

Review of Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean*, NY: Oxford University Press 2011, xvi + 322 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-991651-1

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In *Unreliable Witnesses*, Ross Shepard Kraemer, a pioneer in the study of women's religious history, revisits earlier work and revises previous positions, particularly the central claim that we can reconstruct women's lives and devotions in Greco-Roman antiquity from the fragmentary evidence of male-authored texts. In the long wake of post-structuralism, she is less confident in our ability to extract reliable knowledge from tantalising talk about Bacchus followers, female philosophers, and Torah-reading daughters. What is most certain is that such female figures served rhetorical purposes, casting doubt on their verisimilitude. It has grown difficult not only to say with surety that thus-and-such a woman lived, but even to claim that her story reflected women's experiences and choices in significant ways.

This may seem a sorry pass for a field founded with the goal of undoing women's erasure. Yet it signals not so much a turning back as a shift in direction dictated by the contours of the terrain. Without abandoning her interest in recovering what can be recovered of women's lives, Kraemer has changed focus from reconstructing women's practices to critically analysing the roles that gender played in religious arguments and self-understandings in the ancient Mediterranean world. Her book reflects and participates in a larger shift in the field.

Unreliable Witnesses is organised as a series of case studies bookended by a theoretically-oriented introduction and conclusion. The first content chapter offers short studies that trace out the book's themes. Pervasive gendered oppositions structure texts (like Livy's account of irrational, disorderly Bacchus worshippers) that are ostensibly about women and religion, making them 'unreliable witnesses' for women's lives. Nevertheless, these gendered discourses are not just proxy means by which elite men struggle for power amongst themselves, as some recent accounts would have it. They can index real conflicts within communities over gender roles. They *may* also describe women's actual practices. Given the available evidence, Kraemer argues that the historical existence of

particular women, such as the Torah students invoked in a Mishnaic debate, is often undecidable. It is not, however, unthinkable. Kraemer ably dissects the presentism underlying modern assumptions about what ancient gender hierarchies could and could not accommodate. She limns the limits of our knowledge, applying caution even-handedly both to those who seek precedents for women's acts today and – an important corrective – to those who dismiss this as unrealistic wish-fulfilment. The elusiveness of the social reality of the past cuts both ways.

Later chapters explore these themes at more length. Chapter 3 re-examines the question of the historical existence of the Therapeutae, an ascetic, philosophical sect described by Philo in which men and women participated on a relatively equal basis. Whereas once Kraemer sought to account for women's attraction to its celibate lifestyle, she now concludes that the sect is most likely a figment of Philo's utopian imagination. Chapter 4 looks at stories of Thecla, a female disciple of Paul's who baptises herself and travels as a preacher. Long seen as indicating conflict in the early church over women's authority to baptise and teach, this view has recently been challenged. Kraemer critiques this challenge, while agreeing that the Thecla story's mobilisation of gender is more complex than earlier scholarship, including her own, acknowledged. Chapter 5 turns to new material, a fascinating account of the 'voluntary' conversion of the Jews of Minorca in the fifth century, and the women portrayed as holdouts. Chapter 6 re-sifts epigraphical evidence pertaining to female officeholders in synagogues and to Gentile women converts to Judaism, finding that the former has been underestimated and the latter exaggerated.

The strengths of this book are manifold. Kraemer's erudition and reach serve her subject well. Defining that subject by era and geography rather than by religion, she analyses Greek and Roman, Judaic and Christian sources. This scope lets us see commonalities in their uses of gender, as well as idiosyncrasies. Despite the exponential growth of the field since she began her career in the 1970s, Kraemer has an exceptional grasp of both the scholarly history and recent debates pertaining to her materials. Her seriousness of purpose and generosity as a reader are manifest in a small way in her readiness to engage with relevant arguments made in dissertations. On a larger scale, the forthright reconsideration of her own earlier work throughout the book exemplifies her integrity as a scholar.

It can be unsatisfying to read that evidence for an intriguing historical possibility is inconclusive, but Kraemer's refusal to offer false certitudes testifies to her honesty. Her conclusions in individual case studies are finely argued and, for the most part, persuasive, and the detailed textual analyses give the book intellectual heft. They do sometimes make for slow going. This is a book that will be read by graduate students and established scholars; it is not pitched to undergraduates looking for an introduction to religion and gender in antiquity.

Kraemer's introduction and conclusion do offer a concise overview of some major theoretical definitions and debates, however. This is one area where I would have welcomed more detail. Although Kraemer shows how her empirical cases connect to numerous theoretical questions, these tend to be mid-range issues, such as the question of whether women convert in greater numbers than men. Broader theories of religion and gender are not worked through with the kind of attention she brings to her readings of texts.

Like a number of scholars in recent years, Kraemer is excited by the potential of cognitive theories of religion to bypass stale debates and offer a fresh naturalistic account. Yet it is not clear how these theories, which ground gender and religion in biological propensities to perceive sexual differences and to attribute agency to unseen beings, square with the more critical, constructivist approaches of feminist and social theorists whom she also cites (Bourdieu in particular is a strong influence). It is possible to read *Unreliable Witnesses* as a constructivist unmasking of 'the history, and thus the contingency, and the artifice, of gender,' and of 'religious claims' that reinforce its apparent naturalness (274). But Kraemer's enthusiasm for cognitive theories of religion sits strangely askew of this, pointing towards evolutionary time as something that lies beneath and stabilises the categories that such a history destabilises. These tensions need more discussion. Without it, the mention of cognitive theory feels like a non-sequitur, with little connection to the rich body of work that follows.

Kraemer recognises that it raises questions she doesn't address. Disarmingly, she writes, 'when I began this work, I was in my early twenties. In my early sixties, I'm feeling too old (or at least sufficiently old), not to mention too much of a scholar of Greco-Roman antiquity' to answer them. Though perhaps meant lightly, the remark is apt. Kraemer's heart seems to lie in the historical research to which she has devoted her career more than in the theoretical discussion that frames it. She mentions cognitive theory because it interests her, and she values an honest account over a seamlessly integrated presentation. Even with these loose threads, *Unreliable Witnesses* is a thoughtful, densely woven work that moves beyond well-worn critiques to advance our understanding of gender discourses, and through them, of gender, in the ancient world.