

The lives of women, ancient and modern

Casey McCorry Teresa Malcolm Michel L Tisdale | Jul. 7, 2010

NIMO'S WAR, EMMA'S WAR: MAKING FEMINIST SENSE OF THE IRAQ WAR

By Cynthia Enloe

Published by University of California Press, \$24.95

As media coverage of the Iraq war dwindles, Cynthia Enloe offers compelling reason for maintaining interest. Her book *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* offers detailed accounts of eight women's lives: four Iraqi and four American, enduring gendered oppression or negligence throughout the Iraq war.

Making feminist sense of any war -- during each of its several distinctively gendered phases -- requires taking women seriously: their calculations, their analyses, their actions, and, of course, their silences. If we do not try to make feminist sense of wars, we are unlikely to make reliable sense of war.

Profiling a diverse group of women -- a member of parliament, a beauty salon owner, an Iraqi refugee, an African-American soldier, a sergeant's wife, and others -- Enloe exposes the daily toil of surviving a war.

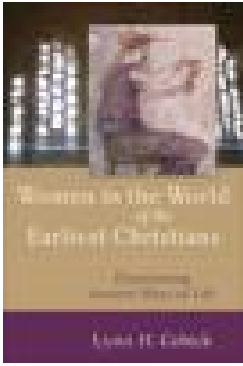
Readers may learn of the gendered dynamics of a war, what Enloe would argue is stifled by militarized gendered silences.

Witnessing the collapse of their country, the Iraqi women describe the transformation of their lives from ones of educational pursuits, entrepreneurship, and a cohesive family, to a dismal present-day Iraq where girls stop attending school, sectarian zealots pressure women to cover up, Sunni and Shiite rivalries displace thousands, and rape, kidnappings, and murder are so commonplace that leaving one's home is a danger.

Enloe's American women see their role in the United States as mere support for the military. Amid divorce, suicide, abuse, and mental illness within their families they revealed they were to keep silent, stay out of the way, and not serve as any emotional hindrance on a soldier's duty, whether a husband, boyfriend or son. As soldiers themselves, they exposed the inordinate number of cases of rape, and the even more shocking apathetic reactions by superior officers. They, like the Iraqi women, felt overwhelmingly that their pain was ignored.

Time after time in press photos, we see a girl in her nightclothes, looking stunned, Enloe writes. We hear nothing at the moment or afterward from the girl, what she is thinking, what she writes in her diary, what she keeps bottled up inside herself.

Enloe pulls these women from the shadows into the public eye, enabling readers to recognize and address the remasculinization and deepening patriarchy that is following the Iraq war.



WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS: ILLUMINATING

ANCIENT WAYS OF LIFE

By Lynn H. Cohick

Published by Baker Academic, \$26.99

In *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, Lynn H. Cohick dispels frequent misconceptions concerning ancient women and analyzes gendered limitations in the ancient world, depicting what she believes the daily lives of ancient Christian women resembled.

“My hope is to enliven the sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes of the ancient Greco-Roman world so that the social and cultural fabric of the Jewish and gentile world will penetrate, inform and even ignite the reader’s imagination to explore in more depth individual women of this time.”

By dissecting a wide range of evidence, including ancient Roman and Jewish texts, epigraphs, iconography, and archaeology, Cohick’s historical assessments describe women as being active members within their social and religious communities, whether pagan, Jewish or Christian.

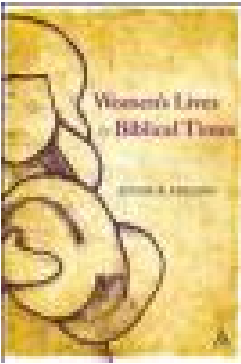
Including a feminist critique of crucial texts, such as Ovid’s “Art of Love,” the Babylonian Talmud, and Pliny the Younger’s letters, Cohick’s chapters chronologically progress through a typical first-century woman’s life, beginning with the lifestyle of a daughter, the customary marriage and expectations as a wife, and the role as a mother. The final chapters describe the obligations of women of various classes and professions, including slaves, prostitutes, midwives and shopkeepers.

