



**Susan Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, LNTS 676 (London: T&T Clark, 2023), pp. ix + 179, ISBN 978-0567708229. £85.00**

Susan Miller is no stranger to writing on the women found in the Gospels. Having previously published *Women in Mark's Gospel* (2004), Miller provides a thorough overview of the key women in John's Gospel. This book draws together various strands of work on John, and offers some key observations on the skill of John the writer, albeit with a focus on the passages involving women. As such, whilst this book will appeal most directly to those interested in understanding women in John and the early church more generally, anyone hoping to learn more about John's Gospel overall will benefit from its scholarship.

Miller opens with a broad overview of the work done thus far on women in John's Gospel, highlighting the differences of opinion over time and between authors. She is very clear that she wishes 'to examine John's distinctive portrayal of women and to contribute to a greater understanding of the roles of women in the early church' (p. 7). What makes John's portrayal of women distinctive is, in no small part, shaped by the general concerns of John for writing this Gospel and addressing the community of which he is a part. As such, Miller goes on to focus on the themes of the revelation of Jesus as Messiah, discipleship, new creation, and the Johannine community. In doing so, she uses textual analysis alongside a feminist interpretation and literary reading of the Gospel whilst adding to the work being done on the posited 'Johannine community'. In the Introduction, Miller also touches on whether John knew the synoptic gospels, tracing the shifting opinions of the past 150 years or so. Whilst the potted history is a helpful introduction, I am not convinced I yet know Miller's opinion on the question. Given her extensive work on Mark as well as John, I would be interested to know more precisely where she lands on the current discussions on the relationship between these Gospels.

The substance of Miller's work is found in the middle six chapters, each devoted to a particular chapter of John and the women therein. The structure of each chapter is the same, and closely follows the stated aim of the work. After a general introduction to the Gospel chapter and the woman/women at hand, we move to John's portrayal of the women themselves, and then to an in-depth consideration of the interaction between them and Jesus. From there the section headings will sound familiar: the revelation of the hidden Messiah; discipleship; the new



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creation; the Johannine community. Every chapter ends with a short conclusion, which brings the strands of each chapter together in a useful, concise summary. There are pros and cons to every literary and structural choice, and the same is true of this book. The format helps guide the reader methodically through not just the immediate material but also to link back always to the Johannine themes. This regular rhythm is somehow formative, and I now find myself looking for these themes each time I read John: perhaps what is helpful for a practising Christian will be useful in another way for those undertaking an academic reading. The format also enables a reader to compare discrete areas across the chapters with relative ease or to dip into the book as their needs dictate. However, for those who are minded to read from start to finish, it means that it can feel a bit repetitive at times, with a sense of *déjà vu* never too far away.

The mother of Jesus, never called ‘Mary’ in John’s Gospel, is first to be considered. In Chapter 2 we dive into the story of Jesus’s first miracle of turning wine into water at a wedding feast in Cana. We will re-consider the mother of Jesus in Chapter 6 as one of the women at the cross. For now, we are in Cana and are introduced to this extraordinary woman who takes centre stage whilst the male disciples linger in the background. Miller unpacks some of the reasons why John might not give a name to ‘the mother of Jesus’, not least of which is to emphasise her unique relationship with Jesus and, therefore, with the Jesus community thereafter. Yet it is not the most comfortable conversation between Jesus and his mother and Miller considers the reasons for this. She posits that it has much more to do with John’s preoccupation with the new creation than the rudeness, or otherwise, of Jesus. Yet it was Mary as a model disciple that I found most helpful and instructive. Mary intercedes on behalf of those in need, persists in the face of seeming rejection from Jesus, and goes on to act in the wholehearted belief that Jesus will step in and resolve a potentially difficult situation. I am not yet convinced that Mary is ‘venerated’ by the Johannine community, but I am persuaded that ‘she acts as a model of discipleship’ for them (p. 36).

We turn next to the Samaritan woman, who encounters Jesus at a well in the midday heat. Again, this woman is unnamed, but she enters into a remarkable conversation with Jesus and brings out some key Johannine themes. There is much to unpack in their long and theologically rich discussion, but Miller seeks to cover all aspects as comprehensively as possible within the limitations of her chosen structure. I particularly



appreciated her consideration of the tensions between the negative countenance of the largely-absent male disciples and the foreign woman who wondered if Jesus might be the Messiah. However, I am less convinced by the argument that the word ‘woman’ links this Samaritan to Eve in the same way as with Jesus’s mother, and so to John’s theme of the new creation. Indeed, Miller returns to this notion at various points with many of the women she discusses, and I am, ultimately, left wondering if all women are forever to be linked with Eve.

