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EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN
AND THEIR CULTURAL CONTEXT: ISSUES OF METHOD
IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION*

Bernadette J. Brooten

If one desires to learn about the lives, practices, and beliefs of early Christian women, one should focus primarily on those women. The vast majority of research on women in early Christianity does not, however, focus primarily on women but rather on what men thought about women. If we want to reconstruct the history of early Christian women, a shift of emphasis is therefore required. We will need to place women in the center of the frame. Placing women in the center means that the categories developed to understand the history of man may no longer be adequate, that the traditional historical periods and canons of literature may not be the proper framework, and that we will need to ask new types of questions and consider hitherto overlooked sources. How and why we study cultural context would shift. If the focus were on women, then one might be less inclined to compare Paul with his male Jewish contemporaries and their views on women and more interested in placing such Roman Jewish women as Prisca and Junia within their Jewish and Roman context.

The approach I am describing is not the only legitimate one. One might study the Pauline passages relating to women in order to understand Paul better or one could examine gospel narratives relating to women so as to come to a better knowledge of the ministry of Jesus. Alternatively, one might attempt a feminist interpretation of a New Testament passage not directly related to women, for feminist interpretation is meant to be comprehensive. The point is not that my approach

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is the only legitimate one but rather that the method and the framework should fit the purpose. Since at the present the interest of most New Testament scholars—even of those writing on women in the New Testament—is not in the history of women, then those who have that interest need to reconsider the approach to the study of women current within New Testament scholarship.

This shift in focus also means a change in what one counts as social context and what one sees to be the theological center or revelation. New Testament scholars often locate questions relating to women as part of early Christianity's cultural milieu, part of the social world of the New Testament, but not as central to revelation. When we put women in the center of the frame, then a different constellation of theology, cultural milieu, and social world will emerge. When woman is no longer simply the social and cultural background of the theological center, then a shift in historical method and a rethinking of theology are required.¹

I. *Early Christian Women's History as Prehistory*

The study of early Christian women is not parallel to the study of early Christian men. To say that women have entered into history and are not simply a part of nature—forming the backdrop, waiting patiently for their husbands to return from the war or the marketplace or the synagogue or the senate, giving birth to sons who make history, mourning the dead and then dying and falling into oblivion themselves, close to life and to death, at one with the eternal cycle of nature—is to contradict the presuppositions of male-centered historiography. The history of man does not allow woman to be a subject of history. It would trivialize the near silence concerning women in our historical sources to create the impression that women's history is parallel to men's history. To consider women's history worthy of study is to go against the grain of traditional history writing. The lack of sources on women is part of the history of women. That we have been hindered from writing or forced to write anonymously or under a man's name, that male historians have considered women's lives unworthy of description, and that that which women have written has usually been ignored by scholars or is no longer extant makes the writing of women's history qualitatively different from the writing of men's history.

To express this qualitative difference, I would like to employ the

¹ For an extensive discussion of feminist hermeneutics and an application to early Christianity, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), which is the most creative and solid work of its type to date. In the present essay I have purposefully tried to build on Schüssler Fiorenza's work by avoiding extensive treatment of issues that she discusses, focusing instead on other questions.

term "prehistory," a term used by Mary Daly for the history of women.² "Prehistory" expresses the radical lack of our knowledge about women in antiquity. The story is nearly entirely missing; we are left with but a few scattered fragments. Yet "prehistory" does not imply that the task is hopeless, that we had best give up, thus letting those who have erased women from history have the last say. It implies a different kind of task, with different methods. To study prehistorical periods is difficult; we will never know as much about life in such periods as in those for which there exist written records. And yet, thorough and careful study of *all* available sources will enable us to reconstruct a much more complete picture than has hitherto been possible. Recognizing that, for women, the state of the sources is similar to that for men and women for the periods usually deemed prehistorical should elicit in us the shock necessary for rethinking the way we use the sources. Sources by men are also primarily about men; they may have little or nothing to do with women's activities or perceptions of themselves. Therefore it is absolutely necessary that we cast the net as widely as possible drawing upon hitherto overlooked sources, such as nonliterary documents (inscriptions, papyri), monumental remains, art, funerary remains, the few literary fragments and works composed by women, as well as women's oral traditions quoted in literary sources.

The term "prehistory" should also serve as a warning to us, for it expresses the highly tentative nature of any reconstruction. If women's history is something different from that which has passed for human history, then the mode of writing must also be different. Traditional historians have tried to create the impression that their reconstructions are firmly rooted in the base of certain and objective knowledge, and scholars of women's history need to beware of similarly objectifying language.³ The work of women's history must be based upon historical imagination. The thoughts behind a reconstruction would be: Let us imagine that this is the way it was; maybe it was not the way we have always thought, but rather this way. Such a childlike *Leitsatz* may seem to undercut the very foundations of scholarly historical criticism. One might think that careful textual analysis and scientific study of nonliterary remains were about to be replaced by

² Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 24.

³ Elizabeth Castelli, unpublished response to Bernadette Brooten, "Inscriptional Evidence for Women as Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue" (Paper delivered at the Claremont New Testament Seminar, Claremont, CA, 28 September 1982).

Among the male scholars who recognize the tentative nature of historiography, see esp. Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) and Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 101–23.

free-flowing fantasy. This is not the case. Scholars would need to examine each reconstruction, testing the interpretation of each fragment, analyzing the sketched-in lines connecting each fragment, and evaluating the suitability of the chosen framework. The difference would not be between fantastic fiction and secure and certain knowledge but rather between a self-consciously artistic rendering of what the past may have been and a self-proclaimed mirror of or window into the past. The difficulty is that the mirror and the window were never really that. The relatively greater evidence for men's history put together still does not constitute a mirror image of male reality and certainly not of women's reality. Nor is it possible through critical analysis to sift through the sources and, cleansing them of all perspectival distortions, to arrive at an objective view of the past. Some ancient sources would lead us to believe that women either did not exist or that they were beings very marginal to life. No amount of historical-critical work, no amount of taking the *Tendenz* into account will make woman emerge as a subject of history. If women, that is, half the human race, are absent, then such sources can never yield an objective picture of human history. Woman represents a crack in the system; her existence as central and not marginal demonstrates that both the ancient literary sources and contemporary historiography are not the mirrors or windows they claim to be. But women's history is likewise not a mirror, nor will it, added to men's history, become one. It is not a simple complement that makes the picture complete. Women's existence in history, contrasted with the trivialization and marginalization of women in both ancient sources and modern history writing, demonstrates that men's history is also an artistic rendering, sketched from a particular perspective, closely related to the interests, concerns, and background of the historian, but one that should be based upon and responsible to the ancient evidence relating to men. To accept this as a description of what historians do would imply a new kind of humility on our part. We would be more apt to admit its tentative nature and more straightforward in speaking of how our personal backgrounds and interests influence the choice of topic and the types of questions asked of the material.

Much of what I have outlined here as the mode of doing women's history is not new. In biblical hermeneutics, for example, one has long been aware of the role of presuppositions in interpretation, as Rudolf Bultmann's 1957 article, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?"⁴ attests. At the interdisciplinary level, especially the work of Thomas Kuhn has brought to the fore the way in which academic institutional structures

⁴ *Theologische Zeitschrift* 13 (1957) 409-17, and in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1964-65) 3. 142-50.

affect research presuppositions and results, a view very congenial to the feminist analysis of the way in which male-dominated institutional structures, academic and otherwise, affect the results of academic research.⁵ In spite of a theoretical recognition of some of these problems, the practice of writing men's history seldom reflects these insights. The writing of women's history forces issues to the front which might otherwise lie dormant.

