

Women, honor, and context in Mediterranean antiquity

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Abstract

Much has been written about how the social structures of honor and shame affected women in Mediterranean antiquity. Sometimes "honor and shame" are taken out of context and used as absolute opposites, an oversimplification. Rather, honor and shame function as coordinates within a complex matrix of other societal factors. Chief among them are kinship, social hierarchy, economic control and effective social networking. Some contemporary studies from southern Europe help illuminate this pattern. The complexity and variation present in the social dynamics of these contemporary cultures indicate that the same kind of complexity and variation must have been present in ancient cultures too.

The aim of this article is to contextualize the discussion of honor and shame with regard to women in ancient Mediterranean societies, by comparison with some traditional twentieth-century Mediterranean societies. Honor and shame cannot be considered as dynamics that work in isolation, but only in correlation with several other factors, primarily kinship, social hierarchy, economic control, and social networking. Moreover, how we evaluate all these aspects is influenced by another overarching factor: point of view. All of these elements must be taken into account.

Discussion of women and honor in Mediterranean antiquity presupposes awareness of a number of related prior issues, all of which have some bearing on the topic. Ultimately, honor/shame functions cannot be understood as static and general norms, but must be seen in relation to other

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societal factors. One of these issues is that most cultural studies by recent anthropologists in the Mediterranean area are done of peasant societies, whereas our study of ancient cultures of the biblical era relies much more heavily on urban data, because for the most part, that is all we have. Historical Jesus studies do indeed focus on a peasant society in part, but with full awareness that the texts ultimately produced by New Testament writers come from urban environments, not only Paul and other letter-writers but the authors of the Gospels as well.

While we have very little data from the ancient sources about peasant life, we have quite a bit of modern data because of these recent studies, so that the body of knowledge from past and present is not comparable. I also note from recent readings around the topic of this article that many newer anthropological studies now focus on the changes brought about by globalization and economic transformation in traditional societies, and on the post-socialist era in Eastern Europe. Thus there is the dilemma that in most cases the older ethnographic studies are more directly helpful for the study of ancient cultures that were not at all influenced by similar phenomena, yet the newer ones bring the reader up to date in anthropological thinking and research.

The immediate backdrop for my topic is the controversial subject of the cultural unity of the Mediterranean, an assumption that has been both touted and questioned for some years. Most of us interested in this area are familiar with the assertions of cultural continuity, of the constitution of the Mediterranean as a cultural unity, as put forward by J Peristiany, Julian Pitt-Rivers, David Gilmore, Carol Delaney, and their collaborators, mostly in the 1960s. This interpretation has been widely adopted by biblical scholars interested in adapting the cultural studies of the mid-twentieth century to the ancient situation. In doing this, we assume some kinds of cultural continuity within a given geographical area. Yet this model has not gone unchallenged. Even Peristiany (1992:6), in the introduction to his later edited work *Honor and grace*, claims that the earlier *Honor and shame* (1966) did not establish the Mediterranean as a “cultural area,” that such an area was never defined geographically, that he did not argue that the Mediterranean was a shame rather than guilt culture, and even that this is not a meaningful distinction. Gilmore’s (1987) later collection of essays contains the well-known dissenting voice of Michael Herzfeld suggesting that hospitality, not honor, was the real way to understand that elusive primary value (Gilmore 1987:75-90).

Mediterranean people themselves are not always happy about these theories. In 1989, Pina-Cabral, a Portuguese anthropologist, delivered a broadside in *Current Anthropology* against the “Mediterraneanists” for their

Anglo and American ethnocentricity. He suggests that the theory of a Mediterranean culture area mostly serves the interest of “distancing Anglo-American scholars from the populations they study” (Pina-Cabral 1989:399). Others have called attention to the fact that the local terms for the equivalent of honor and shame differs from region to region even within the same language and culture group. And so it goes. Very recently, the subject of a unified Mediterranean anthropology has been taken up again with renewed seriousness but also in a different perspective: as perhaps “a system of complementary differences” (Bromberger 2006) or in newer interdisciplinary modes (Albera 2006). While there has been some broadening of the heavily Anglo-American influence to include more local scholars, the especially American dominance in this area remains (Albera 2006:125; now with awareness of use of the material by biblical scholars, 122).