Among the few women who are named in the Gospel, we encounter Martha and Mary of Bethany. These sisters of Lazarus call for Jesus when their brother is sick but are only able to greet him after he has died. Readers who are looking for any engagement with Elizabeth Schrader’s thesis on the addition of Martha to John 11 will be disappointed. Nevertheless, Miller provides much detail about the episode and underlines that, whatever her name, it is a woman (not Peter) who makes the key confessional claim in John’s Gospel: that Jesus is ‘the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world’ (11:27, p. 65). Like the synoptics, this proclamation becomes the pivot-point in the Gospel, with the narrative turning towards Jerusalem and the Passion. Emphasis is also placed on how Martha and Mary demonstrate their faithful discipleship by seeking intercession by Jesus both before and after their brother’s death. Yet what I am most drawn to in Miller’s analysis is the context of ordinary everyday life of these (and other) women. It is easier for individual disciples, of the Johannine community or today, to see themselves in these more domesticated scenes than in the ever-moving and overtly evangelical example of the Twelve.

Mary and Martha are carried over into Chapter 5, with the emphasis on the actions of Mary as she anoints the feet of Jesus. Just as there are parallels between John 11 and the resurrection of Jesus, so there are parallels between Mary’s actions and Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13. There are, therefore, layers of meaning in this anointing, such as service, recognising the kingship of Jesus and identity as Messiah, and the pointing towards death and burial. Holding these in tension, rather than emphasising one over the other, is perhaps what is most important; a task Miller accomplishes. She also discusses the abundant nature of this act, a theme which echoes throughout John’s Gospel, even as Mary remains silent in her actions. It is the all-encompassing and pervading nature of Mary’s actions that speak louder than words in this interaction.

As the presence of women is not explicitly mentioned during the final meal of Jesus and his 'Farewell Discourse', we skip more than six chapters to arrive at the foot of the cross. Here we find some faithful women and the Beloved Disciple. Miller does well to explore the presence of more than just the mother of Jesus, but the nature of the text dictates that her interaction with Jesus and the Beloved Disciple becomes the focus. Like much of what Jesus says throughout John, this is a curious interaction upon first reading. Miller demonstrates for us the power of this exchange for all disciples, and particularly for those in the Johannine community whose discipleship has cost them their biological family. The obvious courage and loyalty of all the women at the crucifixion is hugely important for (female) disciples down the ages, but Miller reminds us that we miss a crucial message if that is our main focus when studying John 19:25–27.

In many ways it is the Mary Magdalene of Miller's penultimate chapter who has seen most exploration by others over recent years, particularly in relation to her role of 'Apostle to the Apostles'. The importance of her role can either be underlined or undermined by the brief appearance of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and Miller explores both. She also shows how the developed conversation between Mary and Jesus can be a model for future disciples both as they come to faith and then share it with others. Whilst for many readers it might feel irrelevant that it is a woman who first models this (after women have brought people to Jesus and proclaimed him Messiah), it was clearly important to John and the women of his community. Indeed, in a twenty-first-century world, where too often women remain unseen in society and unordained in the church, it is perhaps as relevant as ever.

And so I want to mention the two women not addressed in this text, namely the mother of the man born blind and the woman alleged to have been caught in adultery. There may be very valid reasons for Miller excluding them from her analysis but, frustratingly, these are not detailed. I could posit that the former, who is mentioned briefly (pp. 75 and 148), has such a fleeting and indistinct role that she adds little to what Miller is trying to achieve. As for the latter, it might be that Miller has excluded her story due to the absence of John 7:53–8:11 from some ancient manuscripts of John and its appearance in some ancient manuscripts of Luke. However, this is mere conjecture as no explanations are forthcoming in either case, and the wholesale absence of the silent, unnamed woman 'caught in adultery' feels deeply unsatisfactory. As such, of all the things I have



gleaned from Miller's work, it is that woman's unexplained absence that has left the most indelible mark on my heart and mind.

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v30i2.2673>



Reviewed works:

**Oliver D. Crisp, *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), pp. xi + 259, ISBN 978-0801049965. £19.99**

**W. Ross Hastings, *Total Atonement: Trinitarian Participation in the Reconciliation of Humanity and Creation* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), pp. 320, ISBN 978-1978702158. £35.00**

Oliver D. Crisp's *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account* (*PA*) and W. Ross Hastings' *Total Atonement: Trinitarian Participation in the Reconciliation of Humanity and Creation* (*TA*) are two in a recent slew of offerings on atonement. One rationale for placing them in conversation is that both treat the relation between atonement and notions of participation. For both, Christ's incarnational participation in humanity facilitates (1) Christ's act of atonement, and (2) humanity's participation, through the Spirit, in the divine. Such phrasing, however, masks the differences in their approach and conclusions. For the student of atonement, it is, perhaps, what emerges in the dialogue between these differences that is most instructive.

*PA* is a culmination of sorts. Written over the course of more than a decade – Crisp not only published extensively during its gestation, his views were revised, rethought, and developed – it has one motivating question: 'What is the mechanism by means of which Christ's work reconciles fallen human beings to God?' (*PA*, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the book's three parts, Crisp approaches it with trademark analytic rigour. In Part III,

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in original whenever italics are used in quotes.

