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Book review: "Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints" by Elizabeth A. Johnson

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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints. By Elizabeth A. Johnson. New York: Continuum, 2003. xvii + 379 pages. $26.95.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

In *Truly Our Sister,* Elizabeth Johnson presents a feminist retrieval of the figure of Mary, Miriam of Nazareth, that draws explicitly upon the theological ground laid in her 1999 *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (Review Symposium, *Horizons* 26/1 [1999]: 116-35) and provides an anthropological counterpart to her 1993 *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Review Symposium, *Horizons* 20/2 [1993]: 324-44). This work is a retrieval in the full sense of the word, as Johnson not only critiques Marian scholarship and devotion in a useful manner but also proposes a comprehensive theological framework for the consideration of Mary.

Beginning with "the state of the question," Johnson opens her study by surveying the divergent responses to Mary by contemporary women in a variety of cultural contexts. In continuity with her earlier work, Johnson will take a liberationist approach to feminism, which means that women will be asked to speak for themselves, that they will be treated as historically conditioned subjects, that the culture surrounding them will be subject to a "hermeneutic of suspicion," and that the privileged point of observation will belong to those marginalized from political, economic and ecclesial power by the intersection of patriarchy with issues of race or class. Part 1 then turns to a survey of recent feminist theological approaches to the study of Mary, focusing on both critical appraisals and a broad range of creative retrievals.

In part 2, Johnson focuses on two highly problematic theological "roads" that emerge over and over in Marian reflection, the notion of Mary as idealized womanhood and the notion of Mary as a fully- or quasi-divine Mother. Both of these readings have reflected and supported patriarchal ecclesial and social structures which rest, in turn, on gender dualism. In particular, Johnson finds this dualism (and its accompanying heterosexism, racism and classism) at the root of the cult of idealized womanhood, and calls for a rejection of "traditional masculine-feminine dichotomy" in favor of an "egalitarian anthropology of

partnership" (68). The notion of Mary as divine Mother is equally problematic: as it presupposes that God is properly masculine, it displaces female images and experiences to Mary (and then "divininzes" her) rather than allowing the fullness of all gendered imagery to enliven our understanding of God.

Setting aside both of these "roads," Johnson presents, in part 3, an overview of her "modest proposal" of a "pneumatological interpretation of Mary, the historical, graced, human woman, [a proposal] that remembers her as our companion in the communion of saints" (112). Rejecting images of passivity, refusing to have Mary stand as icon or ideal or exemplar, Johnson presents Mary as a Spirit-filled woman, a woman of a particular time and place, a woman graced with the self-communication of God (Rahner), a woman who is remembered as one of the communion of saints rather than venerated in isolation. In terms of ecclesial authority, Johnson grounds her proposal in the trajectory of Vatican II's decision to treat Mary within the discussion of the church and Paul VI's call for a Marian theology that is historical and biblical, a call Johnson will answer in the remaining two parts of this study.

In Part 4 Johnson draws upon historical, archeological and textual evidence to sketch the contours of the lived experience of village life in ancient Galilee. She fills out the story of the Roman occupation, whose caprice and cruelty and taxes made a precarious rural life even more difficult. She paints the picture of Miriam's immersion in Jewish life and practice, shaped less by the distant Jerusalem temple with its formal observance and separation of the sexes than by the local synagogue and the household rhythms of daily prayer. And finally, Johnson presents the likely pattern of village domestic life as it would have been experienced by the mother of an extended household, a life of hard labor spent procuring and preparing food, caring for children and making clothing, all with scarce resources. In domestic life as in religious life, Johnson argues, the context of a poor village would argue against strongly separated gender roles (not to mention ruling out images of Mary in medieval art, images that depict her as lost in contemplation or reading a book!).