I want to make it clear that I am not for abandoning the notion of Mediterranean cultural unity, but it is important to remember that for all we do in “Mediterranean culture,” there is no great consensus on its unity among anthropologists. Nor do I suggest that the concepts of honor and shame are not useful. But as abstractions, they exist at the level of concepts, not social practice. The social practice that expresses them in any given situation is far more complex.

David Gilmore and others in the volume he edited in 1987 claimed that honor and shame as complementary opposites are the principal or core values of this circum-Mediterranean culture. This assumption too has been questioned. In 1984, Unni Wikan of the University of Oslo, in a well-known study, attacked the model, and others have agreed. Wikan argued that rather than being binary opposites, honor and shame in some Mediterranean cultures function quite independently. Some cultures are preoccupied with shame, not honor, and in some cases, “Whereas honour is an aspect of the person, shame applies to the act only” (Wikan 1984:636). Jill Dubisch notes that in modern Greek usage on Tinos, the usual words for honor and shame, *filotimo* (cf the New Testament word *philotimia*) and *dropi*, while more commonly referred to men and women respectively, could both apply to both sexes (Dubisch 1995:202). Henderson Stewart (1994) sees a distinctly European understanding of honor that extends in more of a south-north axis rather than east-west. Sciama (2003) argues that shame and guilt are not as distinctly separated as is sometimes argued.

Inherent in the model as presented by Peristiany in his earlier work and later in Gilmore’s collection is the claim that in Mediterranean societies, the honor code, which is present in some way in every culture, is founded in gender roles and closely associated with sex. Honor is ascribed to men, and

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its binary opposite, shame, to women, as a positive quality, a sensitivity to honor. According to this model, the honor of the family resides in its women, but men carry the responsibility for defending it, while women embody the potential for shame through their sexual conduct. Women are the “weak link” that must be protected in order to be controlled. This approach was exemplified, among others, in Carol Delaney’s “Seeds of honor, fields of shame” and Maureen Giovannini’s “Female chastity codes in the circum-Mediterranean: Comparative perspectives” (Gilmore 1987:35-48, 61-74), and is certainly observable to extremes in the cultural worlds in which honor killings are practiced – but these are not true Mediterranean cultures, rather, Middle Eastern. It has been equally observable there that within the family dynamic, women are often the more aggressively insistent that the men both demonstrate the public honor of the family and avenge it when compromised.

So the research of some female anthropologists reinforced the theories. But Wikan had already argued that pursuing this approach without careful contextualization in everyday life rather than public discourse “can result in the curious position that the relevant society of women is a public gathering of men!” (Wikan 1984:636)

Let us now look in somewhat chronological order at development of discussion on this issue. Peristiany’s first volume, *Honour and shame: The values of Mediterranean society*, appeared in 1966. It was one of the earliest publications to set out the theories of Mediterranean cultural unity and the centrality of honor and shame. But the very next year, an influential article was published after being presented in a conference convened by Peristiany. A full issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* was devoted to “Appearance and reality: Status and roles of women in Mediterranean societies.” The lead article was by Ernestine Friedl, “The position of women: Appearance and reality.” While not even mentioning Peristiany’s volume of the previous year, Friedl argued that the question of gender and power is often misunderstood. If we understand power as the ability to cause or prevent change, as “the de facto ability to prevail in decision-making processes within any relationship, formal or informal” (Gilmore 1990:955), Friedl finds that in Mediterranean peasant societies, where women bring superior economic resources into a marriage, they have greater social power, except in cases where the husband’s education and urban connections are superior. Moreover, women hold the power of behavior, since their conduct determines men’s honor and they constantly remind men of how men must uphold that honor. There is vigorous participation of women in private family decisions, and since the family is the most important social unit, women therefore exercise significant power in society.