II. A Shift in Categories Is Required

New Testament scholars have long recognized the necessity of placing the study of women in the New Testament in a historical, cultural context. Book-length studies on women in the New Testament typically begin with a section on women in Judaism and in the Greco-Roman world, and books and articles on such topics as Jesus and women, the household codes, or the Pauline injunction on veiling of women regularly refer to other sources of the period.⁶ In fact, on the surface it appears

⁵ See esp. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁶ For a survey of recent literature, see the review article by Ross S. Kraemer, "Women in the Religions of the Greco-Roman World," *Religious Studies Review* 9 (1983) 127-39. See also the bibliography *Women and Religion: A Select Bibliography* (American Theological Library Association, 1983); and Clare B. Fischer, *Breaking Through: A Bibliography of Women and Religion* (Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union Library, 1980). Of the many works that situate women within their cultural context, two can serve as examples here: Johannes Leipoldt (*Die Frau in der antiken Welt und im Urchristentum* [Berlin and Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962]), who begins with sections on matriarchy, Egyptian women, Roman women, Greek women, and Jewish women (pp. 9-79); and Evelyn and Frank Stagg (*Woman in the World of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978]), whose "Part I: The World Into Which Jesus Came" includes chapters on the Jewish, Greek, and Roman worlds (pp. 13-100).

Much of the literature on women and the New Testament deals with the question of whether Paul was antifeminist or liberationist, for example, Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1972) 283-303; idem, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman: Revisited," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974) 532-37; response by Elaine H. Pagels, "Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974) 538-49; G. B. Caird, "Paul and Women's Liberty," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 54 (1972) 268-81; Patrick J. Ford, "Paul the Apostle: Male Chauvinist?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 5 (1975) 302-11; A. Feuillet, "La dignité et le rôle de la femme d'après quelques textes pauliniens: comparaison avec l'Ancien Testament," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975) 157-91; A.-M. Dubarle, "Paul et l'antiféminisme," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 60 (1976) 261-80; Veselin Kesich, "St. Paul: Anti-Feminist or Liberator?" *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 21 (1977) 123-47; Richard and Joyce Boldrey, *Chauvinist or Feminist? Paul's View of Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976); Darrell J. Doughty, "Women and Liberation in the Churches of Paul and the Pauline Tradition," *Drew Gateway* 50 (1979) 1-21. For a survey of literature on women and Paul, see Ronald W. Graham, "Women in the Pauline Churches: A Review Article," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 11 (1976) 25-34.

that on the question of women, more than on many others, scholars recognize that one cannot understand the New Testament in a vacuum.

Upon closer examination, however, several problems emerge that are related to the categories employed. A standard comparison is between women in the New Testament and women in Judaism and the Greco-Roman world (or: women in Rome, Egypt, etc.). In essence, one is comparing statements about women found in a body of literature with statements about women found in the writings of a religious/ethnic group and with those found in the writings of a particular cultural period. In the first century, both Jewish and Christian women were part of the Greco-Roman world. Many Christian women were also Jewish. Another problematic comparison is that between Jewish and Hellenistic, terms which, after the work of V. Tcherikover, E. Bickermann and M. Hengel, can no longer be contrasted with each other.⁷ The standard categories of comparison are therefore misleading. This is not simply a formal objection, for the categories chosen determine the very results of research. The sharp contrast usually drawn between women in Judaism and women in early Christianity, for example, is only possible if one fails to recognize that such women as Prisca⁸ and Junia,⁹ leaders in the early church, were not only Christian but also Jewish and that their activities in leadership probably occurred in the context of a synagogue and thus are part of Jewish women's history.

One of the primary "backgrounds" to the New Testament is the Hellenistic or Greco-Roman world. Problems here emerge both from the way in which it is placed parallel to the Jewish world and from the way in which classicists define the study of women in antiquity from their own discipline. The study of Greek and Roman antiquity has at its root canons of literary excellence. For this reason, departments of classics often limit their course offerings to the core of Greek and Latin literature considered to be the basis of the discipline. Thus, the study of classics is essentially the study of two bodies of literature, and not of a historical period or of a

⁷ Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959); Elias Bickerman, *The God of the Maccabees* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 32; Leiden: Brill, 1979); Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2d rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

⁸ Acts 18:2-3, 24-28; Rom 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19. On the type of work in which early Christian missionaries such as Prisca were involved and on the cultural context of their work, see esp. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, chap. 5: "The Early Christian Missionary Movement: Equality in the Power of the Spirit" (pp. 160-204); idem, "Women in the Pre-Pauline and Pauline Churches," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 33 (1978) 156-57.

⁹ Rom 16:7. On Junia, see esp. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Die Rolle der Frau in der urchristlichen Bewegung," *Concilium* 12 (1976) 6; Bernadette J. Brooten, "Junia . . . Outstanding among the Apostles' (Romans 16:7)," in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (ed. Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler; New York: Paulist, 1977) 141-44.

culture. If history were the primary concern, then other literary traditions of the period, such as Greco-Jewish literature or Aramaic, Demotic or Hebrew literature, would be considered as central as Greek and Latin literature. If the concern were with the development of a culture, then Greek authors of the Roman period or later Latin authors would merit greater attention than they receive. This focus on particular works of Greek and Latin literature within the field of classics has also influenced the study of ancient history, so that Greece and Rome still occupy a preeminent role in courses on ancient history. Further, at least partially because of the existence of the fields of New Testament and patristics, classicists and ancient historians tend to exclude early Christian literature and history from their purview. If this decision were chronologically based, then the related tendency to exclude Jewish literature and history from survey studies would be inexplicable.

For the history of women, this division of labor creates considerable difficulties. The studies on women in classical antiquity tend to cluster around Greece and Rome in their peak periods of literary production, which results in large geographical and chronological gaps.¹⁰ The student of early Christianity, for example, wishing to learn about the history of women in the eastern Roman provinces in the first, second, or third century, will find little. There are a number of studies by classicists on women in Rome in the Republican and Imperial periods, but these do not normally include a discussion of Jewish and Christian women in Rome.¹¹

If the study of women in classical antiquity is formed by a field based on literary excellence, the study of women in early Christianity is

¹⁰ For literature on women in classical antiquity, see Sarah B. Pomeroy, "Selected Bibliography on Women in Antiquity," *Arethusa* 6 (1973) 125-57; also published in *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers* (ed. John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan; Albany: State University of New York, 1984) 315-42; idem (with Ross S. Kraemer and Natalie Kampen), "Selected Bibliography on Women in Classical Antiquity" in *Women in the Ancient World*, 343-72; Leanna Goodwater, *Women in Antiquity: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1975); Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975) 251-59; Marilyn B. Arthur, "Classics" (Review Essay), *Signs* 2 (1976) 382-403. For further literature, see the following anthologies: *Arethusa* 6:1 (1973) and 11:1-2 (1978; reprinted as *Women in the Ancient World*); - H. P. Foley, ed., *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1982). For primary sources, see esp. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A source book in translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Konrad Gaiser, *Für und wider die Ehe: Antike Stimmen zu einer offenen Frage* (Dialog mit der Antike 1; Munich: Heimeran, 1974).

¹¹ This is reflected in Goodwater (*Women*) both in her selection and within the books and articles reported upon. Some classicists do include a section on Christianity, for example, Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 262-78; Pomeroy, "Bibliography on Women in Antiquity," 149-52; "Bibliography on Women in Classical Antiquity," 365-69 (section prepared by Ross S. Kraemer); but I know of no such inclusion of Judaism.

built upon a discipline shaped by a religious decision. It is the decision of a male-dominated church leadership to canonize the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, which has determined the boundaries of the study of women in early Christianity for most scholars. Further, because both fields are based on bodies of literature, the focus of study tends to be on the images of women in male-authored literary works rather than on the history of women. In addition, a disjuncture exists because, although the Greco-Roman world contains Judaism and Christianity within it, classicists, ancient historians, as well as scholars in Jewish studies and New Testament seldom behave as if this were the case. Because Judaism and Christianity were the only Greco-Roman religions to survive, they merit separate categories of study in contemporary scholarship, and because the classical literature of Greece and of Rome has been so influential on Western thought, they too are given special institutional support today. One must ask whether these divisions are appropriate to the women's history of that period. Much more interdisciplinary cooperation is required to fill in the gaps in research; such cooperation will involve overcoming considerable disciplinary prejudices.

