



UNRELIABLE WITNESSES

RELIGION,
GENDER,
AND
HISTORY
IN THE

NEO-ROMAN
MEDITERRANEAN

ROSS SHEPARD KRAEMER

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*Religion, Gender, and History in the
Greco-Roman Mediterranean*

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For Honey Kraemer, with love
And for Jerry Kraemer, in loving memory



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Abbreviations

- ACW Ancient Christian Writers. 1946-.
- AE *L'Année Épigraphique*
- ANF *Ante-Nicene Fathers*
- ANRW *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung.* Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin, 1972-.
- ANT *The Apocryphal New Testament.* Edited by J. K. Elliott. Oxford, 1993.
- b. Niddah *Tractate Niddah of the Babylonian Talmud*
- BAR *Biblical Archaeology Review*
- BDB F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Oxford, 1907.
- BHG *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca.* Brussels, 1977.
- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- CCSL *Corpus Christianorum, series Latina,* Turnhout, 1953-
- CHJ *Cambridge History of Judaism.* Edited by W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein. Cambridge, 1984-.
- CIJ *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum.* Edited by J. B. Frey. 2 vols. Rome, 1936-52.
- CIL *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*
- CIRB *Corpus inscriptionum regni Bosporani*
- CPJ *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum.* Edited by V. Tcherikover. 3 vols. Cambridge, 1957-64.

- CSEL Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
 DSD *Dead Sea Discoveries*
 EPRO Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain
 FC Fathers of the Church. Washington, D.C., 1947-.
 GCS Die griechischen christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
 GRBS *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*
 HSCP *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*
 HTR *Harvard Theological Review*
 I Aph *Inscriptions of Aphrodisias*
 IGR *Inscriptiones graecae ad res romanas pertinentes*
 IJO *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*
 JAAR *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
 JAC Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum
 Jastrow M. Jastrow. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. 2nd ed. New York, 1903.
 JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
 JECS *Journal of Early Christian Studies*
 JFSR *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
 JIGRE *Jewish Inscriptions from Greco-Roman Egypt*
 JIWE *Jewish Inscriptions from Western Europe*
 JSJ *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Periods*
 JSP *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha*
 JPS Jewish Publication Society
 JRS *Journal of Roman Studies*
 JSOTSup *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement*
 JTS *Journal of Theological Studies*
 KJV King James Version translation of the Bible
 Lampe G. W. H. Lampe. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Oxford, 1961-68.
 LCL Loeb Classical Library
 Lewis and Short Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford, 1879.
 LSJ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones. *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford, 1968.
 LXX Septuagint

- NJPS New Jewish Publication Society
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version
- NTA *New Testament Apocrypha*. Edited by Edgar Hennecke, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, and R. McL. Wilson. Revised English edition. Louisville, 1991–92.
- P. Ant.* *The Antinoöpolis Papyri*
- P. Oxy.* *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*
- PGM *Papyri graecae magicae: die griechischen Zauberpapyri*. Ed. K. Preisendanz. Leipzig, 1928–31.
- PIR *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*. Berlin, 1933–.
- PL *Patrologia latina*. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–64.
- RBL *Review of Biblical Literature*. Online at <http://www.bookreviews.org>.
- REJ *Revue des études juives*
- RSV Revised Standard Version
- SBLSP *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*
- SC *Sources chrétiennes*. Paris, 1943–.
- SEG *Supplementum epigraphicum graecum*
- Sophocles *Sophocles, E. A. Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*. Boston, 1870.
- SWR *Studies in Women and Religion*
- S.V. *sub verbo*
- TAM *Tituli Asiae Minoris*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1901–.
- t. Megillah* *Tractate Megillah of the Tosefta*
- TSAJ *Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum*
- WHR *Women's History Review*
- WIS *Women in Scripture. A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. Edited by C. Meyers, T. Craven, and R. Kraemer. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000.
- WRGRW *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*. Edited by R. S. Kraemer. Oxford, 2004.
- WUNT *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testamentum*
- y. Sotah* *Tractate Sotah of the Jerusalem Talmud*
- ZPE *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*



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I

Introduction

For a number of years, the Society of Biblical Literature sponsored a session at its annual meetings at which a senior scholar was invited to reflect back on her work and views. Were it not such an egregiously generic title, this book might easily be called by the title of that session: “How My Mind Has Changed, or Remained the Same.” It bears, in ways that I find somewhat startling, a striking resemblance to the outlines of my doctoral dissertation, so much so that another title might well be, “The dissertation I would have written thirty-three years ago, had I only known then what I know now.”

In the early 1970s, as a neophyte graduate student in a new doctoral program then called History of Religions: Greco-Roman, at Princeton University,¹ I took an imaginative course on ancient Mediterranean religions in which we attempted to pursue as many of the sources and issues as possible in E. R. Dodds’s major work, *The Greeks and the Irrational*.² Dodds’s study included an appendix on Maenadism, the ecstatic worship of the Greek god Dionysos, attributed primarily to women in art, in Euripides’ play *the Bacchae*, and in

1. For some sense of the significance of this title for a program that encompassed the full range of the religions of Greco-Roman antiquity, including but scarcely limited to early Christianity and ancient Judaism, I recommend Smith 2004b. Although this essay, “When the Chips Are Down,” chronicles Jonathan Z. Smith’s intellectual biography, it contains highly relevant remembrances of the major currents in my field in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the years I was in college and then graduate school.

