

SUSAN MATHEW, *WOMEN IN THE GREETINGS OF ROMANS 16:1-16: A STUDY OF MUTUALITY AND WOMEN'S MINISTRY IN THE LETTER OF ROMANS*. LIBRARY OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES 471. LONDON: T & T CLARK, 2013. 206 PP + xv. [ISBN 978-0-567-42944-5.]

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Austen begins *Pride and Prejudice* with this statement: It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a fortune *must* be in want of a wife; then she goes on to discuss relationships and marriage, challenging the class structure and cultural norms. Her opening words reflect a cultural assumption, and if we are honest, assumptions inform our daily life more than we often want to acknowledge. I want to suggest to you that it is also (unfortunately) true that a biblical reader in favour of theological view is often in search of a text with which to support it. Biblical readers also have assumptions, our blind spots from personal and cultural prejudice, even sheer ignorance, when we come to the sacred text. When readers think of Paul's views on women, may go straight to a couple of isolated passages—1 Cor 14:34–35, 1 Tim 2:11–12 – and yet this is to overlook other texts where women are clearly engaged in the mission of God alongside Paul and others. Paul talks of women reasonably often but many of these occasions are in lesser-known passages such as Romans 16, which is the *raison d'être* of Susan Mathew's excellent book.

The letter to the Romans is a significant piece of writing and for many it is the bedrock of Paul's theology. As a result, there have been quite literally thousands of books exploring his theology and ethics in chapters 1–15. In comparison, there are relatively few that engage well or extensively with chapter 16, the coda of the letter. Some might wonder — *Does it really matter? What can we really learn from a list of greetings?* Mathew, alongside a growing body of scholars, believes we have much to learn from this chapter. Weima says, "A Pauline letter closing...is a carefully constructed unit, shaped and adapted in such a way as to relate it directly to the major concerns of the letter as a whole" (Weima, *Neglected Endings*, 11). In this monograph Mathew proposes, "a balanced mutual ethic [which] is engendered by the *basileia* of God" (p. 13) and suggests Paul presents "relationships of reciprocity...whose purpose is mutual promotion" (p. 15). This kingdom of God she claims is divorced from gender; indeed for Mathew it is gender blind for it is centered "in the Lord." She notes the sixteen occurrences of the second person plural aorist imperative *aspasasthe*, which binds the ending into a refrain of "love-mutualism:" *You (plural) greet one another!* With probably five church groups mentioned from varying social strata and with men and women actively involved (16:3–5, 10, 11, 14, 15), the potentiality for cross-fertilization and mutual understanding and respect is considerable. Mathew makes an excellent point; sixteen occurrences can only be considered to

be deliberate on the part of the author, and that Paul is building on the earlier themes of accommodation and love, cannot be denied as powerful rhetoric.

In chapter two Mathew deals with the form of imperative showing how this third party greeting is designed to strengthen the bonds amongst the Christians. She also demonstrates that Paul had both men and women as his associates. This exegetical consideration is solid and succinct.

Chapter three considers women in the Roman Empire showing that women were not a monochrome group of submissive maids in the kitchen but many were engaged in the public sphere of life. Mathew upholds the "new women" described by Bruce Winter (*Roman Wives, Roman Widows*), and gives epigraphic evidence for women in courts, politics, magistracy, patronage, priesthood and Jewish synagogues. I too am not ready to disregard Winter's work as Lynn Cohick has done in her book *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009, 72-75). This was clearly a period of history when women were emerging onto the public stage of Roman society, otherwise Augustus would not have legislated on marriage to try and stabilize trends he saw as threatening to the Empire, and poets and writers would not have presented them so consistently and prominently in their writings (see Ovid, Catullus, Tibullus and Cicero). An historical chapter such as this is increasingly what I am after in biblical discussions for it provides the tools for better informed exegetical discussion; without new information it is too easy to simply to take the well-worn path which cannot lead anywhere other to the terrain we have already visited. The historical world *is* the landscape which sets the parameters for any biblical conversation; so in this reader's opinion anyway, we need more history rather than less — a point which Mathew seems to understand. This chapter is likely to make it onto a reading list when I teach Romans or Pauline theology.

Against this backdrop of women's involvement in society, Mathew then engages in a reasonably lengthy discussion of the women from Romans 16. Mathew, having effectively dismissed the assumptions that women were not leaders in chapter two, looks at roles they may have played. She also stresses Paul's public appreciation for their work through her exegetical discussion. This work is not new (while the need for it never seems to go away), but the call for collective mutuality within the church groups is her unique contribution.

In chapters five and six Mathew sets her thesis within the wider argument of Rom 12–13 and 14–15 respectively, demonstrating that this is an integrated idea and part of Paul's wider rhetoric in the letter; it is not really a coda at all; it has theological and rhetorical value. She then concludes with the challenge of Paul's "love–mutualism" to the community. His ethic is "initiated by grace, mediated by love, and sustained by the Spirit" (p. 165) and it avoids extremes of both individualism and collectivism; Paul's ethic is theological not anthropological and it is concerned with processes not states — a "dynamic process of equalization" (p. 166).

This book supports an egalitarian theology, while challenging a complementation view. If the biblical text is what challenges theological truth, then Paul's *Lietwort* (which is a command not a suggestion) to greet one another must inform our discussion with regards to women as leaders. Literary

theorists rightly claims that a "lead-word" is one of the strongest of all techniques for making meaning (see Buber, Amit, Bar-Efrat, Alter, Fokkelman, Freedman), and so the challenge is given by Mathew to consider Paul's use of *aspasasthe* in the task of reading Romans and to apply it to Christian community praxis. This book will inform and open up the ever-present discussion on women in leadership, while her conclusions seem sound to this reader.