

Gender and Status

In this chapter I review studies of texts about women's religious status in Asia Minor in the first two centuries of the common era. While a few scholars have proposed that wealthy women held positions of leadership in antiquity, a dominant stream in scholarship maintains that women's secondary status prevented or limited women's leadership. Important variations among interpretations of texts arise from different approaches to the analysis of women's history. My discussion is organized around these different approaches. Scholars have analyzed women's status in terms of prominent cultural values, an honor/shame paradigm, households, associations, patronage, and economics. This previous scholarship has informed the approach of my study in significant ways.

I will argue that investigation of women's religious status depends on investigation of women's status in households, slavery, and patronage. While scholarship has not ignored these socioeconomic institutions, the most widely known models have not adequately theorized gender in a framework that allows a thorough analysis of women's status. A better understanding of women's status in the ancient world requires a theory that situates the study of gender in the study of socioeconomic status. The discussions of methods and models in this chapter, along with the preceding introduction, provide necessary groundwork for investigating wealthy women's status in households and patronage.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

A QUESTION OF STATUS

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that women were leaders in ancient religious movements and suggested that "women's actual social-religious status

must be determined by the degree of their economic autonomy and social roles rather than by ideological or prescriptive statements.”¹ Schüssler Fiorenza addresses this point for freeborn elite women in particular, pointing to inscriptions that honor wealthy women as patrons of associations and patrons who performed leadership functions in these groups.² Similarly, Bernadette Brooten has examined women’s titles of leadership in synagogue inscriptions.³ She argues that women held the same status as men who held the same leadership titles. Many, if not all, of these persons were wealthy donors and patrons. According to Schüssler Fiorenza and Brooten, women’s wealth mattered more than gender in determining their eligibility for leadership positions.

More recently, Joan Connelly’s compelling history of priestesses in the Greek eastern Mediterranean has drawn from a wide range of sources to study women’s roles.⁴ Connelly links representations of women’s religious leadership with an idealized image of femininity:

Engagement in cult service was what a good woman did. As with spinning, this exercise was more than just a mark of virtue. It was a signifier of social and symbolic capital, of prestige and desirability, that came together to construct a feminine ideal. Cult service was inextricably linked to social status, family fortune, health, and wholeness, and thereby set a powerful archetype for female behavior.⁵

In Connelly’s view, gender and wealth together determined “a feminine ideal.” Family roles determined gender. A prestigious and desirable daughter made a marriage to ensure continuation of a family’s elite status. This account leaves open the question of widowhood: once a woman’s roles as daughter and wife concluded, how did wealth and gender determine her religious roles? I explore this question in this chapter and the following one. The variable of

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 109.

2. Ibid., 181–82, 250, 287, 290–91.

3. Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982).

4. Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

5. Ibid., 192.

fortune raises a question as well. With their focus on wealthy women, Schüssler Fiorenza, Brooten, and Connelly have left unexplored the relationship between religious status and gender ideology for non-elite women. This question becomes prominent in chapter 4, on slave women.

While most scholars seem to agree that gender limited women's religious leadership, a close look reveals that we still lack a consensus on why this might be the case. In general, studies of women's social religious status and potential for leadership have relied on an idea that women's social status was secondary to that of men of the same economic level. This secondary status has been theorized as part of various concepts, and I will address each in turn, beginning with the notion of status as integral to dominant cultural values.

CULTURAL IDEALS

There seems to be evidence in the ancient sources that cultural ideals ascribed secondary status to women. Paul Achtemeier has discussed "the general status" of women in his analysis of 1 Peter 3:1–7.

The subordination of wives to husbands reflected in this passage must be seen against the background of the general status of women in the Hellenistic world of that time. Dominant among the elite was the notion that the woman was by nature inferior to the man. Because she lacked the capacity for reason that the male had, she was ruled rather by her emotions, and was as a result given to poor judgment, immorality, intemperance, wickedness, avarice; she was untrustworthy, contentious, and as a result, it was her place to obey. [The rest of the paragraph discusses legal status and marriage.] It is against this background that one must view the status of women reflected in the NT as a whole, and specifically in this passage in 1 Peter.⁶

Achtemeier marshals quotations from elite authors and examples from legal materials to document the subordination of women.⁷ The commentary explains

6. Paul J. Achtemeier, *A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 206–7.

7. Since the focus is on subordination and women's inferior social status in marriage, the discussion omits consideration of women's status outside of marriage. Achtemeier argues that marriage to a

how the biblical author reflects the dominant ethos of elite men. For scholars interested in women, many questions remain. What was the basis for these notions about women? How did the discourse and legal traditions operate to make women subservient? What were the effects of this subordination? What was the relationship between legal traditions and actual social practices?⁸ It is not clear how the rhetoric of the letter's author represents historical situations. A focused analysis of women's status would address the relationship between rhetorical interests of the biblical author and reconstruction of the historical political socioeconomic context. Omission of this step tends to foreclose critical analysis of gender ideals, and discussions of religious criticisms of marriage, women's possibilities for separation and divorce, and practices among non-elites.

