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ISSN 1026-2946

Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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Subscription Information: Subscription rates and ordering procedures are published on the inside back cover. Information can be downloaded from our website: www.scott.ac.ke. Or email Ben Gichuhi: ajetjournal@scott.ac.ke

Purpose: *AJET* is published twice a year by Scott Christian University, a chartered private university in Kenya, in order to provide theological educators and students with evangelical articles and book reviews related to Christian ministry in Africa.

Publisher: Scott Christian University, the publisher of *AJET*, has been accredited by ACTEA since 1979 and was chartered as a private university by the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) Kenya in November 1997. Scott offers university level theological education with concentrations in Pastoral Studies, Christian Education and Missiology.

AJET is indexed in *Christian Periodical Index*; *New Testament Abstracts* (Cambridge MA); *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, published by the American Theological Library Association, Chicago; *Theology in Context* (Institute of Missiology, Germany); and in *DIALOG Abstracts* (Cambridge MA). *AJET* is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, E-mail: atla@atla.com, Website: <http://www.atla.com/>. *AJET* articles and information can be found on the web by searching “evangelical theology”.

Book Reviews

Carolyn Custis James

Half the Church:

Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, 206 pages, hb

ISBN 978-0-310-32556-7 \$13.86 US at Amazon.com

Reviewed by Theodore B. Witmer, Shalom University, Bunia, DRC

Carolyn James has written a passionate plea for men and women to take to heart the creation truths that we are all bearers of God's image and we all are under the creation mandate to be fruitful, multiply, fill and subdue the earth (p. 50). Thus women have the same responsibility as men to accomplish God's mission in the world.

She is very concerned for the horrible situation that many women face especially in the developing world: suffering, exploitation, prostitution, repression, selective abortion of unborn females,¹ bride immolation and more. This drives her to emphasize that women (especially from the West) who might empathize more with suffering women should not hesitate to get involved in addressing their plight. In fact, she emphasizes that all women should be involved, not just a few (p. 81). She shows that the situation today is just as bad if not worse (certainly the numbers are much greater) than when Amy Carmichael tried to publicize the plight of temple prostitute girls in India 100 years ago, but many people remain insensitive to today's injustices just as Carmichael found. The recent book *Half the Sky*² provides lots of material to raise the awareness of women's abuse and the injustices they face.

James argues that Christian women are especially suited to address the needs of women worldwide. She provides many examples of women in the Bible who undertook amazing exploits for God. She provides exegetical insight into the Hebrew term *ezer* (KJV "helpmeet") which is in fact mostly used in the OT (16 times) to describe God as a strong helper of Israel to protect the nation. Thus she envisions women as *ezer-warriors* (p. 113) who should be engaged in global mission with all their energy along with men. She cogently observes that men and women are somehow uncomfortable with

¹ Christophe Guilmoto puts the number of female infants aborted or killed in Asia at 163 million, equal to the total female population of the United States. In Marian V. Liautaud, "Genocide in Shades of Pink," *Christianity Today* (December 2012).
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/december/genocide-in-shades-of-pink.html>

² Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheyl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, New York: Vintage Books, Random House Inc., 2009.

each other and often end up working separately, but in fact since the Scriptures use the term *ezer*, there should be a very close male/female relationship that parallels the closeness of the trinity in the pluri-unity of humanity even apart from marriage. Secular research supports that when women are closely involved with men in undertakings, the outcomes are better (p. 117). Rather than a battle of the sexes both in and outside of the Church, Christians of both genders need to get on with facing the world and its problems together.

In an interesting discussion, James points out that in fact most women (60%) are not married (p. 102 ff.). Even those who do get married are only married and caring for children for less than half of their lives. While she does not want to devalue in any way the blessing of marriage and children, she asserts that the ideal classically held up for Christian women of being stay-at-home moms is inadequate to give the majority of women purpose for life when unmarried, widows or empty nesters. [And what of women in poverty who have no option but to work hard outside the home (p. 36)?] The homemaker ideal is not consistent with the value of singleness endorsed by Jesus and Paul, not as an unfortunate state, but as “kingdom strategy” (p. 69). Since Jesus himself was single, we should not imagine that the “not good” of being alone in Genesis 2 means that marriage is a necessary state. Not being alone can be achieved without marriage by living productive lives as God’s image bearers in relationship with other men and women (contrary to the hermit model of spirituality of the middle ages). Rather than marriage and motherhood as the Church’s primary message to women, creation gives a greater calling that can include all women at all stages of life, the calling to bear God’s image in the world, kingdom builders who are out to subdue the Enemy (p. 76). While it was the man who was “alone” in Genesis, the Church today does not promote men getting married as their highest calling in life. Why does it seem to do so for women (p. 107-108)?

