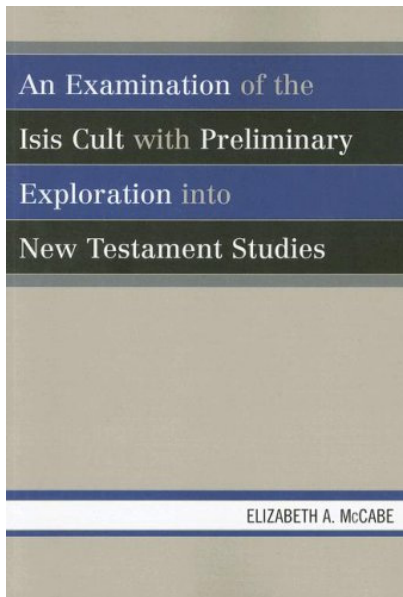


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McCabe, Elizabeth A.

An Examination of the Isis Cult with Preliminary Exploration into New Testament Studies

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Although the title of this work suggest a broad purview, McCabe's brief work focuses principally on the status of women in the cult of Isis vis-à-vis that of men and the contribution that this can make to understanding of 1 Tim 2:12–14, Pseudo-Paul's prohibition of women teaching or having authority over a man. According to McCabe, the pastoral writer aligns himself against precisely those egalitarian dynamics that were nurtured and encouraged by the cult of Isis.

The argument unfolds in five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 survey the cult of Isis in the Roman world, stressing, on the one hand, the liberative aspects of the cult and, on the other, Roman opposition to the cult. The third and fourth chapters discuss the convergences between the Isis cult and practices and beliefs of the Jesus movement, first generally, then in relation to Pauline groups. Finally, McCabe mounts an argument for the influence of Isis at Ephesus and as a context for the pastoral writer's admonitions in 1 Tim 2,

McCabe begins with a summary of the accounts of the Isis-Osiris legend in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, Apuleius's story of his initiation in *Metamorphoses* book 11, and Diodorus's account in book 1 of his "Library." The most important texts for McCabe's

argument, however, are Isis aretalogies and related texts, which, she claims, not only express the emancipatory role of Isis but reflect the social equality of women and men in the Isis cult. The key text for McCabe is the second-century C.E. “Praises of Isis” (*P.Oxy.* XI 1380), which declares, “you made the power of men equal for women” (σὺ γυναιξί[ν] | ἴση<ν> δύναμιν τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἔ[ποι]ησα, ix 214–216). This declaration, coupled with the myth of Osiris’s death and Isis’s reigning in his stead, constitutes Isis as “the leader of a movement for the emancipation of women” (17). Diodorus’s musings on Isis’s dominant relationship vis-à-vis Osiris led him to a similar conclusion, that for Egyptians κυριεύει τὴν γυναῖκα τᾶνδρός (1.27.2).

McCabe uses these statements as the optic through which to interpret other statements about Isis. Thus, she argues that the assertion of the Andros aretalogy of Isis, “I granted that a woman be obedient to her husband, making (them) mutually subject to the other” (δῶκα χα[ριζομένα πει]θάνιον ἀνδρὶ γυναῖκα, ἀμφοτέρω[ς τ’ ἐδά]μασσα, *IG XII/5* 739.101–102), implies that “the status of the wife is higher than that of the husband” because the wife’s submission to her husband “relies not upon command, but upon persuasion” (17). This is surely an overinterpretation of *πειθάνιον* and is rather conspicuously at odds with the second part of the assertion (which she does not quote). The Andros statement must be seen in the context of the claims of other aretalogies, according to which Isis decreed (*ἐνομοθέτησα*) that parents be loved by their children (*IG XII/5* 14.23–24) and “forced” women to be loved by men (*ἐγὼ στέργεσθαι γυναῖκας ὑπ’ ἀνδρῶν ἠνάγκασα*, *IG XII/5* 14.29–30). These are not statements about the relative statuses of children and parents, husbands and wives, but claims about how Isis is responsible for the glue that holds society together. Moreover, Diodorus’s claim that Egyptian men are obedient to their wives is, as the context of 1.27.2 makes clear, Diodorus’s own interpretation of Egyptian marriage contracts, which permitted women to inherit along with her brothers and which allowed women to insist on the sexual fidelity of their husbands, something that was highly unusual by Greek standards (see Ann Burton, *Diodorus Siculus, Book 1: A Commentary* [EPRO 29; Leiden: Brill, 1973] 144). It is also incorrect: extant marriage contracts fail to indicate that women were dominant in the marriage. This is Diodorus’s exaggeration, not a description of social relations in Egypt.