Within the study of women and the cultural context of early Christianity, the assessment of the relative status of women in Judaism and Christianity is particularly problematic and therefore deserves special attention. In a word, on the question of women Judaism is regularly used as a negative backdrop against which to view early Christianity. I am using the terms "status of women" and "question of women" quite consciously, because they accurately describe the approach of most scholars who compare women in ancient Judaism with women in early Christianity; that is, the interest is not in the history of Jewish women, but rather in a comparison between Jewish men and Christian men and their attitudes toward women. Such comparisons usually occur when assessing Jesus' or Paul's attitudes toward women. George Tavad, for example, in discussing 1 Cor 11:2-7 (on the man as the head of the woman, on veiling, and on man being the image and glory of God), writes: "This is patently a very rabbinic passage. Paul has not yet emancipated himself (and how could he have done so?) from the thought patterns of his Jewish-pharisaic training." His comment on the command that women be silent in the churches is: "This old-fashioned Jewish position is hardly in keeping with the principle and the practice of prophecy."¹² G. W. Trompf, referring to Paul's collegial relationship with women, writes: "If Paul had so eluded the patriarchal attitudes of his Jewish inheritance, then, it makes it the more unlikely that 1 Cor 11:3-16 is from his

¹² George H. Tavad, *Woman in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973) 29, 30.

hand."¹³ Tavad does not say how the passage from 1 Corinthians 11 is rabbinic (in midrashic technique? are there rabbinic parallels?), nor does he document that the prohibition of women speaking in religious services is in fact a Jewish position. Further, the juxtaposition of Jewish and prophetic is a rather curious one. Trompf similarly makes a simple equation between patriarchal and Jewish, implying that for Paul to work together with women was to go beyond his Jewish inheritance.

The difficulties in the comparative study of women in Judaism and Christianity are inherent not only in such offhanded comments, left undocumented and unexplained, but also in the conceptual framework within which one studies women in ancient Judaism. One major problem is the confusion of prescriptive with descriptive literature; that is, one takes rabbinic sayings about women to be a reflection of Jewish women's reality. Concomitant with this lack of distinction is the organization of the study according to literary corpus. Evelyn and Frank Stagg, in their book *Woman in the World of Jesus*,¹⁴ for example, arrange the section on women in the Jewish world according to "Philo of Alexandria," "The Writings of Josephus," etc. They follow the same literary rubric in their sections on women in the Greek and Roman worlds. Such an arrangement lends itself to woman being treated as a literary motif and to a confusion between images of women in Jewish literature and the history of Jewish women. The focus is on male writers and their attitudes toward women, rather than on women themselves. Given this literary outline, with its accompanying lack of attention to nonliterary sources, it is not surprising that literature is confused with reality.

One example of this is a statement in the section on the Mishnah: "In Jewish society, divorce was a man's prerogative, not a woman's (*Yeb.* 14.1), except in the relatively rare cases where a woman wielded special power, as in the more Roman than Jewish Herodian families."¹⁵ In discussing Jesus' prohibition of divorce, they note: "One thing common to all passages ascribed to Jesus is the absence of the double standard that discriminated against woman."¹⁶ If one studies the problem of Jewish divorce historically, drawing upon all available evidence rather than only the few readily known texts, it becomes evident that there were two strands of legal thought and practice in ancient Judaism. According to the one, only the man could initiate a divorce, but according to the other a woman also had that right.¹⁷ If that is the background, then the question of the double

¹³ G. W. Trompf, "On Attitudes Toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature: 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and Its Context," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980) 211.

¹⁴ See above, n. 6. In spite of the questions I raise here, this book is helpful in many ways.

¹⁵ Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 51.

¹⁶ Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 133.

¹⁷ For documentation and discussion of the evidence for ancient Jewish divorce practice

standard may not have been Jesus' concern at all. Further, the strict prohibition of divorce has worked not only to protect women from arbitrary dismissal by their husbands but also to lock women into unhappy and even violent marriages. A total prohibition of divorce in the context of patriarchal marriage cannot be seen as simply liberating for women.

Evelyn and Frank Stagg are by no means alone in viewing Jesus' prohibition of divorce in this way. Leonard Swidler speaks of "Jesus' revolutionary egalitarian attitude toward women in marriage by eliminating the husband's right to divorce his wife,"¹⁸ and Johannes Leipoldt sees the prohibition as based on love of neighbor and given for the purpose of protecting the woman from ending up in misery.¹⁹ Taken within its own context and within the context of later centuries, Jesus' prohibition of divorce is ambivalent for women. On the one hand, it has protected women from simply being sent away by their husbands. On the other, strictly forbidding divorce changes the nature of marriage, and patriarchal marriage without exit means something rather different for women than for men. Could it be a recognition, perhaps unconscious, of this ambivalence that has led to wanting to see Jesus' prohibition of divorce against the backdrop of inequalitarian Jewish practice of divorce? Could it be that only against that backdrop it seems egalitarian? In her article "Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy," Judith Plaskow speaks of projection onto "the Other" of that which we cannot acknowledge in ourselves. She writes: "Feminist research projects onto Judaism the failure of the Christian tradition unambiguously to renounce sexism. . . . This is the real motive behind biased presentations of Jesus' Jewish background: to allow the feminist to present the 'true' Christian tradition as uniquely free from sexism."²⁰ The treatment of Jewish divorce in the time of Jesus seems to me to be an example of such a projection. Jewish women and their history evoke little attention in all of this; it is at most Jewish men who are of interest as a backdrop for Jesus' saying.

Leonard Swidler has had a long-term commitment to feminist issues within the church and has made important contributions, through his teaching, writing, and editorial activity, in this area. His studies of

with respect to women, see the recent debate in *Evangelische Theologie*: Bernadette Brooten, "Konnten Frauen im alten Judentum die Scheidung betreiben? Überlegungen zu Mk 10,11-12 und 1 Kor 7,10-11," *EvT* 42 (1982) 65-80; Eduard Schweizer, "Scheidungsrecht der jüdischen Frau? Weibliche Jünger Jesu?" *EvT* 42 (1982) 294-97 (= "I. B. Brooten"); Hans Weder, "Perspektive der Frauen?" *EvT* 43 (1983) 175-78; Bernadette J. Brooten, "Zur Debatte über das Scheidungsrecht der jüdischen Frau," *EvT* 43 (1983) 466-78.

¹⁸ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 238.

¹⁹ Leipoldt, *Die Frau in der antiken Welt*, 89.

²⁰ In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (ed. Evelyn Torton Beck; Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982) 253; the article appeared previously in *Cross Currents* 28 (1978) 306-9, and in *Lilith* 7. 11-13.

women in ancient Judaism and early Christianity have been more influential on a broad scale over the past decade than the work of any other single scholar, and they are therefore deserving of special attention.²¹ There are certain points at which one must raise questions. Swidler's thesis that Jesus was a feminist, which is central to his writing on women in the Bible and women in postbiblical Judaism, rests on his conception of what it meant to be a Jewish woman at the time of Jesus. His focus is on attitudes toward women rather than on the history of Jewish women; this is in keeping with the ultimate goal, which is a comparison between Jesus and other male Jews of his time. This focus is evident in the categories Swidler employs. In *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, the sections "Woman in Hebrew-Jewish Tradition" and "Woman in Christian Tradition" are subdivided into "positive," "ambivalent," and "negative" (elements, images and/or attitudes). This is not a historical categorization. Were one to be interested primarily in concrete Jewish women, their daily lives, rituals, achievements, and struggles, one would not utilize such categories. For how could one evaluate the complex historical phenomena of Jewish women's lives with the categories "positive," "ambivalent," and "negative"? Even as categories for describing attitudes, these are not adequate. While it is relatively clear what constitutes a negative element or attitude toward women, that which is positive is much less clear. For example, Swidler places Jesus' prohibition of divorce in the "positive" category,²² but most feminists would disagree that a strict prohibition of divorce is positive for women. Further, his placing the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam and the Fall story (Genesis 2-3) in the "positive" category²³ would hardly meet with unanimous agreement among feminists. The problematic character of Swidler's categories becomes especially evident through his use of the term "ambivalent"; the necessity of this third category makes it clear that these divisions really do not work. "Ambivalent" is a catchall term, situated between "positive" and "negative," subsuming whatever does not fit elsewhere, whereby the lines are often blurred. The section "Deutero-Pauline (and Other) Ambivalent (and Some Negative) Attitudes Toward Women"²⁴ is a good illustration of the problem. Within that section it is not at all clear which are the ambivalent and which are the negative attitudes. One is also surprised to find that, for example, 1 Cor 14:33b-35, the command that women be silent in the churches, is placed in this category, rather than in the clearly negative one. Swidler, by way of explanation of the pas-

²¹ Leonard Swidler, "Jesus was a Feminist," *The Catholic World* 212 (Jan. 1971) 171-83; idem, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1976); idem, *Biblical Affirmations*.