Cohick reveals that women were far from being cloistered in their homes, and while they were limited by gendered social limitations of the time and rarely received positions of leadership, their presence in the ancient Greco-Roman world was far from a submissive one.

Cohick finds great importance in evaluating the lives of ancient women as a unit of interrelated parts, not compartmentalized facets. “Rather than focus solely on a single aspect of a woman’s life, such as work or marriage or religion, I will touch on all those categories,” she writes. “Not enough attention is paid to the fact that her family life greatly impacts her religious choices or that her occupation might be germane to understanding her marriage.”

Cohick breaks down the sweeping term “women,” and assumptions concerning their lives in the ancient world, and gives a detailed investigation of various women’s lifestyles in the first-century Greco-Roman world.

-- Casey McCorry, NCR intern



WOMEN'S LIVES IN BIBLICAL TIMES

By Jennie R. Ebeling

Published by T&T Clark International, \$32.95

An explosion of fiction focusing on female biblical characters (most notably, Anita Diamant's 1997 novel *The Red Tent*) spurred archeologist and scholar Jennie R. Ebeling to write her own book, one that would be less dramatic but perhaps present a more realistic, complex picture of women's everyday lives in ancient Israel.

While the core of *Women's Lives in Biblical Times* is nonfictional, Ebeling brings the subject to life in the person of 'Orah,' a hypothetical woman living a small village of the central highlands of Israel in the Iron Age I (circa 1200-1000 B.C.). Beginning with her birth and ending with her death, the book starts each chapter with a piece of Orah's story, followed by a discussion of the larger picture -- what we can reconstruct and conjecture about the lives of women in this era, and through what sources.

The Hebrew Bible is only one such source, and a limited one, Ebeling explains. Its focus is on men, and its authors 'were primarily concerned with the world of the urban male elite -- kings, priests, prophets and others -- and the relationship between the people of Israel and their national god, Yahweh. Generally speaking, these male authors did not consider the common people -- those peasants who comprised the majority of the population of Israel and Judah -- important enough to describe in detail.'

For a deeper picture of ordinary people's lives, and women's in particular, Ebeling also draws on archeology and iconography of Israel and other populations in the ancient Near East, as well as ethnography from villages in 19th- and early 20th-century Palestine.

Orah's life is a simple one, uneventful on a grand scale. The author takes us through Orah's childhood, as she learns the crucial skills needed to contribute to a household -- grinding grains and baking bread, spinning and weaving, pottery-making -- to her first menstruation, to marriage, and the joys and real dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, to her roles as a mother, widow and grandmother, and, finally, her death at the advanced age of nearly 40. Household religious practices play a role in many of these events -- with the women's rituals often directed to the goddess Astarte.

Even while we marvel at the stark differences between Orah's life and that of a modern Western woman, Ebeling connects the reader to this imagined woman's humanity, bringing the past to life in fascinating detail.

-- Teresa Malcolm, NCR staff



THE GIRL IN THE ORANGE DRESS: SEARCHING FOR A FATHER WHO DOES NOT

FAIL

By Margot Starbuck

Published by IVP Books, \$16

Unless you have had the most perfect life possible, your father has failed you at least once. That's because fathers are human just like the rest of us. Because failure, like life, has many faces, the failure of a father is one of the most damaging.

This failure affects each of the failed differently. Some look for paternal life with people, drugs, food, alcohol, or even organized or disorganized religions.

Margot Starbuck, as she recounts in *The Girl in the Orange Dress*, has had problems with fathers more than many. Her adoptive father takes a job on the other side of the country. When she finds her birth father, he wants nothing to do with her.

Since most of the major religions have given God a masculine aspect, you would think that looking for a father figure in religion would seem to be the easiest of all our journeys. But because most religions don't combine some sort of feminine with the masculine, even God loses out.

Because of Starbuck's experiences with both her fathers and with religion you might assume that she has given up, but you would be wrong. It is because of those experiences that she has become a more well-rounded woman, mother and daughter.

The Girl in the Orange Dress is not an indictment against fathers. Starbuck's evolving relationship with God is, like our own, worthy of exploration and sharing. As with most life lessons, the learning never stops. I look forward to the next installment of her life.

-- Michel L. Tisdale, NCR staff

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