In the same vein, Jane Schneider in her 1971 study "Of Vigilance and Virgins: Honor, Shame and Access to Resources in Mediterranean Societies," concluded that honor/shame codes originated as ways to cope with the pressures of intense conflict. "Honor is also important as a substitute for physical violence in the defense of economic interests" and "to legitimate limited aggression, making acts of imposition, encroachment, and usurpation morally valid in the eyes of nearly everyone except the victim. Especially in bilateral societies, where the exercise of collective force and violence is vastly curtailed, but family patrimonies are extremely vulnerable, honor regulates affairs among men." But if a lineage and its common economic interests are unstable, the family will fixate on its women as its future.

John Davis (1977:43-44; see Gilmore 1987:4) made the claim that in Mediterranean societies, women are often ideally excluded from nondomestic work and thus seen as materially nonproductive. Rather, their value lies in their reproductive capacity. But the equation of "excluded from nondomestic work" with "materially nonproductive" is an incredible denial of the vast amount of material output from village households, and one wonders in whose estimation this is so.

In 1975, Susan Carol Rogers added a new note to the conversation by suggesting that "a non-hierarchical power relationship between the categories 'male' and 'female' is maintained in peasant society by the acting out of a 'myth' of male dominance" in which both sexes believe that the other believes it (Rogers 1975:729). She cites instances observed in which a husband has declared his decision, then capitulates when his wife objects. Everyone, including women of the group, insist that he changed his mind, when what he really did was give in to his wife's wishes. Rogers makes the important distinction between authority, which is institutionalized and therefore easier to observe, and power, which can be manifest in many indirect and nonofficial ways. As long as anthropologists focus on authority, the more easily observable of the two – and the one of more direct access to male observers – there is no way to factor informal power into the equation. Though family prestige is determined by the *man's* status, she argues that this is really a dialectic balance of power. Since women really hold the greater power, both sexes act as if males are dominant, and in that way, power is balanced.

Ten years later, Rogers (1985) offered a contrasting study of two French peasant villages, one to the north and the other to the south of the country. In the northern one, there is an ideology of equality and the society is largely non-hierarchical. Public office does not require patronage connections, but is also not considered important. Men tend to be isolated in work, while women network intensively. In the southern village, the basis of social

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organization is the extended family. Here patronage relationships are crucial for political election, which carries high prestige. Men, because of their occupations, are stronger at networking than are women, and men thus largely determine village life (Rogers 1985). She concludes that “the study of gender, therefore, is not ‘simply’ the study of women; it is the study of social and cultural organization.” Where the universe is seen as a social hierarchy, gender relationships are also hierarchically organized. And where cultural and economic systems foster the social exchange of one sex more than the other, that sex will be relatively more powerful.

Still later, Sally Cole (1991:76-80, 83, 106) in her study of women in a Portuguese fishing colony acknowledged that a positive sense of shame (*vergonha*) is expected there of women and not of men, but she attributes the whole honor-shame paradigm not to traditional culture but to British views of Mediterranean society in the 1960s and to Portuguese Roman Catholic and fascist views of the same era that “emphasized women’s roles in human reproduction and obscured their roles in economic production,” a position previously highlighted by Davis, above.

Jill Dubisch (1995:193-228) notes that when the concepts of honor and shame were first developed, a time that coincided with the first training of many of today’s field workers, “the people described by the anthropologist were presented as members of bounded and unchanging social groups whose way of life could be encapsulated in such static frameworks as ‘honor and shame’”. Then female anthropologists began to discover women who were “active participants in social life and strong personalities, often stronger and more assured than women we knew in our own societies.” This dissonance between theory and experience led to further reassessments. In her case, it resulted in the conclusion that honor and shame are not “a rigid set of rules about male and female nature or about how men and women should behave,” but “a framework for discourse and negotiation, worked out in the dynamic context of social life” (Dubisch 1995: 204). Her own study of women’s lives and the customs of religious pilgrimage on the Greek island of Tinos led her to examine the “poetics of womanhood” (by analogy to the “poetics of manhood” first used by Herzfeld in 1985) in the depiction of the suffering mother and the public performance of suffering by women in daily life and in the ritual of pilgrimage. This phenomenon, she argues, could be seen by some as exploitation by male society, but could also be seen as women’s construction of a public selfhood and an active creation of womanhood that is a far cry from the honor and shame paradigm (Dubisch 1995:193-228). Also interesting in this regard is the report of some Arab women’s reactions to the story of the “Prodigal Son” in Luke 15, many quite different from those of Arab