²² *Biblical Affirmations*, 173-75, 238-39, 259.

²³ *Biblical Affirmations*, 76-84.

²⁴ *Biblical Affirmations*, 332-38.

sage, notes: "Perhaps the author thought of the women as all converts from Judaism, where women for the most part were kept illiterate."²⁵ The relationship between literacy and public speaking is not a simple one, and the present state of research does not allow us in any case to come to a conclusion about the comparative literacy rate among Diaspora Jewish and Gentile women.

Especially striking about Swidler's outline is that, whereas passages from the Hebrew Bible and extracanonical Jewish writings do fall under the category "negative," on the Christian side, all of the New Testament falls into "positive" or "ambivalent," and it is only the Christian fathers who are placed in the negative category. The New Testament canon, with the exception of the "(and Some Negative)," is thus kept within the boundaries of the positive and the ambivalent. None of the genuine Pauline passages is considered negative, not even Rom 1:26 (condemnatory evaluation of sexual love relations between women),²⁶ nor 1 Cor 11:2-16 (veiling of women, subordinationist theology of the sexes).²⁷

Especially evident in Swidler, but also at the base of many scholars' work on women in ancient Judaism, is the assumption that quantity within the sources somehow reflects historical reality. This balance-sheet type of approach creates the impression that the sixty-three tractates of the Talmud reflect a greater historical reality than the Jewish inscriptions from Rome (a Jewish community that flourished throughout the Roman period but the literature of which is not extant) or the literary fragments from Alexandria. Although it is true for men's history as well, for women's history one must be exceptionally careful to recall that each mention of women we have is but the tip of an iceberg. If that is the case, then one cannot simply line up all of the Jewish and Christian evidence about women, placing all varieties of sources together and not distinguishing their relative significance.

It is also problematic that Swidler employs the categories "Jewish" and "Hellenistic" throughout his work, as do most Christian scholars who write about Jewish women. The assumption is usually that the Hellenistic world was more progressive and the Jewish world more conservative with respect to women, so that when one discovers progressive elements in Judaism, the tendency is to attribute these to Hellenistic influence. A

²⁵ *Biblical Affirmations*, 337.

²⁶ Rom 1:26 is mentioned only in passing (p. 330) and does not merit a paragraph of its own. This is not in keeping with the widespread discussions in the women's movement of lesbian existence and discrimination against lesbians.

²⁷ *Biblical Affirmations*, 329-32.

good example of this is Johannes Leipoldt's treatment of the Therapeutrides, a group of ascetic Jewish women who devoted their lives to the study of the Torah and the allegorical interpretation thereof (Philo, *De vita contemplativa*). Leipoldt writes:

That it is expressly emphasized that the Therapeutrides are filled with the same zeal for the Law as their male colleagues is, however, un-Jewish. . . . The Therapeutai are outsiders within Judaism. Their ascetic stance . . . is Greek, as is their love of monasticism. . . . Therefore one cannot view the participation of the Therapeutrides in religious services as characteristic for the Jewish manner. It remains the case that in general the Jew did not view woman as equal to man before God and therefore did not let her speak in religious services.²⁸

Swidler writes: "The misogyny of much of contemporary Palestinian Judaism seems to have been greatly modified by Greek influence in the Therapeutae. . . ." ²⁹ In all of this it is not clear that the Therapeutrides/ai were outsiders in Judaism at all—Philo praises them highly and says that they were spread throughout the Greek and the barbarian worlds (*De vita contemplativa* 21)—nor is it evident why it should be uncharacteristic of Judaism for women to participate in religious services.³⁰ Further, why should foreign influence have been necessary to counteract Jewish misogyny? Why could Judaism not have been a pluriform entity, with many strands of thought and variety in practice?

The type of evaluation given by Leipoldt and Swidler is relevant for New Testament studies in that it excludes from the discussion evidence of Jewish women's intellectual activity by a priori ruling it out of court as being non-Jewish in origin. This in turn results in the view that women in ancient Judaism were nearly always victims of male dominance and seldom leaders or contributors to culture. A view of women in Judaism from which the progressive elements have been cleansed as being Hellenistic in origin is then taken as the backdrop for New Testament statements on women.

For Leipoldt the assumption that pagan is more progressive than Jewish goes so far that he discusses Lydia and Prisca in the context of Gentile Christians, noting: "After all of that it is not surprising that Christian women are mentioned and praised relatively more frequently in the Gentile church than in Jerusalem."³¹ According to Acts 16:13-15,

²⁸ Leipoldt, *Die Frau in der antiken Welt*, 59, 60, 61 (my translation); discussed by Swidler, *Women in Judaism*, 66-69; *Biblical Affirmations*, 133-34.

²⁹ Swidler, *Women in Judaism*, 69; *Biblical Affirmations*, 134.

³⁰ On women's participation in synagogue worship services, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Brown Judaic Studies 36; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 139-41.

³¹ Leipoldt, *Die Frau in der antiken Welt*, 109 (my translation).

Paul met Lydia at the sabbath synagogue service,³² and Acts 18:2 reports that Priscilla and Aquila were Jews. (Compare Acts 18:26, in which Priscilla and Aquila are said to have taught the Jewish rhetor Apollos in a synagogue context.)

One of the most widely read brief studies on women in ancient Judaism is the appendix on the topic by Joachim Jeremias in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*.³³ Although it is much more extensively documented than any of the literature cited thus far and less inaccurate in detail, there are nevertheless certain structural difficulties. Similar to the other authors, Jeremias's primary interest is not in Jewish women but in contrasting Jesus with his male Jewish contemporaries, as his closing paragraphs indicate. One of the major points of contrast is Jesus' prohibition of divorce.³⁴ This focus on Jesus determines the way in which he describes the position of Jewish women. He places special emphasis on statements concerning subordination and restriction, of which there are many, and tends to take them as simple reflections of historical reality. Jewish evidence attesting to anything other than the subordination of women he rarely quotes or examines critically. One example of this would be the inscriptional occurrence of the title *archisynagōgos*, "head of the synagogue," for women, which Jeremias declares to have occurred under foreign influence and to be honorific, a view for which there is little evidence in the sources.³⁵

In order to come to a better historical understanding of the material with which Jeremias deals, most of which is rabbinic, one would need first of all to study it systemically in its literary context. Jacob Neusner has provided a model for such work in his five-volume commentary on Mishnah's Division on Women.³⁶ Such systemic study is not an attempt to excuse or apologize for the misogyny found in rabbinic texts, as Neusner's work amply demonstrates. On the contrary, it helps to locate and understand rabbinic statements concerning women within the male-centered thought system from which they emanate. As a historian of

³² The RSV and some other translations do not translate *proseuchē* in Acts 16:13 as "synagogue." This hesitancy is in part due to the fact that it was women who were gathered there. *Proseuchē*, however, is well attested as meaning "synagogue." On this problem of terminology see Martin Hengel, "Proseuche und Synagoge. Jüdische Gemeinde, Gotteshaus und Gottesdienst in der Diaspora und in Palästina," in *Festschrift Karl Georg Kuhn: Tradition und Glaube* (ed. Gert Jeremias, Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn and Hartmut Stegemann; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 157-84; Paul Wexler, "Terms for 'Synagogue' in Hebrew and Jewish Languages: Explorations in Historical Jewish Interlinguistics," *Revue des études juives* 140 (1981) 101-38; Brooten, *Women Leaders*, 139-40.

