

SIX NEW GOSPELS, by Margaret Hebblethwaite, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994. pp.154.

It is becoming quite common for feminist theologians to set about digging up their foremothers, that is "to excavate" those women of faith who have either been neglected or simply written out of history.. They feel that justice has to be done to their valiant predecessors by retelling and reinterpreting their stories. Margaret Hebblethwaite selects six significant New Testament women who were close to Jesus: a single and a married woman; a young and an old woman; a conventional and a more daring woman; and attempts to look at Jesus through their eyes. To do that is not quite as simple as it sounds for the Gospels offer only fragments and not full blown biographies. Hebblethwaite deliberately sets about filling out the gaps. What we get, therefore, is a work of fiction based on certain Gospel facts. The writer begins to walk on thin ice when she offers page by page factual "theological commentaries" on her text.. She goes a step further: she indicates that she is going to use a feminist theological methodology; furthermore Ignatian spirituality is to be the background against which she is to function. With a build up like that one could not be blamed for expecting a sophisticated work. But it is far from that: the "stories" are appealing, almost naive, and can be read (the writer suggests) with or without commentary. Furthermore Hebblethwaite does not intend to be rigidly bound by history: Her characters eat sandwiches, do pastoral work and stay in hotels. Mary has a boyfriend; her baby is "the best in the world"; John the Baptist was " hugely successful", while Mary of Magdala's life " was in a mess!" The writer describes what she is doing as "a creative theological venture". She dares, for example to ask twentieth century questions of first century characters; she wants, " to push forward the frontiers of interpretation." (One could argue that the Early Church Fathers also romanticise using Scripture as their starting point so why can't a twentieth century woman do it her way?). Hebblethwaite, in my opinion, creates a number of problems for herself and for the reader. She does not indicate the readership she had in mind when she began. If she wrote for traditional theologians they might find the mixture of fact and fiction offputting. Throughout the book the feminist critique is in short supply so I am not sure that the feminist theologians with whom I associate would be able to own this book. Were I to suggest that it might find a place among Sunday School teachers I should not be accused of downgrading it. It is simply that the stories are told in the first person and therefore have possibilities for a lively drama production. In that context the creative imagination could be released. and the book find an appropriate home.

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