The Isis aretalogies indeed express a social conservatism, representing Isis as the author and discoverer of the laws of civilization and the one who establishes the order of things. At the same time, as many have observed, the aretalogies also stress functions that were of special interest to women: she is acclaimed as a protector of women during childbirth; she devised marriage contracts; she ordained marriage and marital affection; and she is called “goddess among women” (*ἡ παρὰ γυναιξί θεός*). There is no doubt that Isis held considerable attraction for women, as she did also for sailors (as the queen of rivers, winds and seas) and many others. The wide range of competences claimed for Isis—

wisdom and education, piety, law-giving, “family values,” astronomy, and navigation, to name just a few—and her reputation as a deity open to supplication gave her wide appeal. What is not in evidence is that the cult of Isis was disproportionately subscribed by women or that women enjoyed equal status with men within the cult. On the contrary, Sharon Heyob’s analysis (*The Cult of Isis among Women in the Graeco-Roman World* [Leiden: Brill, 1975] 81, 129) has shown that only 18 percent of the extant dedications to Isis are from women or mention priestesses or women devotees and that even in Italy and Athens, where the proportion of women dedicators was higher, they are still responsible for fewer than half of the dedications. Moreover, priestesses of Isis are unattested prior to the Roman period, and during the Roman period women served as secondary cultic agents, never as the main sacerdotal officers. Even if we take into account the fact that women likely did not have access to the same financial resources as men (and hence had fewer dedications cut), and even if we take into account the various visual depictions of the Isis cult, in which women are frequently represented and hence adjust Heyob’s figures upward, it remains that the cult of Isis was not in any obvious way a site of experimentation in the social liberation of women. Simply because the cult of Isis had women members does not mean that it lacked a (male-dominated) hierarchical structure, still less that it was “egalitarian.” Peter F. Dorsey (“The Role of Women in the Cult of Silvanus,” *Numen* 36 [1989]: 143–55) has made a plausible case that, although the 4 percent of extant women’s dedications to Silvanus probably does not represent the actual percentage of women members of the cult, it is hardly the case that the cult of Silvanus was egalitarian or that women enjoyed equal status with men—or that all men enjoyed the same status.

If McCabe exaggerates the liberative functions of the cult of Isis, she also constructs Roman culture as a patriarchal foil for Isis. Thus, she represents the periodic suppressions of the Isis cult in Rome as Roman emperors reacting to a “threat to patriarchal society” (37). It is true that for political reasons Augustus represented Anthony’s liaison with Cleopatra VII as an unnatural inversion of the natural order, and it is possible that Augustus’s suppression of the cult of Isis was a function of his struggles with Anthony. But this hardly explains earlier suppressions of the cult in 59, 58, 53, 50 and 48 B.C.E., which had more to do with struggles between aristocrats such as Clodius who cultivated the support among plebian *collegia* and those who opposed them. To suppose that these suppressions were attempts to ward off threats to patriarchy is too blunt an analysis and leaves us to explain why the cult was later promoted or embraced by Caligula, Nero, Otho, Vespasian, and Domitian.

Chapters 3 and 4 detail some of the fascinating convergences between the Isis cult and the Jesus movement: the use of water; parallels between the resuscitation of Osiris and the resurrection of Jesus; and the fact that both are savior cults. McCabe’s treatment raises

many questions that call out for further work, in particular questions concerning the recruitment mechanisms of both cults, the social registers in which each cult gained footholds, and the nature of the social power wielded by each cult. It would be important as well to engage in a comparison that gets beyond basic semantic parallels or the common use of certain substances (e.g., water) and to look more carefully at structural convergences and differences—the kind of close comparisons of the descriptions of Isis and Wisdom in Christa Kayatz’s *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9* (WMANT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966) or Burton Mack’s *Logos und Sophia* (SUNT 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973).

In the final chapter McCabe argues that the pastoral writer’s prohibition of women teaching or exercising authority over men and the accompanying argument that Adam was created first (and therefore deserves precedence) and that it was the woman, not the man, who was deceived (1 Tim 2:12–14) finds parallels in the myth of Isis’s successful efforts to trick Rē into disclosing his secret name (and thus give Isis magical power). There are indeed some rough parallels, but Rē was not Isis’s spouse, Isis was not deceived (on the contrary, she deceived Rē), and the function of the serpent in the two stories is entirely different. Moreover, we must observe a distinction between the native Egyptian cult of Isis, which features Isis as a mistress of magic, and her Hellenistic incarnations, which downplay or completely ignore her magical competences. In any event, it is difficult to make out in 1 Tim 2:12–14 an attack on the Isis-Rē myth; at least, if 1 Timothy were attacking the Isis-Rē myth, it was an impressively inept rebuttal.

The cult of Isis offers a reasonably well-documented and geographically diverse cult that in some ways may have been in direct or indirect competition with the Christ cult of the Greek and Roman cities of the empire. The several extant aretalogies, because of their remarkable similarities in structure and wording, create a “synoptic problem” that is yet to be addressed fully, and there is a lurking question about whether the *Vorlage* of the aretalogies is late Egyptian or Greek (analogous, for example, to the question of Q’s original language of composition). The accomplishment of McCabe’s volume is to bring the cult of Isis into conversation with the Christ cult. I am disappointed to find that none of McCabe’s own arguments is terribly compelling, mainly because they are either too schematic and forced or insufficiently attentive to the breadth of the available data. But it can be hoped that the conversation that she has begun between Isis and Christ might continue.