³³ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 358-76.

³⁴ Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 376.

³⁵ Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 374 n. 79; see Brooten, *Women Leaders*, 5-39, 223-33.

³⁶ Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Women* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1980).

women, one needs to remember that such a system does not correspond to historical reality. As Neusner puts it: "So Mishnah speaks for its authorities and tells us what is on their minds, that alone. Only in later times would the Israelite world come to approximate, and even conform to, Mishnah's vision of reality. But the meaning of which we presently speak is in the minds of a handful of men."³⁷

What Neusner means is that the rabbinic authorities, the teachers whose sayings are recorded in the Mishnah, began as a small group of men whose understanding of Judaism came to be accepted as normative only in later centuries. The sayings of the rabbis do not reflect historical reality, but rather their vision of reality, and need to be studied in the context of that vision. The next step after systemically analyzing the rabbinic understanding of women and differentiating with respect to individual rabbis' views would be to begin to reconstruct Jewish women's history in antiquity. The focus would be on Jewish women, rather than as at present on Jewish men's attitudes, and the purpose would be to understand the history of Jewish women better, rather than to use Judaism as a mere backdrop against which to view early Christianity. Such an approach would also be much more useful for those whose primary interest is early Christianity, because fuller, more complete, more critical history of Jewish women in antiquity would provide a much better basis than we have now for placing early Christian women in their historical context and for comparative studies.³⁸

III. Restructuring Implies New Questions and a New Framework

What concrete shape might the history of early Christian women take?³⁹ How might one proceed with it? In order to reconstruct this

³⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism* (Brown Judaic Studies 10; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979) 95.

³⁸ For further discussion of the study of women in Judaism on the part of Christian scholars, see Bernadette J. Brooten, "Jüdinnen zur Zeit Jesu. Ein Plädoyer für Differenzierung," *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Tübingen) 161 (1981) 281-85. An important project in progress at present is that being undertaken by Ross S. Kraemer on the topic of women in Greek-speaking Jewish communities in the Roman Empire. Kraemer follows an approach similar to that outlined below, that is, a women's history approach. For further literature on the history of Jewish women in antiquity, see esp. Ora Hamelsdorf and Sandra Adelsberg, *Jewish Women and Jewish Law* (Fresh Meadows, NY: Biblio, 1980). For the older literature, see Bernhard Wachstein, *Literatur über die jüdische Frau* (Veröffentlichungen der Bibliothek der israelitischen Kultusgemeinde Wien 7; Vienna: Bibliothek der israelitischen Kultusgemeinde, 1931).

³⁹ Those working on women's history in early Christianity can benefit greatly from historians of women of other periods. See, for example, Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); *Conceptual Frameworks For Studying Women's History*: four papers by: Marylin Arthur, Renate Broidenthal, Joan Kelly-Gadol, Gerda Lerner (A Sarah Lawrence College Women's Studies

history, one would need to have a good understanding of social, political, and economic conditions of the women of various classes in all parts of the Roman Empire; of women's participation in and the theology of other Greco-Roman religions, including Judaism; of first-century philosophical and religious thinking about women; of the laws affecting women in the various geographical regions; of women's participation in public life, including politics; of sexual behavior and attitudes toward sexuality; and of the physical living conditions of women, that is, architecture, art, ceramics, etc. One would want to know how many women could write, what women's education consisted of, what women wore, and what kinds of work slave women did. It would be necessary to note developments within women's history in the first century, tracing them back to and/or contrasting them with previous centuries. A study of first-century Christian women would also imply a study of first-century Christian men's theology and practice, as well as of such societal institutions as the family. All of this requires a new kind of synthesis, drawing upon New Testament and Jewish studies, classics, ancient history, archaeology, art history, papyrology, epigraphy, and anthropology.⁴⁰

A history of Christian women in the first century would be a history of women, and not a history of male attitudes toward women. If the primary focus were on women, then the history of Christian women would be part not only of the history of early Christianity but also of the history of first-century women. One would not just be comparing Paul's statements on women with Philo's statements on women; one would be locating women like Junia and Prisca in the continuum of Jewish women's history, which includes the Therapeutrides, Jewish women who

Publication, 1975); Berenice A. Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs* 1 (1976) 809-23; Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: Rediscovering Women in History from the 17th Century to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1976); Carolyn C. Lougee, "Modern European History" (Review Essay), *Signs* 2 (1977) 628-50; Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); articles in the journal *Pénélope* 1- (1979-); Christine Fauré, "Absent from History," *Signs* 7 (1981) 71-80; idem, "The Twilight of the Goddesses, or The Intellectual Crisis of French Feminism," *Signs* 7 (1981) 81-86; Carl N. Degler, "What the Women's Movement Has Done to American History," *Soundings* 44 (1981) 403-21; Jane Lewis, "Women, Lost and Found: The Impact of Feminism on History," in *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines* (ed. Dale Spender; Oxford and New York: Pergamon, 1981) 55-72; Gisela Bock, "Historische Frauenforschung: Fragestellungen und Perspektiven," in *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte* (ed. Karin Hausen; Munich: Beck, 1983) 22-60.

⁴⁰ On the usefulness of anthropological research for the study of women's history, see esp. Gianna Pomata, "Die Geschichte der Frauen zwischen Anthropologie und Biologie," *Feministische Studien* 2:2 (1983) 113-27.

were synagogue leaders, and Beruriah.⁴¹ Junia and Prisca were both first-century Roman Jewish women. Prisca taught in a context related to the synagogue (Acts 18:26); had a house church together with her husband Aquila (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19), with whom she also worked as a tent maker (Acts 18:3); and, according to Acts 18:2, was banned from Rome and went to Corinth. Junia was an apostle, a fellow prisoner of Paul, and had become a Christian before Paul (Rom 16:7). A study of Junia and Prisca in their historical context would therefore mean posing such questions as: What are the sources for first-century Jewish women in Rome? What do we know about women and the Roman penal code? What do we know about Jewish women's education and about non-Jewish Roman women's education in this period? Are there other examples of wives and husbands practicing a trade together? What would have been the income from such a trade? How much do we know about women and travel in this period? Did women serve as delegates or missionaries in other religious movements or in civic contexts? What can we know of the size, layout, and cost of a house in which a house church could have met? These questions are rather straightforward historical questions, unusual only because they simply presuppose that women, like men, are historical beings, and that the historical study of women is a worthwhile enterprise.

