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Review article

Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan:
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Amy Peeler's *Women and the Gender of God* is a significant addition to recent literature from the Protestant tradition about Mary. This scholarly but eminently accessible work draws upon Scriptural studies (Peeler is an associate Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, IL) and theologians from across the centuries from Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions, as well as insights from gender studies and Peeler's own experience as a woman priest within the Episcopal church. Although Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not mentioned in its title, she is central to the book's fundamental argument. As would be expected, Mary's role is located pre-eminently in the Incarnation, although the book ends with a thought-provoking chapter on Mary's role of mothering and proclamation as revealed by Scripture.

The key themes of the book are affirmations of God the Father's non-maleness, the unique nature of Jesus' maleness, and the holiness of women's bodies. While each chapter has a distinct theme, the book makes a cohesive whole, asserting that God values women and does not favour men, and that God being born of a woman 'determines how all Christians view the triune God as well as all people made in the divine image' (p. 7).

Peeler discusses the projection of masculinity onto God as evidenced in writings from a wide ecumenical range, and she stresses that this has practical consequences, 'because all humans suffer when God is more like some than others' (p. 92). This theme is explored in relation to God as the source of life and as sovereign initiator, as well as to Jesus' maleness, all of which lead to interesting Marian reflections. For example, in exploring why it is both right and good to call God 'Father', Peeler succinctly relates how 'Jesus does not call God "Mother" because he already has one' (p. 115) and emphasises that naming God 'Father' manifests 'the unparalleled role played by the young Jewish girl named Mary, the Mother of God' (p. 117). Mary's dignity is also highlighted as Peeler explores the question of whether Christ could have been female. Responding negatively to this question, Peeler declares that, because to be human is to be born of a woman, God could only involve both sexes in the Incarnation by the eternal Word of God taking flesh of a woman: 'a male-embodied Savior with female-provided flesh saves all' (p. 137). Moreover, Peeler stresses that Jesus' maleness is different to all others; he is 'a male who received his body from God's partnering with a female alone' (p. 141), and 'his embodied maleness broadens [in the Church, the body of Christ] to include the female body from which he came' (p. 144).



Mary also plays a central role in the chapter on ‘holiness and the female body’, where Peeler asserts that if ‘the Christian God really disdained the female body, the Son would have found another way to achieve the reconciliation of all things’ (p. 47). While Peeler’s positive reading of the Jewish purity laws may well not convince all her readers, her clear assertions about the dignity of the female body are undeniable: ‘God’s choice to allow the body of a woman, even the most intimate parts of herself, to come into direct contact with the body and blood of the Son stands against any who would deny women *by virtue of the fact that they are women* access to the holy’ (p. 62). Peeler’s tone throughout the book is calm and conciliatory, and it is likely that those who read her reflections on women’s ordination stemming from this discussion will accept their logic, even if they hold diametrically opposed views to her. Recognising that other elements in the debate about the ordination of women ‘certainly demand consideration’ and that ‘those of good faith may reach different conclusions’, she stresses that ‘the holy God’s embodiment in, through, and with the care of a female body should be a significant [...] I would even say *central* – part of the conversation’ (p. 64).

The chapter exploring ‘honor and agency’ includes a delightfully memorable comparison between Zechariah and Mary: ‘Whereas Zechariah has approached God’s realm, God’s messenger has approached Mary’s realm. One might imagine it this way: while Zechariah is invited to a state banquet at Buckingham Palace, the royal family themselves pay a formal visit to Mary’s home address’ (p. 68). Zechariah had entered the holy of holies, but ‘the presence in the holy of holies is poised to enter Mary herself’ (p. 75). It is rare that a book including extensive research and copious footnotes has the capacity to engage and challenge the non-specialist reader as skilfully as Peeler manages to do, as this passage clearly demonstrates.

Despite the undisputed value of the core of Peeler’s book, it is perhaps the final chapter on Mary after the incarnation, simply but significantly entitled ‘ministry’, which offers the most thought-provoking content, which is likely to widen the Marian horizons of many of its readers. Peeler seeks to demonstrate how Mary ‘did more for God than mother Jesus’ (p. 152). After having discussed Mary’s ministry of proclamation in her Magnificat, her ministry of mothering during Jesus’ early and adolescent years, and her ministry of both parenting and proclamation at the wedding at Cana, Peeler turns to Mary’s role of proclamation at

Pentecost. She gives a fascinating analysis of the Greek text of Acts 2. The Lucan author is described as having left 'several markers' to 'indicate that though the apostles are easily seen, they are not the only ones being heard' on the morning of Pentecost. These include those who are testifying being called 'Galileans', of which Luke 1.26 has established Mary is one; the contrast between Luke's use (four times) of *ἀνὴρ*, the more gender specific term for 'men' in the listening crowd and his use of the more general term *ἄνθρωπος* for those who are testifying, and the account of Peter's extensive quoting of Joel 2, with its reference to the spirit of God being poured upon *sons and daughters*. Peeler concludes that Mary, and the other unnamed women, who are referred to in Acts 1.14, must have 'vocally and publicly' proclaimed the good news, for Peter could not have declared the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy 'if Mary and the other slave-daughters of the Lord had remained silent' (pp. 183-184).

While this, along with several other passages of this book, are most obviously interpreted in the light of advocating women's ministry, a merit of this book is that this need not be the only lens through which it is read. A predetermined position of the reader on the disputed topic of women's ordination should not dissuade them from reading this book, it will be a welcome read by all seeking to deepen their understanding of the relationship between Mary and the Christian understanding of women.