men interviewed by Ken Bailey. The men often considered the father's running and showing emotion in public as unacceptable elder male behavior. The women more often did not consider the father's dramatic moves of running and kissing the returned younger son unusual, undignified, or shameful; rather, they were appropriate expressions of his undying paternal/maternal affection (LaHurd 2002).

The traditional value on virginity must also be seen within a larger perspective, that of economic value. Alice Schlegel in 1991 undertook a cross-cultural study of societal valuation of the virginity of girls at marriage. Her findings indicate that virginity is of greater interest to prospective marital families when property exchange is involved. Where there is no property exchange in the marriage negotiations, there is little interest in the virginity of the bride. Families control their daughters' sexuality to make the best marriage alliances especially when status concerns are at stake in marriage transactions. In recent years, where there is increased economic independence of girls and increased availability of contraception and abortion, there is a corollary decline in interest in virginity, as well as dowry and other forms of economic exchange in marriage arrangements. Perhaps an ancient corollary can be seen in the fixation on virginity in Israelite law and even in later Israelite writers like Sirach (e.g. 42:10) and Philo, in a society in which the marriage contract was very specific about the transfer of property, as contrasted to the relative lack of interest in virginity in Roman law where, by the first century, marriage *sine manu*, without transfer of the wife into her husband's family, meant that there was little concern about property transfers with marriage.

Two studies have focused on small villages in Andalusia. One such study compared two such villages (Gilmore 1990), while the other compared villages of southern Spain with others in Portugal and Galicia (Brogger & Gilmore 1997). In 1990, in a study entitled "Men and women in Southern Spain: 'domestic power' revisited," David Gilmore (1990:953) foreshadows what some women anthropologists were later to find in other places. He admits that:

Recently, anthropologists have begun to challenge standard assumptions about gender in southern Europe ... these studies have revitalized Mediterranean ethnography by transcending sexual stereotypes of woman as reticent, passive, and submissive, and man as active, powerful, and assertive. Disavowing the alleged "invisibility" of peasant women and providing new insight into women's daily routines both in and out of doors, they take us far beyond the crude sex-based oppositions such as honor/shame,

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kinship/friendship, and public/private, with their often hidden androcentric biases.

In his study of Andalusian villages, Gilmore finds a definite “female-oriented residence pattern and sororal neighborhoods” which “challenge conventional wisdom about patriarchal, patrilocal peasantries.” In some Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, and southern Italian villages, “this residential preference tends to create a permanent female infrastructure, or matri-core; that is, neighborhoods are dominated by women’s ties because women remain co-residential more often and longer than men and because they reside in close association with childhood neighbors, kinswomen, and parents after marriage. He puts it as follows: “According to village perceptions of spatial-social distance, it is the husband who is most often the ‘stranger’ in his home or neighborhood, residing ‘very far’ from his parents, who may be located more than two blocks away, and from his agnates” (Gilmore 1990:960).

This social organization is a woman’s source of power, “since it provides her access to allies and to sources of information and gossip, and establishes a continual basis of kinship support (Gilmore 1990: 960). In these societies, the wife’s mother exercises enormous power, the husband’s mother a great deal less. Men simply acquiesce to letting their wives and *suegras* (mothers-in-law) run domestic life because it is not worth the constant struggle to resist. Thus domestic power, understood as the ability to make decisions about family matters, is in the hands of women, especially in poorer working class households where economic stability is less sure.

