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Publication Information

MacCammon, Linda (2008). "Review of 'The Comical Doctrine: An Epistemology of New Testament Hermeneutics,' by Rosalind M. Selby." *Theological Studies* 69.3, 689-690.

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Review of 'The Comical Doctrine: An Epistemology of New Testament Hermeneutics,' by Rosalind M. Selby

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seems designed to provoke contrition in the viewer. Gelfand examines in detail the relation of the concepts of the vices to various social classes.

This volume is a wonderful contribution to the scholarly literature on the subject.

Fordham University, Bronx, N.Y.

JOSEPH W. KOTERSKI, S.J.

THE COMICAL DOCTRINE: AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICS. By Rosalind M. Selby. Paternoster Biblical Monographs. Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2006. Pp. x + 282. \$39.99.

Selby's thought-provoking study explores the implications of Barthian epistemology for biblical hermeneutics. Troubled by trends toward restrictive, dogmatic readings of Scripture and dissatisfied with the "either-or" choice of Enlightenment foundationalism or postmodern deconstruction, S. offers an alternative approach to biblical hermeneutics that embraces Barthian theological realism. Theological realism presupposes that God, as a speaking subject, is "completely independent of human philosophies and the truth lies in him, relativizing all human statements concerning that truth" (11–12). For S. this means that God's self communication in Scripture has a true reference beyond the texts and that biblical truth claims are not "humanly created or arbitrary" but communicate something about God that makes the terms used by the biblical writers appropriate to the divine "object" (6).

Such a position requires justification, which S. ably provides in chapters 1–4 through a wide-ranging survey of philosophical debates on issues of epistemology, ontology, theories of truth, text and reference, community and authority, historical knowledge, and the role of historical-critical method in biblical hermeneutics. In mapping out and engaging major figures in these debates, S. makes a persuasive case for theological realism and the integrity of biblical truth claims while setting the stage for her own proposal for biblical hermeneutics.

For S. the priority of the theological dimension in Scripture means that the faith community is the authoritative interpreter of the biblical texts. Academic forms of interpretation and analysis, while helpful, ought not override the theological import of the texts and cloud God's self-communication in Scripture. In her view, the proper role for academic communities is to "serve exegesis but not control it" (222). But if theological hermeneutics has primacy over general hermeneutics, which faith community is the authoritative one? S. contends that it is the one that has the "right" relationship with its Scriptures, that is, the one that combines the critical controls provided by textual givens (e.g., the Resurrection) and church doctrines (e.g., the Trinity) with academic analyses. In this fusion of theology and philosophy, readers avoid the extremes of either postmodern relativism (an endless plurality of readings) or dogmatic conservatism (pre-critical or *sensus literalis* readings).

In chapter 5, S. summarizes the major points of her study and offers a

test case with the Transfiguration account in Mark's Gospel. After reviewing her findings and considering the various dimensions of literary genres and texts, S. concludes that the Gospels cannot be read like other texts, because a "specific and unique form of reference is at work in the gospels" (235). In her view, the best way to approach the Gospels in general and the Transfiguration in particular is to read them theologically, as one would read an icon. In the Transfiguration, the elements of divine givenness and transformation, historical detail, and the dynamics of symbolic knowing and reference are held in creative tension. S. describes the reader's response to the power of this iconic image within the Gospel narrative: "We can be drawn through the icon until we attend from it to the kingdom of God and the true significance of the Christ and the words, to glimpse the risen and eschatological glory vouchsafed to us through this narrative. Thus, by the nature of the gospel and all that we have suggested it is and can be, the story of the transfiguration is sacramental in its theophany for us—despite its uniqueness, textuality, historical distance and all the difficulties in interpretation. The voice can still come to us even out of these particular 'cloudings', indeed, it may even be the case that the voice celebrates them—it can still, and because of these very features, speak the truth" (237).

The complexity of this God-given revelation requires a wholly different "ethics of reading" in which members of the faith community are given the freedom to explore and interpret the texts (using the tools of biblical criticism), but only within the established limits provided by the texts themselves and the church's teachings and traditions (246).

S.'s command of the issues and scholarship is impressive and makes her work a useful resource for all students of biblical hermeneutics. Moreover, her iconic reading of biblical texts presents interesting possibilities for future exegesis. One difficulty, however, is the limits she places on the interpretive process. Her claim that the faith community is the authoritative interpreter does not adequately address the problem of church myopia; such myopia can mute those marginal or renegade voices that often reveal biblical truths clouded by cultural biases and theological traditions. Nevertheless, her attempt to reclaim the primacy of theology in biblical hermeneutics is praiseworthy.

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LINDA MACCAMMON

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ORDINATION: FEMALE CLERGY IN THE MEDIEVAL WEST. By Gary Macy. New York: Oxford University, 2008. Pp. xiv + 260. \$25.

Macy's study of sixth- through 13th-century women deacons, presbyters, and bishops is a tour de force. While the materials he treats overlap some of those in Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek's *Ordained Women in the Early Church* (2005), M. provides much more commentary. His questions are historical: How did women come to be understood as incapable of