2. Dodds 1951.

various other sources. Struck by what seemed to me the gross inadequacy of Dodds's explanation of Maenadism in terms of the greater irrationality of women, I focused my seminar paper on a critique of his arguments, and a preliminary exploration of alternative explanations. That seminar and that paper set the course of my scholarly agenda for the last thirty-five years in ways that I could, of course, never have foreseen at the time. That paper would form the core of my doctoral dissertation, a series of case studies on the functions of religious activities for women in the Greco-Roman world.³ There, I argued that certain religious practices functioned as critiques of socially assigned roles for women and men, and they allowed women temporary, and sometimes permanent, actual social alternatives, from ecstatic devotion to Dionysos, to the adoption of Christian asceticism, to the contemplative life that Philo of Alexandria attributes to a group of monastics called Therapeutae. I drew heavily on the recent work of anthropologists such as I. M. Lewis's (1971) analysis of contemporary possession cults, and Kenelm Burridge's (1969) observations about gender arrangements in contemporary millenarian movements.⁴

In the early 1970s, feminist study of religion was barely a gleam in its foremothers' eyes. Much research was related to the then-active debates about the ordination of women to ministerial and priestly offices in contemporary Christian communities, themselves fueled by the resurgence of the women's movement in the last third of the twentieth century.⁵ Partly because these debates often focused on questions of historical precedent (Did Jesus appoint women apostles? Did women ever serve as priests in early Christian churches? What antecedents might there have been in the practices of others?), they were certainly of interest to me. Yet it was also clear that my own central interests were not widely shared. I was interested in the recovery and accurate description of what women themselves did and thought within contexts that could be labeled "religious,"⁶ as well as in theoretical models that, like those of Lewis and Burridge, might enable me to analyze and explain whatever differences I might find when I concentrated my research on women. Even ten years after I began my dissertation research, the reasonably comprehensive bibliography of a review essay I published on women in the religions of the Greco-Roman

3. Kraemer 1976. The majority of the dissertation was eventually published in somewhat revised articles: Kraemer 1979; 1980; 1989.

4. Lewis 1971 [2003]; Burridge 1969.

5. For a more detailed discussion of this period, with bibliography, see Kraemer 2008, esp. 474–79.

6. The complexity of the terms *religion*, *religious*, and so forth are helpfully explored in Smith 1998; see also Wilson 1998. On the emergence of a category of religion in antiquity, see Boyarin 2004; Mason 2007; Elliott 2007; see also chapter 7 for more detailed discussion. For my own current sense of this, see what follows.

Mediterranean had only about 250 entries,⁷ and few of them focused on these particular issues.⁸

Similarly, in the early 1970s, the major problems associated with historical reconstruction seemed to be the relative absence of sources either by or about women, and the difficulty of assessing the reliability of those that are available. If we only had enough sources by women themselves, and/or enough sources by trustworthy male authors, we would be able to reconstruct a reasonable portrait of women's lives and self-understandings in the ancient world. Unfortunately, of course, for women's beliefs, there is virtually no first-hand, direct data (in the sense of trustworthy first-person accounts comparable to the wealth of those available for elite, educated men). Few writings survive from women themselves.⁹ For women's behaviors, there is both material evidence and the accounts of elite, literate authors, mostly, if not entirely, male. The problems with explanation, of course, were another story: lacking the ability to interview our subjects or to observe directly the social workings of antiquity, we were left to arguments from analogy, a method, if not also a theory, that drew frequent criticism.

Fifteen years later, I revisited the data of my dissertation and extended my analysis, including considerable additional data, and focusing in particular on the correlations between ancient religious practices, gender constructions, and ancient social locations.¹⁰ I drew extensively on the critique and arguments of Mary Douglas concerning religion as compensation for social forms of deprivation, as well as on Douglas's own work on the correlations between social constraints and cosmology (constructions of the universe).¹¹

7. By contrast, the bibliography for this study contains close to two hundred entries concerned extensively with women's religions and gender in antiquity, most of them written after that essay, and it is by no means comprehensive, nor is that really feasible any longer. It is no longer possible to read comprehensively in any of these areas, despite the fodder this inevitably provides for critics. The scholarly literature in this and most fields has become largely unmanageable. Even in the interval since I finished the basic manuscript (in 2008), numerous highly pertinent works have appeared, only a few of which I have been able to note, at best briefly.

8. When I was struggling to compose the introduction to my dissertation, after I had written the remaining chapters, I came across a file folder containing a version I had written the prior summer, and then obviously forgotten. I was both amused and relieved to find that it was far better than the newer draft I was finding so difficult to write. One can only reinvent the wheel so many times; some of my discussion here repeats, in only moderately reworked form, my remarks in the introduction to my 2004 anthology of sources pertaining to women's religions in the Greco-Roman world (abbreviated throughout as *WRGRW*).

9. Few women are securely known to have produced literary compositions in the Greco-Roman period, on which see Snyder 1989; see also Lefkowitz 1991. For consideration of the possibility that some anonymous or pseudonymous works may have been composed by women, see, e.g., Kraemer 1991b. On Christian women authors, see Wilson-Kastner 1981; see also Kraemer and Lander 2000 and Perkins 2007 on the authorship of the *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*.

10. Kraemer 1992.

11. Douglas 1970; 1978.