the Roman matron—who functions as literary trope in ancient literature. Cohick examines the influence of Augustus and his legislation, evidence for what scholars have termed the "new woman," negative portrayal of wives, and descriptions of the dining and bathing practices of wives. Chapter 3 moves from wife as ideal construct to historical realities. Here we find an examination of how the parameters and responsibilities of wives, and the realities of divorce, remarriage, and concubinage, intersected with other factors such as wealth, citizenship and slavery. Chapter 4 is a particularly helpful chapter, bringing together much new research on motherhood and exploring such topics as childbirth, grief, caring for infants, and children's education.

Chapter 5 shifts from family life in the first instance to consider the religious activities of gentile women, ranging from their involvement in the domestic cult, to Vestal Virgins and the cults of the Bona Dea and Dionysus. The chapter also includes discussion of descriptions of female conversion by male writers and of women God-fearers—Gentile women who were associated with the synagogue, some of whom became attracted to early Christianity. This chapter is complemented by the next on the activities of Jewish and Christian women. The focus is especially on the Essenes (one of the highlights of the book), but there is also treatment of the Therapeutrides, female leaders of the synagogue, and Christian women's titles and authority. Chapter 7 focuses on women and work, including midwives and wetnurses, artisans, and women in trade. There is also discussion of participation in the arts and in intellectual and philosophical milieus, including very detailed analysis of Philo's Therapeutrides. In light current interest in the intersection between the lives of women and slaves in early Christianity (taking into consideration sexual ethics), the focus on slaves and prostitutes in chapter 8 is a welcome contribution. Finally, chapter 9 examines how women participated in the patron/client relationship and public benefaction. Cohick raises important questions about how women leaders of earliest Christianity and supporters of Jesus were able to exercise influence (for example, Phoebe, Lydia, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene).

A major strength of this volume is its comparative approach linked to the explicit thesis that no distinct Christian culture existed in the first century, but rather “every woman negotiated her roles within the fledgling church in terms of the larger Jewish or gentile society’s options and expectations” (24). Some might find it surprising that early Christian material does not take pride of place, but the value lies in bringing together evidence concerning *both* Jewish and pagan women which helps us to understand the *world* of the first female church members. However, at various points, Cohick does engage in thorough comparison to the early Christian material with some exegetical issues treated in detail (for example, discussion of the Samaritan woman [John 4 in chapter 3]). Some might find the decisions as to which New Testament texts to explore to be somewhat arbitrary. For example, there is a good deal of attention given to manifestations of asceticism/women remaining unmarried among pagans and Jews (such as Vestal Virgins, Therapeutrides, and so forth), but very little attention to evidence for the phenomenon among church women (for example, 1 Corinthians 7, with references to virgins receives barely a mention).

Work on women and gender in early Christianity in the last decade has been dominated by literary analysis and rhetorical readings focused especially on how female identity is constructed by male authors, some of which has been extremely skeptical about the possibility of extracting social realities concerning women’s lives from ancient texts. In contrast, Cohick remains strikingly optimistic about historical reconstruction, describing the aim of her book as an attempt to “offer an authentic, descriptive historical picture of women’s lives” (30). While some might wish that Cohick had engaged in more detailed debate with scholars on questions of method and theory, her study has restored some much needed balance to current discussion about women’s history and the rise of Christianity.

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Tradition & the Rule of Faith in the Early Church. Edited by
Ronnie J. Rombs and **Alexander Y. Hwang.** Washington, D.C.:
Catholic University of America Press, 2010. xvi + 351 pp. \$39.95
cloth.

It is unusual to find a collection of essays that cohere so well. The editors have produced a volume that manages to be both a fitting tribute to Professor Joseph