To write women's history cannot, however, mean to use literature as a sort of attic archive, drawing out historical details and pasting together a collage which then passes as historical reality. The historian must respect the integrity of literature, recognizing that the very historicity of a literary document implies studying it for itself, in its present form, with its own contours. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to search the New Testament for snippets of information about women, cutting them out and placing them side by side with similar snippets about other first-century women painstakingly clipped from other literary and non-literary sources, glueing the whole thing together and passing it off as the reality of women's lives in the first century. This is not the enterprise. Junia and Prisca were both associates of Paul, and they cannot be understood apart from him. In fact, were it not for Paul, we would know nothing of Junia and even less of Prisca than we do know. To say that Junia and Prisca were Paul's associates is, however, not to say that they shared his theology, Christology, or understanding of women. But it is to say that Paul's desire that women be veiled while preaching or prophesying and the accompanying idea that God is the head of Christ, Christ

⁴¹ Beruriah was a learned Palestinian Jewish woman of the early second century. See esp. David Goodblatt, "The Beruriah Traditions," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26 (1975) 68-85.

the head of the man, and the man the head of the woman (1 Cor 11:2-16)⁴² were part of their reality. They may not have accepted Paul's views for themselves or they may have. In any case they probably could not ignore them, and Paul's views are therefore a part of their history and must be analyzed as such. Such an analysis would, however, be of a new type. Rather than taking Paul's views on women as an accurate reflection of early Christian women's reality, one would analyze Paul's system of thought on its own terms and in the context of male thinking of the time and then ask how women in antiquity were affected by and, in turn, how they affected Paul's views. On the question of veiling, for example, 1 Cor 11:2-16 is evidence that some women did not agree with Paul. It was presumably their refusing to wear the sign of submission that caused Paul to write on the subject and to formulate a theology of headship as theoretical support for the practice of veiling. Whether the Corinthian women finally accepted either Paul's subordinationist theology or his command that they be veiled, we do not know.

To write women's history, to place women at the center, is to say that men are not at the center of reality, that what men do and are is not more important than what women do and are. It is still true, for both general and church history, that the topics chosen and the questions asked assume that men's activities and thoughts are more important than women's. The tendency to emphasize political and military history is based on this assumption, as is the tendency in church history to focus on the history of councils, papal pronouncements, and dogmas. When the framework is structured in this way, it is not surprising to find the history of women subsumed under such categories as "the role of women," or "the status of women." Such terminology evokes the image of the landscape of a male reality that is varied and complex. Men have many roles, and their reality varies as to social class, geographical region, race, religion, historical period, etc. Into this dynamic and active landscape, we now place woman, a clay figurine, which is put into place at some

⁴² On 1 Cor 11:2-16, see esp. Morna D. Hooker, "Authority on Her Head: An Examination of 1 Cor xi.10," *New Testament Studies* 10 (1964-65) 410-16; Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1972) 297-302; Annie Jaubert, "Le voile des femmes (1 Cor xi. 2-16)," *New Testament Studies* 18 (1972) 419-30; William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and Paul's Views Regarding Women," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975) 94-110; A. Feuillet, "La dignité et le rôle de la femme d'après quelques textes pauliniens," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975) 157-91; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "The Non-Pauline Character of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976) 615-21; John P. Meier, "On the Veiling of Hermeneutics (1 Cor 11:2-16)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978) 212-26; Lamar Cope, "1 Cor 11:2-16: One Step Further," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978) 435-36; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Sex and Logic in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980) 482-500; Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 226-30, 233.

one point in the moving scene. One can now discuss her role, her status, her relation to men in the scene. If, as the discussion proceeds, one notices that woman actually has several roles or that the status of a slave woman in the society in question differs from the status of an aristocratic woman, one adds new clay figurines to the scene to express that diversity. One can also place this landscape next to others and compare the status of woman in one society with the status of woman in another. This clay-figurine method of the study of women is really based on the view that women are not active participants in history at all, but rather passive recipients of a role or roles given to them by men and a status allowed to them by men. Placing women in the center means that the clay figurines come alive. They begin to talk to each other, telling their experiences, their beliefs, their hopes, their theories, and their opinions.

In the context of male-dominated society (which is not to be equated with male-centered reality), to place women in the center is not the same as the male-centered landscape shadow boxes we have been viewing. To place women at the center is not "reverse discrimination." Focusing in on the clay figurines and wanting to hear them is the only way to allow them to come alive. To listen to women is not to refuse to hear men; it is to let those who have been mute speak.

One might object that this is all a rather idealized picture: the clay figurines of the past come alive and begin telling us their story with great animation and even in dialogue with each other. I must quickly add that such a thing cannot ever happen in quite this way for antiquity. We will probably never hear the women of early Christianity in their discussing, debating, and struggling with or in their comforting one another. The most we can hope for is a snippet of a conversation, a quick glimpse through a crack in the door. If we do not focus all of our attention on how to get that snippet and that glimpse, we will miss them.

In order to be prepared to receive, we must phrase the questions properly. If we ask about military affairs, governmental intrigues or the development of church hierarchy, the din of male voices will drown out the one or two women speaking. If, on the other hand, we ask about popular piety; look at the pictures people venerated; talk about taxes, work, and wages; marriage, divorce, and celibacy; spinning and weaving and clothing and food; if we ask what women read and wrote, what they said, and what they did, then we may hear what the women have to tell us.

With this kind of framework, it should be clear that comparisons between early Christianity and its cultural context would not be comparisons of the status and role of women. The purpose of comparing early Christianity with other religious movements and of setting it in its cultural context would be to understand the language in which early Christian women spoke and to be able to imagine what their lives may have

been like. In order to understand why women may have become Christian, one would want to know as much as possible about the women and men who did not become Christians, as well as about the men who did. With such a model, the study of women would no longer be a battleground for the struggle over the superiority of one religion over another; this would not, however, mean an avoidance of questions of meaning.

If framework implies where women are placed in the picture, it also entails the question of historical periodization, that is, the boundaries of each frame. Women's historians have called into question the traditional periodization of history as not necessarily reflecting women's experience. As Joan Kelly-Gadol put it: "Let me merely point out that if we apply Fourier's famous dictum—that the emancipation of women is an index of the general emancipation of an age—our notions of so-called progressive developments, such as classical Athenian civilization, the Renaissance, and the French Revolution, undergo a startling re-evaluation."⁴³ It was, in fact, Kelly-Gadol's negative answer to the question "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" which introduced periodization as an issue in women's history.⁴⁴ We might ask whether, for example, "History of the Jewish people in the Period of the Mishnah and the Talmud" is the best framework within which to place Jewish women's history from ca. the first century B.C.E. through the sixth century C.E. "Apostolic Age," which presumably does not include Junia (Rom 16:7) or Thecla, who is called an apostle in some traditions, also needs to be questioned as a period of Christian women's history, as does the "Patristic Period." For the time being, the political designations ("Ptolemaic," "Roman," "Byzantine," etc.) may prove to be the most useful. Changes in government meant changes in law, which did affect women's lives. In Ptolemaic Egypt, for example, women could not own land, but in Roman Egypt they could. Similarly, the advent of the Christian emperors meant legal changes that significantly affected women's lives, such as in the area of divorce law. Nevertheless, these political periods should be understood merely as convenient markers. One would still need to examine whether there might be more important turning points in ancient women's history than changes in political power. For religious history, it may be best to suspend the use of periods for the time being and to speak simply of the century or centuries involved.

A further area relating to framework is that of canons of literature. The historical study of women cannot limit itself to bodies of literature

⁴³ Kelly-Gadol, "Social Relation," 810–11.

⁴⁴ Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 137–64. On the question of periodization, see also Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 154–59; Degler, "What the Women's Movement Has Done," 418–19.

canonized by men or raised to the level of normativity by men. Within the scope of the present discussion this issue would relate primarily to the history of women in early Christianity and ancient Judaism. Concretely this means that those wishing to study the history of women in early Christianity cannot limit themselves to the New Testament canon and cannot exclude the early Christian churches considered heretical by other branches of early Christianity. For Judaism, the history of Greek- and Latin-speaking Jewish women deserves the same attention as that which one can learn from rabbinic literature, and it should be studied as having its own integrity and not simply interpreted in light of rabbinic halakah and sayings about women. For both Judaism and Christianity, a limitation to the canonical and the normative would yield a skewed picture of women. Were one, for example, to limit oneself to the canonical Pauline and deutero-Pauline literature, one could have the impression that Paul was ambivalent with respect to women, and that this ambivalence was solved by his disciples in the direction of conservatism. One would note that, on the one hand, Paul accepted women as colleagues (Rom 16:1–12; Phil 4:2–3; Phlm 2), believed that gender distinctions cease in Christ (Gal 3:28), accepted women's prophesying activity (1 Cor 11:5), and saw the celibate state as an option for women (1 Cor 7), but that the same Paul required women to wear a veil when praying or prophesying and employed a subordinationist theology and anthropology to justify the practice (1 Cor 11:2–16), prohibited divorce (1 Cor 7:10–11), viewed love relations between women as the result of idolatry (Rom 1:26), and possibly believed that women should be silent in the church assembly (1 Cor 14:34–36—if this is not an interpolation).

