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**Kraemer, Ross Shepard**

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

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Ross Kraemer is one of the pioneers of historically careful studies of gender and religion. In *Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons and Monastics: A Sourcebook for Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World* (Fortress, 1988), later expanded and revised as *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, 2004), Kraemer provided a welcome, extensively researched historical collection of data for women's participation in religion that is still a fixture in studies of gender and religion. In *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religion among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), Kraemer not only provided evidence for neglected and forgotten (because marginalized) women's participation in and leadership in religions in the ancient world but also used the methodology of anthropologist Mary Douglas to furnish a theoretical framework for the understanding of women's religious lives in antiquity. In the volume edited with Mary Rose D'Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins* (Oxford University Press, 1999), Kraemer provided a collection of essays that historically analyzed women's participation in early Christianity from a variety of critical angles.

In her latest critical analysis of gender and religion in the Greco-Roman world, *Unreliable Witnesses*, Kraemer demonstrates the "reflexive turn" that has characterized so many

recent studies of gender and religion in the ancient world, one that admits, perhaps regretfully, that in search of a usable past for women's participation in religion, we may have conflated our desires with the evidence and are thus, as Kraemer notes of Elizabeth Clark's observations about the "construction" of gender in the ancient world, much less sanguine about extracting any kind of "reliable" history of women's religion from texts and even inscriptional evidence that are infused with a "history of ideas about gender" and the use of gender in the ancient rhetoric of power (7). As Kraemer notes in the introduction, "My recent work attends far more carefully to the degree to which the rhetorical uses of gender obscure our vision of antiquity" (11).

Throughout the book Kraemer applies this caution to analysis both of cherished, "classic," and still relatively unexamined evidence for women's participation in religion in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. Throughout she provides a rigorous, sometimes uncomfortably rigorous, analysis of the rhetoric of gender. In the end, however, one is left with a feeling of discomfort that there probably is no "usable past" and that any feminist positivist reconstruction of Greco-Roman religious activity for women, including that of Judaism or Christianity in their formative eras, is wish-fulfillment at best, failing to take into account the fact that any discourse about gender is a constructed discourse and does not enable us to derive an accurate representation of historical women—or men.

Kraemer's analysis of the ancient rhetoric of gender begins with "Four Short Stories" (ch. 2), which takes us through the Roman historian Livy's account of the "Bacchic scandal" in Rome in the second century B.C.E., providing a "textbook case of the problems of reconstructing and redescribing ancient women's religious devotions" (33), thanks to the author's "rhetorical agenda"; the "reporter from hell" in the Christian apocryphal Acts of Thomas, about a woman killed by her lover and raised by the apostle to narrate the torments of hell she saw when apparently dead, "clearly violations of gender norms" (41); "the daughters of rabbis," concerning the debates over women's Torah study in the Mishnah, debates that cause Kraemer to question what they have to do with "social reality" or, intriguingly, "whether anyone subjected these theories to reality testing" (46). The last example, "A Roman Christian Matron," uses the account of a woman known to Justin Martyr whose morally reformed life causes her pagan husband to accuse her of Christianity, a crime, and the subsequent indictment of her teacher. Here Kraemer engages Kate Cooper's *The Virgin and the Bride* (1996), which calls into question the very notion of the woman being the subject of the story at all when the "point" of the story is to highlight "competing male figures of authority" (52).

In a very extensive chapter, "Spouses of Wisdom" (ch. 3), Kraemer takes on Philo of Alexandria's description of the contemplative ascetic Jewish sect of the Therapeutae and their female counterparts, the Therapeutrides. Her examination still leaves open the

question whether either group, especially the latter, could really have existed (at least in the terms in which Philo describes them), suggesting that Philo's account does not reflect actual Therapeutridae; even if it is entirely fictive (as it may well be, in her view), "It is still very much about the uses of gender" (116).

Chapter 4 takes us to an important subject of study in the last three decades, "Thecla of Iconium" as depicted both in the Acts of Paul and Thecla and in the Pastoral Epistles (in particular 1 Timothy), both of which have been interpreted to reflect descriptions and debates over the leadership roles of women in early Christianity. Analyzing the important suggestions of Dennis MacDonald, Virginia Burrus, and Stephen Davis that the Acts may have originated with women's communities and women storytellers, Kraemer ultimately concludes that "it matters less who formulated the story and more what possibilities the story licenses in antiquity," namely, the possibility (not the certainty) that Paul's depicted "commissioning of Thecla to preach and teach may actually reflect the legitimation of women's roles to do just that (152). But Kraemer remains skeptical of the possibility of our knowing.

Chapter 5, "Artemisia of Minorca," takes us to a lesser-known tale of an attempt to convert the Jews of Minorca and women's roles in resisting that conversion, in the fifth century C.E. While the description of the conversion is contained in an authentic letter of the Christian Severus of Minorca, his account of the resisters is less an accurate description, in Kraemer's view, than an attempt to depict Judaism as feminine (and emasculating) and Christianity as being able to "remasculinize" Jewish men (176). In short, the *Letter* of Severus is less a window into historical and social reality than a clue to the "power dynamic" of fifth-century Minorca (178).

In chapter 6, "Veturia of Rome and Rufina of Smyrna as Counterbalance," Kraemer takes on two centrally important issues for feminist scholars of early religious history, the existence of women office holders in ancient synagogues and the attraction of Gentile women (as opposed to Gentile men) to Judean (Jewish) practices. Despite the earlier conclusions of Bernadette Brooten (*Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogues*, 1982), Kraemer herself finds the evidence, both for women's leadership in the synagogues and for Gentile attraction to Judaism (her preferred term is "Judean practice") "intriguing" but ultimately "ambiguous," (216) as are any reliable data for Gentile women's disproportionate involvement with Judaism (231).

Overall, the volume is more evidence of Kraemer's continued care to avoid Sherlock Holmes's fallacy of theorizing ahead of the data, or at least continuing to reexamine the data in the light of ongoing scholarship. Her continued devotion to the scholarship of Greco-Roman antiquity, particularly as it pertains to women's religious activity, however,

has made her far less confident in making any assertions about that activity. In the end, however, one can find some measure of comfort in her assertion that “I have argued in these chapters that some aspects of women’s practices (their activities, if not ordinarily their intentions and self-understandings) remain perceptible” (245).