Brogger & Gilmore (1997) did a comparative study of “matrifocality” in Andalusian village life and that of Northern Portugal and Northwest Galicia. In all cases there is strong exercise of matrifocality, that is, family life functions through women and their social networks, but these systems work in different ways. In Andalusia, where an honor/shame code is more easily detected, the strong distinction between the private female sphere of the house and the public male sphere outside prevails. Women have well developed networking capabilities because they always live close to other female family members and are proud and careful of the way in which they are guardians of the home. They have a major role in family decisions. Yet here, the functions of inner and outer space are markedly different, for once outside the home, women assume a passive and subservient attitude, something that men do not necessarily reinforce. It is women themselves who take on this role in public.

In the north, however, women dominate not only the home but also village life, with the exceptions of the majority occupation of fishing and in public office. They do not become immediately passive outside the home like

their Andalusian counterparts, but more dominant. Families are also matrifocal, and women hold both economic control and superior networking. In the absence of an “honor-shame” complex, women are boldly course in public, virginity is not valued, and women’s most common exclamation of impatience in the Portuguese villages studied is “caralho” (penis). This area, of course, is not really part of the Mediterranean locale, but is closely related to it by contiguity of cultures and more recently, national boundaries.

The authors theorize that in the Portuguese fishing villages where women dominate social life, since there the men do the heroic, dangerous activity of fishing in the rough surrounding waters, they do not need to defend their masculinity. By contrast, in the Andalusian villages where heroic action is not regularly available, men feel the need to engage in heroic posturing to establish their masculinity.

What differences do female anthropologists bring to the endeavor? Female ethnographers have been studying the lives of women in Mediterranean cultures since Ernestine Friedl’s (1962) *Vasilika: A village in modern Greece*. Enormous new insights have been gained by their entry into the field. Some gems in this regard are Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s marvelous anecdotal account of life in an Iraqi village in 1969 and Jill Dubisch’s (1986) edited volume, *Gender and power in rural Greece*. Here we do get inside the more “private” world of women’s lives to find out how their system works. We see, for example, that both the positive and negative poles of images about women are operative: they are both seducers, “Eves,” weak and unreliable, and at the same time participants in the very creative act of God, likened to the Mother of God (Dubisch 1986:23-24 et passim). The same is reported by David Gilmore in his study of Andalusian carnival practices (Gilmore 1998): at carnival time, women are satirized by cross-dressing males and also idolized in religious idealism, while women mix freely with men, ignoring the usual social barriers. Both women and men accept stereotypes both good and bad of both sexes.

But from Robinette Kennedy in Dubisch’s collection, we learn among other things that in a village of Crete where relationships between men and women are suspicious and hostile, and where life for women is very hard, a woman’s reputation among women depends not on her chastity and sexual respectability, as in the male world, but on her ability to be a friend: kind, gentle, understanding, sympathetic, and above all, on her ability to keep confidences. Those women who succeed in having affairs outside of marriage that are known to other women are not thought less of as long as they maintain the characteristics of friendship. Silence about their activities will be kept, and they are even accorded some quiet respect for their courage

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(Kennedy 1986). In the same vein, Wikan reported of life in a Cairo suburb that an adulteress who was kind and helpful to other women continued to be accepted by them with no objections. In these cases, women do not look to the world of men for their honor, but to other women and with other criteria than those of the male world (Wikan 639-642).

Yet this probing of women's world by women researchers is not without its problems. Dubisch (1986:3-5), long a scholar of women's life in the Greek islands, observes that originally even on the part of anthropologists, women have been considered not subjects but objects of society, the "other" studied as a separate category or special problem. Since in most cultures studied, women constitute a sub-culture of the dominant one that is considered to be the "real" culture, not only they but also the study of them runs the risk of marginalization. If women are already seen as socially marginalized, the introduction of women anthropologists who focus their study on the women of a culture may actually contribute to the marginalization of women, with no significant change occurring in the usual conceptual framework. The "male bias" could simply be replaced by a corresponding "female bias." The assumption that women are more qualified to study women, and *vice versa*, is debated. If the corollary is that women ethnographers are not qualified to study men, the same bias of the dominant and sub-culture is preserved, and the study of women is still study of the "special other". Yet it is clear that in some cultures in which separation of the sexes is heavily enforced, a whole crucial dimension of the culture is neglected if ethnographers do not have access to it.