Within the canon, the movement of those who see themselves in the tradition of Paul displays increasing subordinationism. The Colossian and Ephesian household codes command women to be subordinate to their husbands, while at the same time commanding husbands to love their wives (Col 3:18–19; Eph 5:22–33), while the Pastoral Epistles argue that woman should learn in silence and should not teach or have authority over a man (1 Tim 2:11–12); woman was second in the order of creation (1 Tim 2:13); Eve was deceived, but Adam was not (1 Tim 2:14); women will be saved by childbearing (1 Tim 2:15); women deacons (or wives of deacons?) should be serious, not slanderers, temperate and faithful in all things (1 Tim 3:11); younger widows should remarry and not be enrolled as official widows of the community (1 Tim 5:9, 11); women are especially susceptible to heresy (2 Tim 3:6–7); older women should teach younger women to be submissive to their husbands (Titus 2:3–5).⁴⁵ With

⁴⁵ On women in the Pastoral Epistles, see esp. Else Kähler, *Die Frau in den paulinischen Briefen* (Zurich: Gotthelf, 1960) 141–71; Hans-Werner Bartsch, *Die Anfänge urchristlicher Rechtsbildungen: Studien zu den Pastoralbriefen* (Theologische Forschung

the exception of the possible existence of the office of deacon for women, each of these items points toward restrictions, limitations, subordination for women. From this, one would have the impression that an increasing emphasis on the subordination of women characterized the early church.

If we contrast this picture with a writing emerging from another group which sees itself in the Pauline tradition, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*,⁴⁶ it becomes clear that this was not the case. This work, not included in our canon but nevertheless translated into many languages, enjoying wide popularity for centuries, is the story of a young woman who left family and fiancé to follow Paul. Twice sentenced to die, once for the crime of abandoning her fiancé and once for defending herself against rape, Thecla was saved by miraculous means. She baptized herself in the face of death, was rescued from death and later donned men's clothing and set out in search of Paul. When Thecla found Paul, he told her, "Go and teach the word of God." The work ends with, "after enlightening many with the word of God, she slept a noble sleep."

Concerning women, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is nearly diametrically opposed to the Pastoral Epistles. Whereas the former offers women celibacy as an alternative to marriage, the Pastorals insist that women enter into patriarchal marriage. Whereas the women addressed by the Pastorals are told that salvation will come through childbearing, Thecla is neither mother nor bride. Whereas the Pastorals attempt to limit the office of widow to older women and insist that women learn in silence and not teach, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* approvingly depicts Thecla as evangelizing.

These two writings represent a solution to the ambiguity in Paul. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* represents a continuation of Paul's preference for celibacy (1 Cor 7:8-9, 39-40), his collegiality with women and his view that gender distinctions are no longer relevant in Christ. The

34; Hamburg: Reich/Evangelischer, 1965) 60-81; Otto Bangarter, *Frauen im Aufbruch: Die Geschichte einer Frauenbewegung in der Alten Kirche* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1971) 39-64; Gerhard Lohfink, "Weibliche Diakone im Neuen Testament?" *Diakonia* 11 (1980) 385-400. For a discussion of early Christian widowhood in the context of ancient society, see Jo Ann McNamara, "Wives and Widows in Early Christian Thought," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 2 (1979) 575-92.

⁴⁶ Translation in *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 2: 353-64. See Dennis MacDonald, "Virgins, Widows, and Paul in Second Century Asia Minor," *Society of Biblical Literature 1979 Seminar Papers* 1: 169-84; Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1980); E. Margaret Howe, "Interpretations of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday* (ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 33-49; Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs* 6 (1980) 298-307; Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

Pastorals represent a clear break with Paul's preference for celibacy, but are in continuity with his conservative views on social customs and women and with his rationale for these (1 Cor 11:2-16). If 1 Cor 14:34-36 is by Paul, this would be a further point of continuity.

From the Pastorals and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* we can see that there were at least two ways of thinking about women in communities that appealed to Paul as an authority. (Colossians and Ephesians are not necessarily to be subsumed under the line of the Pastorals.) The communities that gave rise to and passed on these works were apparently engaged in debate concerning what was appropriate behavior for women. What role women played in these debates is difficult to reconstruct. Perhaps the widows in the community(-ies) of the Pastorals were among the leadership of the opposition, for the author goes to some lengths to try to limit their authority and church activities (1 Tim 5:3-16). That there were women in the opposition is clear in any case from 2 Tim 3:6. As for the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, while it is not a model of feminist thinking, the figure of Thecla did offer women an alternative to patriarchal marriage,⁴⁷ namely celibacy, and she did serve as a model for women performing missionary activity. Tertullian attests that women in late second- or early third-century Carthage appealed to Thecla as a justification for their own right to baptize (*De bapt.* 17). Thecla was also a model for ascetic women in the fourth century.⁴⁸ The document was probably an especially effective instrument in the church's mission to women. Even this brief outline of the development of two streams of early Christian thought demonstrates the necessity of including extra-canonical sources. It reminds us that the author of the Pastoral Epistles probably had to reckon with opposition from women within the communities addressed and gives us a much more balanced picture of the historical development.

IV. Restructuring Requires Employing New Sources

It should be obvious that if our goal is to hear women, then writings by women should take top priority.⁴⁹ On the early Christian side, the

⁴⁷ On virginity as freedom from submission to a husband, see Cyprian *De habitu virg.* 22 (CSEL 3.1, p. 203); Leander of Seville *De institut. virg.*, preface (PL 72.880A).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa *Vita Macrinae* 2 (SC 178.146); Ambrose *De virg.* 2,3 (PL 16.223-24).

⁴⁹ A good selection of the writings of the Greek poets Sappho, Corinna, Erinna, Anyte, Nossis and of the Roman poet Sulpicia can be found in Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 3-10, 131-32. Goodwater (*Women*) has bibliographic sections on each of the ancient women authors. On Sappho, see esp. Judith P. Hallett, "Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality," *Signs* 4 (1979) 447-64; Eva Stehle Stigers, "Romantic Sensuality, Poetic Sense: A Response to Hallett on Sappho," *Signs* 4 (1979) 465-71; Page DuBois, "Sappho and Helen," in *Women in the Ancient World*, 95-105.

recent collection, *A Lost Tradition*,⁵⁰ provides an easily accessible translation of *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*,⁵¹ the Vergilian Cento of *Faltonia Proba Bona*,⁵² the *Pilgrimage of Egeria*⁵³ and the *Eulogy of Eudoxia*. Also important are such oral traditions of early Christian women as the sayings of Maximilla and Priscilla⁵⁴ and the sayings of the Desert Mothers.⁵⁵ Of further interest is a work such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which, whether women were involved in the composition at any stage or not, probably was directed toward women and did, in any case, find popularity among women.

Nonliterary documents form another category of sources which has been hitherto overlooked. Of special importance here are papyrus letters written by women; these are both business and private letters. Also relevant are such legal documents as marriage, wet-nurse, and loan contracts, tax receipts and bills of sale in which women play a role. There has been nearly no systematic study of these documents to date, the work of Sarah Pomeroy⁵⁶ and Alanna Emmett⁵⁷ forming the notable exceptions. Another category of nonliterary documents that deserves greater attention is inscriptions. Susan Treggiari's study of slave women mentioned in inscriptions demonstrates how fruitful such work could be.⁵⁸ Within Judaism, titles of synagogue leadership for women found in Greek and Latin inscriptions represent evidence for a phenomenon not

⁵⁰ Patricia Wilson-Kastner et al., *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).

