

MARY MAGDALENE, LA MALINCHE, AND THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION, by Jennifer Vija Pietz, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023. 231 pages. \$105.00.

“What does Mary Magdalene, a first-century disciple of Jesus, have in common with La Malinche, a sixteenth-century indigenous woman who became caught up in the Spanish Conquest of Mesoamerica?” (xi). So begins Jennifer Vija Pietz’s book. Pietz addresses this question by exploring how subsequent generations have understood these two women. Hers is a reception history: Pietz reviews and compares the “afterlives” of Mary Magdalene and La Malinche among individuals and communities with vested interests in interpreting them. She shows that both have become “pliable icons” (xv) for later interpreters, whose understandings of the women’s significance reflect their own biases and aims rather than the women’s actual historical lives.

The book has five chapters. Four function as parallel pairs: a chapter examining the primary sources on one of the women, followed by one that reviews the woman’s interpretive arc up to the present day. The chapters on interpretive trajectories continually refer to Pietz’s sifting of the primary evidence in the previous chapter. The final chapter realizes Pietz’s goal of making the reception histories of Magdalene and La Malinche a case study on the enterprise of interpreting people from the past.

Chapter 1 carefully presents what the New Testament gospels say about Mary Magdalene, treating the Synoptic Gospels before turning to John’s distinctive portrayal of Magdalene and her appearances in the additional endings of Mark. Pietz highlights differences between the NT depictions and observes that they present Magdalene as the sole named witness to Jesus’s crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb—not as a repentant prostitute.

Chapter 2 impressively reviews interpretations of Mary Magdalene in apocryphal NT texts, patristic literature, Eastern Christianity, the medieval period, the Renaissance, and modern times. Pietz discusses cultural productions, ecclesiastical developments, social institutions, and academic interpretation. She shows that later appropriations either try to fill in the gaps left in Magdalene’s story by the scant NT material and/or expand on a particular component of the (sometimes misconstrued) biblical accounts. Pietz, who has clear feminist concerns, takes an admirably sympathetic stance toward her source material. For example, while Pope Gregory I’s influential conflation of Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the woman in Luke 7:36-50 gave rise to belief in Mary’s alleged promiscuity, Pietz concludes that defaming Magdalene “does not seem to be

his goal, even if it is an unintended consequence. Rather, he repeatedly praises her penitence and ardent love of Jesus, not dwelling extensively on her supposedly sinful past” (44).

Chapter 3 on La Malinche presents what the earliest sources say about her. First, however, Pietz astutely orients readers to matters of historical background, terminology, and the nature of the primary sources, which, as in the case of Magdalene, give us little access to the actual La Malinche; I say “astutely” because most readers will likely have less foreknowledge of her and her Mesoamerican context than of Mary Magdalene. The chapter is an immersive lesson on the remarkable life of this enslaved Nahua woman who was given to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, operated as his interpreter, and eventually bore him a son.

Chapter 4 reviews the reception history of La Malinche in Mexican and Chicana history, culture, and literature. A significant shift took place between the relatively positive appreciation of La Malinche when Mexico, was a colony of New Spain (1521-1821), and the time following Mexican independence, when interpreters’ quest for a Mexican identity apart from Spanish rule led them to view her as a traitor. Pietz gives significant attention to Octavio Paz’s extended essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) because it did for La Malinche what Pope Gregory’s appraisal did for

New From
Karl N. Jacobson
and Rolf A. Jacobson



Good preaching
changes lives
workingpreacher.org



\$19.99

















 **fortress press**

Mary Magdalene: fix on her a number of cultural tropes that turned La Malinche into a pejorative symbol of deeply ingrained traumas that Paz says Mexicans still grapple with. The remainder of the chapter explores interpretations of La Malinche in Paz's wake, including in Chicana and broader academic literature that tries to retrieve the historical Malinche and/or to reclaim her as a positive symbol of identity and female empowerment.

Chapter 5 is the shortest but perhaps the most concentrated with insights pertinent to *Word & World* readers. Pietz compares the reception history trajectories of both Magdalene and La Malinche, drawing critical insights from the comparison and raising questions about the ethics of interpreting real people from the past, particularly when their significance is fraught with implications for entire groups of people (especially marginalized groups). Both women have been saddled with the “archetypal whore” stereotype that not only lacks historical foundation but affects women in contemporary social and ecclesial contexts. How can we avoid oversimplifying the lives of real people to suit our interests? Pietz articulates several strategies, which her study models, including staying true to the primary sources and assessing later interpretations with an empathetic hermeneutic to understand the function they served in their context.

Pietz's book is a solid and substantial study. While chapters 2 and 4 can feel daunting as the author reviews how work upon work add layers to the interpretive arcs of Magdalene and La Malinche, she synthesizes her findings as she proceeds and repeats her points so her readers can track what she is exposing. Her clear, straightforward prose turns each chapter into an immersive journey into its subject matter. While I longed for images to accompany Pietz's discussions of paintings of Magdalene



and La Malinche, her descriptions effectively convey how the artists construed these women.

Preachers, ministers, and lay educators often necessarily synthesize complex individuals or groups to convey an idea or moral. Consider how Pharisees^¾historically a complex, respected, diverse, and progressive group of interpreters of Mosaic law^¾are repeatedly reduced to symbolic caricatures of an oppressive legalism, with supersessionist and anti-Jewish implications. What is at stake in interpreting significant persons from the past to illuminate our present? That we will be unable to capture all their complexity is a given. But whether we can be responsible both to their original sources and contexts and to the implications our interpretations have for people today is Pietz's challenge to us in this superb book.

Gilberto A. Ruiz

Saint Anselm College, Manchester, NH

WOMEN AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: A GLOBAL HISTORY, by Jennifer Hornyak Wojciechowski, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022. 272 pages. \$39.00.

The third edition (1970) of Williston Walker's *A History of the Christian Church* (revised by Robert T. Handy) was the textbook in my general church history class in college in the mid-1970s, as it had been for hundreds of students since the first edition was published in 1918. The American religion course textbook, Sydney E. Ahlstrom's massive *A Religious History of the American People* (1972), was newly published. Neither author was particularly interested in gender, and women were given very little space. At the time, I do not think I noticed what was missing. When I read E. Clifford Nelson's *Lutherans in North America* (revised edition, 1975) in seminary, I was more alert to the nearly total absence of women. Female abolitionists were the subject of my master's thesis. When I began doctoral study, I was determined to focus my research on women. I audited an informal course taught by Rosemary Radford Ruether; there was no textbook, although she and Rosemary Keller were at work on their three-volume, documentary anthology *Women and Religion in America* (1981–86). Barbara J. MacHaffie's *HerStory: Women in Christian Tradition* (1983; second revised edition, 2006) appeared in time for me to assign it in one of the first courses I taught.