The first step in restoring gender balance in research has been to "fill in the gaps," to "straighten out the record", and supply what has been wanting to the whole vision by the omission of the world of women's experience. But it has also become clear that to do this "is more than a matter of filling in the ethnographic record; it also requires changing the very concepts, theories, and methodology ... and ultimately, the field of anthropology itself." To ask, for example, how women exercise power in society, leads to the question what is power and how it is exercised. The investigation leads not simply to a different view of women but a different view of society (Dubisch 1986:3-5; Moore 1986:3-5).

This is by no means complete coverage of a topic on which the literature abounds, but rather a survey of some of its important aspects. How does it connect with our interest in Mediterranean antiquity and early Christianity? The survey suggests that before informed assumptions about gender can be made, there are four factors besides gender that must be taken into account in any given society. We need, therefore, to be sharper in our

assessments of what is happening in ancient Mediterranean cultures. These factors are: kinship structures, perceptions of social hierarchy generally, control of economic means, and ability to form social networks.

First, the particular ways in which kinship functions

Mediterranean cultures generally are societies in which kinship structures give access to other aspects of the culture. Often a strong mother figure at the center of a family commands respect and obedience. How would we recognize matrifocal social organization in antiquity, since all texts are presumably written by males who theoretically engage in masculine posturing and thus present the veneer of male dominance? If ancient societies were as complex as modern ones, elements of matrifocal culture must be there somewhere. While our stereotypical idea of the ancient Mediterranean family is strongly patriarchal, we need to pay attention to the centrality of women in some recent traditional Mediterranean cultures, especially those that practice matrilocality, and to the possible hints of matrilocality and matrifocality preserved in such ancient texts as Genesis 2:24 (a man shall leave father and mother and cling to his wife), Song of Songs 3:4 (I will bring him to my mother's house), Mark 6:3 (Jesus called son of Mary in his hometown), Romans 16:2 (Phoebe my *prostatis*), 12 (Tryphaena and Tryphosa), and 13 (Rufus' mother and mine), 2 Timothy 1:5 (remembering the faith of mother and grandmother) as well as to the information available about the informal power exercised by ancient Roman female patrons, heads of households, and mothers (see further Osiek and MacDonald 2005).

Second, social hierarchy

More than one anthropologist will say that where there is hierarchy in the society generally, men will predictably be of higher status than women of the same social level. In a corollary, in societies in which gender distinctions are highly enforced, male dominance is more likely to be present. With few exceptions, this seems to be generally true across cultures. But perhaps it is not as widespread as we think. The absence of a highly developed honor-shame complex in a culture seems to correlate with greater female power, but it cannot be established whether this is a causal relationship.

It is necessary to assess the kinds and degrees of hierarchy, how it is understood, and how it functions in a given society, as well as the level and way in which gender differences are seen and enforced before coming to conclusions about women's participation in that hierarchy. One thing that is clear both in studies of contemporary peasant societies and ancient urban ones is that *status is a more reliable predictor of power than gender*. That is,

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higher status women bear more power than lower status men. Where men and women are of equal social status, men will be considered superior. But where women are of higher status, they will wield more power, both formal and informal, than lower status men. Pitt-Rivers, in the earlier Peristiany book, found this to be true of the Mediterranean cultures he studied: the higher the ascribed honor of the family, the more careless were its members to defend it, and the more social freedom the women had, because their honor is unassailable and does not depend on male protection, but rather on the woman's own status. (Peristiany 1966:65-71). This result can be verified by what we know of elite Roman women.