⁵¹ See also the bilingual edition by Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 106-31.

⁵² See also the bilingual edition and commentary by Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane F. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Vergilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (AAR Texts and Translations 5; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

⁵³ See also the recent German translation and commentary by Herbert Donner, *Pilgerfahrt ins Heilige Land: Die ältesten Berichte christlicher Palästina-pilger (4.-7. Jahrhundert)* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1979) 69-137.

⁵⁴ Collected in Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2. 687.

⁵⁵ Included among the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (PG 65.201-4 [Theodora], 419-22 [Sara], 421-28 [Synklētikē]).

⁵⁶ Pomeroy is at present doing a comprehensive study of women in Ptolemaic Egypt which is based primarily upon the papyri. See also her "Women in Roman Egypt. A preliminary study based on papyri," in *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (ed. H. P. Foley; New York: Gordon and Breach, 1982) 303-22.

⁵⁷ Alanna Emmett is a member of the team editing the *Corpus Papyrorum Christianarum* at Macquarie University in North Ryde, NSW, Australia. In her work, she is focusing on papyrus sources for early Christian women's monasticism.

⁵⁸ Susan Treggiari, "Jobs in the Household of Livia," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 43 (1975) 48-77; idem, "Jobs for Women," *American Journal of Ancient History* 1 (1976) 76-104; idem, "Questions on Women Domestics in the Roman West," in *Schiavitù, manomissione e classi dipendenti nel mondo antico* (Università degli studi di Padova pubblicazioni dell' istituto di storia antica 13; Padova: Istituto di storia antica, 1979) 185-201; idem, "Contubernales in CIL 6," *Phoenix* 35 (1981) 42-69.

otherwise known to us from ancient Jewish literature.⁵⁹ Donative and cultic inscriptions mentioning women, as well as inscriptions in which women's civic titles occur, are also especially important.⁶⁰ Papyrus documents and inscriptions are in one sense the only primary written sources from antiquity. Any literature that has been copied and recopied has also been susceptible to redaction, censorship, selective compilation, canonization, etc. The community handing down the literature has exerted control over it and formed it. Whether, on the other hand, nonliterary sources survive is usually a matter of climate and historical accident, which means that for the most part, what we do have is both untampered with and probably a better cross-section of what originally existed. Further, nonliterary documents are, by nature of the subjects they treat, probably closer to women's daily life in antiquity than is ancient literature. Systematic work that takes into account the qualitative differences between literary and nonliterary materials could produce new insights into women's lives in antiquity.

A further source of new information concerning women could be monumental remains. Archaeological remains afford an enormous opportunity: they are without male bias. Objects and rooms used by women are as likely to have survived as those used by men. Here the present problem is really not with the ancient evidence but rather with modern interpreters of it. A good example of this is the question of a women's gallery or section in the ancient synagogue.⁶¹ In the ancient synagogue remains themselves there is no evidence that women sat separately from men, such as donative inscriptions honoring those who built, furnished, or decorated a women's gallery or section or inscriptions in the mosaic floor indicating where women and men were to sit. If one were to examine only the synagogue remains, the question of a women's section would not even arise. Nor would ancient literature lead us to a women's gallery or section, for the Jewish and non-Jewish sources of the period do not make mention of a women's gallery or women's section in the synagogue. The origin of the reconstruction is contemporary Orthodox practice, which certainly extends back in time, but we do not know how far back. There is in any case no firm evidence that an architectural divider separated the women from the men. If that is the case, then the prevailing image of women and synagogue services in antiquity requires revision. It is no longer impossible to imagine that women could have served in liturgical functions or in an administrative capacity. This example

⁵⁹ See Brooten, *Women Leaders*, 1-99, pls. I-X, 223-50.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Ramsay MacMullen, "Woman in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia. Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 29 (1980) 208-18.

⁶¹ See Brooten, *Women Leaders*, 103-38, pls. XI-LIII, 250-61.

indicates the potential gain for women's history that studying monumental remains could have. Another especially promising area of research seems to me to be private homes, with an eye toward spaces used primarily or only by women. How often and in which periods and regions do we find evidence for a *gynaikeia*, that is, separate sleeping and living(?) quarters for women? Are there class differences with respect to its existence? Where is it located within the house? How often does one find evidence that women worked in the *gynaikeia* (e.g., spindle whorls or other textile equipment)? Clarification of these questions could shed light on early Christian women's sexuality; on the work of women missionaries to women, whose locus of activity was apparently the women's quarters of households; and on the question of the seclusion of virgins, especially in Judaism and Christianity.

Archaeological research could also be especially important for the study of women and work in antiquity. Here again, women's tools are no less extant than men's tools. Spinning equipment and cooking tools exist side by side with hunting equipment or weapons, and yet there has been a marked tendency on the part of archaeologists to display greater interest in the latter than the former. Agriculture represents an ambivalent area. The general assumption has been that only or mainly men were involved in agriculture, but this may not be the case. A careful examination of pictorial evidence and of literary sources may lead us to the conclusion that women were also involved in agriculture or in some types of agriculture, which would mean that some of the extant farm tools were used by women. Archaeology could also shed light on other questions of women and work. It would be helpful to know, for example, in what kind of physical surroundings the Lydia of Acts 16:14-15, 40 sold her purple; where she purchased it; and which other types of merchants would have worked in her vicinity.

Pictorial evidence, statues, and terra-cottas could lead to new insights in a number of areas. Erotic art could help us to understand women's sexuality better (or male attitudes toward women's and men's sexuality). One could learn more about women's work and daily activities through pictorial depictions, and paintings and statues are the best guide we have to women's hairstyles and clothing. The latter items are of theological significance for early Christianity (e.g., 1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Tim 2:9-10; Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*), and Jewish sources also devote some attention to the veiling of women. Perhaps a thorough survey of depictions of women could help to clarify what type of veil the Jewish and Christian sources presuppose. Women's cultic activities occasionally occur in paintings and reliefs, but one must be cautious in interpreting mythic scenes as actually cultic. A more thorough study of women in Christian catacomb paintings could be relevant here, and another fruitful area would be the depiction of women saints in early

Christian art. The Thecla images, for example, often with cropped or flowing hair, are evidence of a different model for women than the usually veiled and demure virgin Mary of the Middle Ages or the modern period.⁶²

In addition to these sources, future research will also likely employ the traditional male sources in a new way. Hagiographical materials, for example, or biographies of holy women, if studied critically and with the question of how they might have related to women's history and piety, could be very useful sources. Prescriptive literature studied together with legal and economic documents could also yield new insights. In sum, although scarcity of sources is a problem, lack of ancient evidence is not the reason for our knowing at present so little about early Christian women's history.

Summary

One who takes up the task of early Christian women's history discovers that the present framework of study is not suited to that task. Scholars at present study early Christian women within a framework that is asymmetrical, comparing woman in early Christianity with woman in ancient Judaism and with woman in the Greek and Roman worlds. The present division of disciplines is based on criteria not appropriate to the study of woman, thereby leading to the study of woman as a literary motif or to women being used to prove the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The limitation to normative canons of literature is similarly questionable. Placing women at the center of the study will mean cutting through the disciplines and being comprehensive with respect to literary sources. It will result in a different view of the relationship between religion and culture and between theology and society. If women are no longer relegated to the cultural background or the societal context, but are recognized as central for understanding early Christianity and its theology, a rethinking of the whole will be required. This will not mean a harmonious complementarity of women's history and men's history, simply adding the two together, thereby leaving the structures of male history and theology intact. Rather, early Christian women's history, as prehistory, that is, as qualitatively different from the history of early Christian men, demonstrates the fragmentary and perspectival nature of what has passed as early Christian history. Thus, the goal of writing early Christian women's history is that it result in a new view of women and in a new view of men.

⁶² See Claudia Nauwerth and Rüdiger Warns, *Thekla: Ihre Bilder in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (Göttinger Orientforschungen. II. Reihe: Studien zur spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981).