In the last chapter of the book (chapter 8) James addresses the issue of egalitarian versus complementarian views of women’s roles. Egalitarians maintain that the Bible does not teach that men and women should occupy different roles in the church whereas complementarians teach that the Bible does teach gender-differentiated roles in the church. She points out that the theological issues and Biblical texts are so difficult that good scholarly evangelicals continue to disagree. While she respects the two viewpoints and accepts that different churches and individuals will have different points of view, she refuses to take up this debate by expressing an opinion. Instead she laments how the theological disagreement has sidetracked our attention away from the clear creation passages, and thus from getting on with the huge tasks that confront the Church and which women, as half the Church, need to be engaged in for the glory of God. Rather than debating who is “in charge” (Lk. 9:46; Mt. 20:26), Jesus exhorts His followers to serve others (p. 166-170). We all have talents that need to be used effectively, and if half the Church is

not using or is under-utilizing (burying) these talents, we are engaged in a terrible waste that will be judged by the Lord. She calls for a “blessed alliance” of men and women to go out and confront the injustice that is prevalent in the world (p. 184) with a unity that mirrors the unity of the trinity. This would then be an effective and tremendous testimony to the glory of God (cf. p. 76). Men and women should all be serving, not worrying about who is in charge.

James has written a thoughtful call to action on behalf of women who are hurting and need the concerted effort of men and women working together to bring the solutions of a holistic Gospel. I would recommend reading it as a challenge to see how we can be more effective in confronting the injustices that are all around us, especially in Africa.

Derek and Diane Tidball

The Message of Women: Creation, Grace and Gender

Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012
£11.99, 304 pages, ISBN: 978-1-84474-595-1

Reviewed by Georgette Short, Scott Christian University

Discussions concerning women in the home and the church are still, perhaps surprisingly, prevalent in theological circles today. The rejection of the appointment of women bishops in the Anglican communion last year brought this issue very much into the public domain and demonstrated to those both inside and outside the church, just how divided Christians are on this matter. Because the debate is largely centred on the place of women in the church and in particular whether they should take a leadership role, many scholars have concentrated their efforts in this direction with both the complementarian and the egalitarian perspectives represented. Derek and Diane Tidball do not limit themselves in this way but instead take a comprehensive view of how women are portrayed in the Bible. Rather than simply concentrating on one of the issues in the Bible concerning women, the Tidballs take a canonical approach and build up a complete picture of what the Bible says about women.

The book begins with an exploration of the foundations of the Bible's view of women. This section examines the creation of humankind and discusses how the Bible views the creation of Eve as well as the part she played in the Fall. It then goes on to show the effect the new creation has on women. The next part of the book examines how women were portrayed under the Old Covenant. This section shows the variety of ways women are seen in the Old Testament, within the family, as leaders, and as victims, for example. The authors then go on to look at how women are seen within the kingdom and the part they played in Jesus' ministry, ending with how women are viewed in the new community, where they are seen taking up a wide variety of roles.

The Tidballs take an expository approach to the subject of women in the Bible, in line with the purpose of *The Bible Speaks Today* series of which this book is a part. They examine the text carefully and humbly, wrestling with what the Bible says in order to understand its message and, in so doing, making the message relevant for us today.

The authors show an awareness of the complexity of the Bible's view of women, and therefore present an intricate picture of what the Bible says about them. They avoid drawing simplistic conclusions and are willing to grapple with the text in order to gain a better understanding. Although they make the

message of the Bible very relevant for today, they also take seriously the culture in which the texts first came into being so that they differentiate clearly what in the text is cultural and what is for all time. This is crucial when discussing women when so much has changed in their roles and opportunities since the Bible was written, and yet much that the Bible says about them is timeless.

The Tidballs see the Bible as presenting a positive view of women, which is not always the case with those who adopt an egalitarian position. They see the Bible as affirming of women and, using the examples of women such as Miriam, Deborah and Huldah, demonstrate that God often used women at critical points in Israel's history. However, they are not afraid of tackling the so-called 'texts of terror'¹ in which women are victims of the male cruelty. Nor are the authors afraid to face head on the passages in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, which are the subject of much debate in the church. Their approach is to examine the text rather than debating the issue with those who might take another view.

As well as dealing with the texts related to women in a thorough and comprehensive manner, this book also explores the implications these passages have for women today and demonstrates to the reader that these women of old have much that is valuable to say to the contemporary church. It challenges some stereotypes and widely held views on the place of women in church and society.

The Study Guide at the end of the book asks searching questions related to each section and would be useful for individuals or groups to look into the subject further.

This book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the biblical view of women. In not limiting itself to only one of the issues concerning women, it helps us to understand all that the Bible says about women and therefore takes a more balanced approach. In placing what different parts of the Bible say about women alongside each other, they build up a picture of women that is both affirming and challenging for Christian women in the world today as they seek to live out their faith, and also present a biblical picture of women that informs the whole church.

¹ Phillis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, (London SCM, 1984).