At the opposite end of the ancient social scale, slaves in Mediterranean antiquity were of both male and female sex but were not implicitly considered to have gender, the social construction that determines expectations of social behavior based on sex. Social expectations of them were thus quite different, including norms of chastity and the non-recognition of their blood and marriage ties as legitimate kinship. Ironically, with no personal status to maintain, only that possibly derived from their owners, they were far freer of social expectations of conformity, though they also lacked the protection of social conventions and usually had little choice about their fate.

Third, economic factors

These are often neglected in analysis. Control of economic means and resources by women invariably brings new forms of power. We posit that in the ancient Mediterranean world, economics was largely subsumed into kinship and fictive kinship structures. This is precisely where female power is most likely to have been exercised, so we need to pay attention to the hints of social power exercised by women precisely through their participation in these economic structures. Here, for example, the information about women business managers in Pompeii gives us some needed evidence and we must take a closer comparative look at characters like Lydia and Prisca of the New Testament.

There has been some study of economic models in classical Greece that takes into account the labor of free women and slaves (Hunter 1981:152; Jameson 1977-78). There has been precious little of such an approach in the Roman world.

Fourth, ability to form social networks

Social power also flows from social networking. To the degree that one sex has closer same-sex networks of communication, it will have greater social power than in a society in which it does not have the same kinds of systems.

The entry of women into the field of anthropology has not only provided new perspectives; it has also provided new access to sections of society to which men do not have access, especially in those cultures in which any kind of rigid separation between the sexes is maintained. Women researchers can gain easier access to women's perceptions of their lives and to their communication systems.

The widows of 1 Timothy 5 were a formidable group that the author felt he needed to legislate about, and wariness about their networking ability continues to be reflected in later church orders like the *Didascalia*, where there is an effort to control the movement of widows, their networking systems, and their evangelizing efforts (*Didascalia* 14-15=*Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1-7).

Finally, the point of view of writer, reader, researcher, and researched

Finally, there is another factor that must be taken into account, not an element of content but a crucial factor in the process of the analysis itself: the *point of view* of writer, reader, researcher, and researched. We are reminded how important is literary point of view in understanding the strategy within a text (see recently Yamasaki). How much more important is it in the analysis of events and daily lives. The complexities of naming and understanding the important element of context in social interpretation depend heavily on awareness of point of view, which is so often presumed to be universal when it is not (see discussions in Dilley). The varieties of points of view that can be present in an event and the remembering of it are manifold and latent with social struggle. "The ability to define contexts in essential or any other terms involves the issue of power. The ability of one agent to impose his or her definition of relevant context upon others as a kind of hermeneutic hegemony is a political act" (Dilley 1999: 35).

We are critically aware that the point of view in an ancient text is rarely that of losers, the poor, the marginalized, or women of any status. Those perspectives have been lost to us. That is not an excuse to assume that the point of view presented in the texts was shared by all concerned in the contexts in which they rose, for what we most often have is the public perspective and thus, necessarily the perspective of those who dominate in the public sphere. The point of view of those less-included groups is sometimes accessible in contemporary studies, however. By listening to what we can learn there, we can perhaps learn to read between the lines in ancient texts as well.

CONCLUSION

Study of contemporary Mediterranean cultures shows a high degree of complexity and variation. There is no reason to think that the situation was any less complex in antiquity. In earlier stages of social-scientific study of early Judaism and Christianity, we may have been too quick to generalize on the basis of one factor alone instead of in correlation with all necessary factors. It is interesting that Roman historians, though they have tried to incorporate the findings of anthropology, do so with a great deal more caution than biblical scholars, largely because they have so much more data to go on, and so often simply do not find the theories or models confirmed there. Gender is one factor among several: kinship structures, hierarchy, control of economic resources, and social networks, all of which must be evaluated with a critical eye to the point of view in representation, and balanced in a great juggling act in order to come to any kind of understanding of women – and therefore of men as well – in Mediterranean antiquity.

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