An association between women's secondary status and cultural ideals has appeared elsewhere in scholarship. John Elliott has quoted misogynist texts from a long list of authors to evince support for his assertion that "in the world of biblical antiquity, patriarchal structures and patriarchal mindsets were the order of the day."⁹ This argument seems to gather weight as it lumps together "Greek, Roman, Israelite and Christian authors" and indeed "*every* known society from ancient to modern time," as marked by female subordination.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Elliott provides evidence of a conflicting ideology when he writes, "The cult of Isis, because of its emphasis on the equality of females and males, held a particular attraction to women."¹¹ This caveat seems to imply that women as a group preferred gender equality, and that some people in "the Mediterranean culture" of biblical antiquity did challenge female subordination. This is an intriguing suggestion of cultural diversity. Since Elliott's account emphasizes attitudes and literary texts, questions about possible connections between different ideologies and actual socioeconomic relations remain to be explored.

Elsewhere, scholars have invoked cultural ideals to understand texts about slavery and the status of female and male slaves. In the history of interpretation of biblical texts, acceptance of dominant cultural ideals has supported acceptance

nonbeliever posed risks for a Christian woman, but he does not address alternatives to marriage, such as a Christian woman's separation and divorce from the nonbeliever.

8. Achtemeier, *Commentary on First Peter*, 207.

9. John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation, and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 591, 589.

10. Ibid., 590. The claim functions as the background environment to account for 1 Peter 3:1-7 and place it at a distance from ethical evaluation by contemporary feminists: "the Petrine author also is a child of his times" (596). Also 591.

11. Ibid., 584.

of slavery. Jerome Quinn has underlined obedience, order, and subordination in his discussion of the household code in the Letter to Titus.¹² He envisions the entire household as Christian; he seems to support the command to slaves “to be subject . . . in all matters,” because he assumes that the Christian master or mistress would not command un-Christian acts.¹³ Quinn focuses on the behavior of the slave and the repetition of the ideology of masters. According to Richard Horsley, elite authors did not question the system of slavery as “a fact of ancient life.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, slaves did run away and rebel, so some ancients questioned and resisted slavery for themselves.¹⁵ Biblical commentaries have been slow to explore slave resistance and the role of discourse on slavery in exploitation. Rather than reproduce the prejudices of antiquity, a more thorough analysis would analyze their rhetorical constructions.¹⁶

Rhetorical constructions that reflect cultural ideals recur in biblical texts concerned with instructing wives and slaves. Achtemeier and Quinn allude to historical situations that may have triggered concern for the behavior of wives and slaves in the biblical texts. For Quinn, the culprit is characterized as “enthusiastic zeal,” for “individual equality and freedom” and “unrealistic expectations.”¹⁷ For his part, Achtemeier notes, “That the Christian faith inherently meant equal status for women in the sight of God is evident from such a passage as Gal 3:28, and from the important role played by women in the early church.”¹⁸ This statement points toward interest in reconstruction of the historical situation. Up to now, commentaries have not investigated economic aspects of the cultural values of subordination of wives and of slaves.

12. Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 137–50.

13. Ibid., 149. Yet, slaves are given similar instruction in 1 Tim. 6:1–2 with respect to non-Christian owners. Jennifer Glancy, in particular, has juxtaposed the sexual morals promulgated in biblical texts against the lack of moral freedom for slaves in Christian assemblies. Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49–70.

14. Richard A. Horsley, “The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars,” in *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 59.

15. “Indeed, women, slaves, and members of other socially subordinated groups in the early Christian churches may have been less willing than Paul to leave the hierarchical social order intact during the interim before Christ’s return.” Sheila Briggs, “Slavery and Gender,” in *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds*, ed. Jane Schaberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs (New York: Continuum, 2004), 186.

16. For example, Quinn cites references to passages that name slaves as thieves, but misses the chance to discuss the phenomenon in a context of power relations between masters and slaves. Quinn, *Letter to Titus*, 149. He evinces little interest in distinguishing between women and men slaves.

17. Ibid., 138 and 148.

18. Achtemeier, *Commentary on First Peter*, 207.

Achtemeier alludes to discrepancies in women's status when he notes that women inherited, held property, and "acquired legal independence and full right to participate in business"(207). These aspects of women's socioeconomic status seem inconsistent with the idea of the women's subordinate status. And this suggests areas for investigation: How would a woman's socioeconomic status affect her household status as a wife or a single woman in this religious group?

