

Dornisch, L 1999 – Paul and Third World Woman Theologians

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What if the letters of Paul were written by Paula? What difference would that make today? How would we read them? What if most of her co-workers were women? How would this change the traditions we have received? Would these letters then be more accessible to women and other oppressed groups throughout our broken world?

Dornisch begins her book with these questions. She primarily addresses women and women theologians from Third World countries. These are women emerging as voices calling for a new consciousness. These women speak against oppression, murder, rape and violence. While the author agrees that women from economically developed cultures cannot speak directly for women from the Third World, she states that we can learn from these women who have suffered so much and who are speaking out on behalf of those who seem to have no voice.

Dornisch's work is based on the premise that Paul is sometimes seen as anti-woman, male-dominating, mired in images and concepts from ancient worlds so that Third World women cannot relate to him. According to Dornisch these women have been put off by Paul's apparent dogmatism and patriarchy. Dornisch proposes to overcome this dilemma by inviting the reader to play with the text ... an exploration in reading and interpreting. She converts these texts (the letters of Paul) to be women-, user- and liberation-friendly. Dornisch asks the reader to read with the following perspectives: firstly to hypothesize Paula as co-author with Paul. She actually quotes Paula directly in the role of Paul, so that the reader works

through all the letters with the awareness of the author as a woman. Secondly, Dornisch gives all the co-workers or heads of households, deacons and apostles female names, resulting in a female context evolving. A third perspective is to read from the view of imagined women of the first century with their various cultural and traditional world views. The fourth perspective is that of women today, from whatever continent, who are struggling to create life for themselves and others. Dornisch divides the letters of Paul into four parts. Part one is titled "Beginnings", associated with the people of Thessalonica; part two 'Development', associated with the people of Corinth; part three connect "Themes", associated with the people of Phillipi and Galatia, while part four encompasses "Major Theological Developments", associated with the people of Rome. Dornisch covers these Bible letters chapter by chapter, emphasizing social themes such as suffering, freedom, responsibility, sin and relationships.

The book is written in an accessible style. The work speaks from and in favor of the strength women possess to survive and to influence others. I think the author also manages to open three world contexts for the reader: that of women of the first century and of women of Third and First worlds of the twentieth century. A point of criticism is that most of the social themes that she addresses are part of the brokenness of humanity and not exclusively related to women. I got the impression that the work is more aimed at highlighting political freedom for women instead of social or gender freedom.

For persons interested in the theology of liberation and of feminism this could be a refreshing nuance. Readers not interested in these issues, could find the book worthwhile insofar as it provides a wider understanding of the context of Third World women. Unfortunately, for some, this book and the interpreting game it proposes could seem totally irrelevant. In reply to the opening statement: no, it does not make any difference whether the books by Paul were written by Paul or Paula. The Word of God, the Message of hope and salvation surely speaks through time, gender and suffering to reach and inspire everyone in whatever circumstances. As I again read through the letters of Paul it strikes me that Paul never praises himself; he always tries to be humble and honest towards his call: "For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ." (2 Corinthians 2:17)