This historical survey prepares the way for Johnson's constructive presentation in part 5. First, rejecting the usually homogenized "biblical account of Mary," she gives extended consideration to thirteen passages from Scripture, allowing each passage, while remaining a fragment, to serve as a fully realized and luminous tile in the "mosaic" that is Mary. With a wealth of textual and historical research, Johnson's critique consistently brings forward the communal context of this specific story of faith, from the signal consideration of Jesus' rejection of

his family in Mark 3, to a fruitful retrieval of the annunciation as a story of "a faith event" rather than a sexual encounter, to a consideration of the post-resurrection community in Acts 1 and 2 which, in Johnson's feminist reconstruction, includes Mary among the women of that community.

Second, and in the book's final chapter, Johnson places Mary, "a woman of Spirit," in the communion of the saints, the community of the Spirit that comprises the "grand company of the friends of God and prophets" (307). As she surveys the dimensions of this "grand company"—the Spirit-filled living, the dead "cloud of witnesses," the stories that inspire, the rejection of a social model of patronage in favor of a social model of companionship, and the need for human communities as bearers of memory and hope—Johnson's treatment of the theology of Mary as part of theological anthropology, and not its grand exception, becomes not only clear, but compelling.

While the wealth of Marian reflection presented in *Truly Our Sister* can be only lightly sketched here, I will now offer a few questions with the hope of inviting at least some of the sustained analysis that this important book deserves.

1. Johnson has consistently argued against gender dualism, and in this work specifically finds that its intersection with androcentric Marian theology has produced idealized and damaging images for women. She suggests that these images for Mary should be simply abandoned; though she recognizes that here she has theology and pastoral sensitivities on a collision course. But, given the incarnational emphasis of Christian faith, how should we understand the role of symbol in its religious vision? Are symbols simply a pastoral accommodation? Or do they "function," as Johnson has famously observed about "the symbol of God?"

2. Drawing on Carol Meyers' work, Johnson concludes that the life of a village woman in Galilee would have been less determined by the category "woman" than the life of an upper-class woman of the time, as rural men and women lived in close quarters and seemed to exchange roles more readily than urban or upper-class men and women. Johnson argues that this "partnership" "made life possible." But I question the (somewhat idealized) scholarly presupposition that class-based gender role interdependence lessened, in any way, patriarchal norms about spousal relationships, which Johnson seems to imply by her use of the word "partnership" to describe the likely domestic pattern of Mary's household. Was Mary "a sister" to her own sisters? Did she collude with social norms in her treatment of the daughters of

that house? Did Joseph hit her? None of this is intimated in the biblical record, of course, but a feminist reading must also take into account that none of this would have merited notice.

3. The Marian devotion of John Paul II is summarized by the motto "*Totus Tuus*," which calls the faithful to cling to Mary as she clings to Christ (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*). In contrast, Johnson's theology of Mary finds her gaze fixed not on "the newborn Child" but on the God of Israel, and argues for the integrity of Mary's own story, which is more a story of her faithfulness to the movement of life in her time than a story of clinging to the Christ. Is this contrast more than just a difference of devotional emphases? Might these two perspectives give rise to very different models of Christian discipleship?

4. It seems clear to me that in doing this "theology of Mary" Johnson is demonstrating the approach and criteria for "feminist theological anthropology," as her insistence on seeing Mary in her own "luminous density" suggests a fruitful approach for a more general Christian understanding of the human person. If indeed this is a proposal for a feminist theological anthropology, what ramifications might such an approach have for systematic theology? Certainly this approach would be an interesting counter to recent Marian-inspired Catholic arguments that make "female" theologically normative for "human," an argument that pairs Mary and Christ with just the kind of gender dualism Johnson rejects. But then one might ask about the role of Christ in the soteriology of this pneumatological theology. If Mary's life finds its fulfillment in the communion of saints, called and graced by God's Spirit, what is the role of Christ?

I now have gone beyond the argument of *Truly Our Sister,* but I blame this on the scholarly range and theological vision that graces the work of Elizabeth Johnson, for which we should all be grateful.

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II

No one other than Elizabeth Johnson could have written a book like *Truly Our Sister.* In reflecting on her work in christology, she once wrote, "Indeed—and here is what amazed and delighted me—in this instance, the more feminist you became, the more orthodox your position."[1] Moreover, she was thrown into the study of mariology some-