The attribution of women's secondary status to dominant cultural ideals leaves us with questions about the move from text to historical reconstruction. We need a critical analysis of assumptions entailed in moving from text to historical reconstruction. Many commentators read biblical texts from the perspective of the master/husband/father. This viewpoint leaves ancient wives and slaves as secondary persons and marginal topics. We need a different perspective to help us understand free women and slaves as actors and agents in their own right.

A second major group of scholars have attempted to explain women's status in a specific cultural system.

HONOR/SHAME

Methods and models drawn from the social sciences have informed the anthropological construction of honor/shame in "the Mediterranean culture." A recent example is the study by Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*.¹⁹ These authors have proposed to use "the cultural values of honor and shame," based on their meaning in a Mediterranean context, as one of three key assumptions of their investigation of early Christian women.²⁰ Osiek and Macdonald continue to use this cultural model while citing literature that questions the value of the Mediterranean model. One of the critics is Mark Golden, who concluded his review of the literature by questioning "the idea of the Mediterranean as a culture-area."²¹ Other critics of the model have raised the issue of method. Mary Ann Tolbert has argued that biblical anthropological studies "tend to invert the social science method; rather than making the theory the conjectural topic of investigation, and the social data the arena of proof,

19. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald with Janet Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 233.

20. Ibid., 7–9. The authors associate honor/shame with patriarchy and with a different set of standards for females.

21. Mark Golden, "The Uses of Cross-Cultural Comparison in Ancient Social History," *Echos du Monde Classique* 36, no. 11 (1992): 331.

New Testament explorations have often made the textual data the topic of investigation, and the theory or model the vehicle of proof.”²² Indeed, Osiek and MacDonald take the model of honor/shame as a “key assumption” with which to interpret the evidence: references to the “character of the culture,” or to the “Mediterranean world,” appear to assert and account for differences between women and men.²³

Tolbert raises another problem for using the analytic of honor/shame: “Concrete social relations may vary considerably from the symbolic constructions of gender upheld by social ideology.”²⁴ In this case, the relations between men and women may have varied considerably from those upheld by the ideology of honor and shame. Osiek and MacDonald describe slaves as, “by definition,” “totally lacking in honor.”²⁵ On the other hand, the honor ascribed to wealthy women (and men) was routinely engraved in stone and displayed in public to recognize benefactors and office-holders. If slave women could not earn honor while many wealthy women did, then the construct honor/shame does not do enough to explain women’s status. Schüssler Fiorenza has noted that the honor/shame system is only one feature of the “kyriarchal ethos of antiquity.”²⁶ Other features include age, family, economic status, ethnicity, legal status, and sexual preference. Thus the dualistic construction of honor/shame in gender terms requires modification in an analytic framework that also includes factors such as legal status and access to socioeconomic resources. Analyzing these factors together would allow a better understanding of women’s status.

HOUSEHOLDS

Some histories of religious groups describe women’s status through use of a social model that locates women almost exclusively in a traditional household. For instance, John Elliott’s analysis of the community addressed in 1 Peter has centered on the distinctive character of the group, and the author’s descriptions of this character in terms of a household. “It is from a universal interest in the implications and applications of the household in a great variety of political, economic, social, and religious spheres of life that the image of the household of God in 1 Peter derives its socio-religious significance and its emotional

22. Mary Ann Tolbert, “Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1, *A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 266.

23. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 13 and 16.

24. Tolbert, “Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods,” 265.

25. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 97. Imperial slaves should be an exception to this rule.

26. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 98.

power.”²⁷ In Elliott’s argument, the household provides the model for the group’s organizational features, including authority, leadership, roles, relationships, and responsibilities.²⁸ In this traditional household model, women are seen as subordinate, whether they are free wives or slaves.²⁹ The ancient household was a primary institution of the imperial socioeconomic system.³⁰ Thus its political and economic significance in its historical context is crucial to reconstructing its use in 1 Peter. Elliott’s analysis could be extended to critically examine slavery, marriage, and the imperial use of household in colonization. The correlations between women’s socioeconomic status in the household and their religious status require more attention.

In modern socioeconomic theory, household has been distinguished from market, and historians have adopted these concepts. Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann have contrasted the ancient “embedded” economy with the modern “detached” economy.³¹ They name the household as “the most important ancient economic institution in which economic behavior was embedded.”³² Yet they also assert that the rights and powers that a head of the household had with respect to wife, children, and slaves cannot be claimed as “economic” matters. Thus “markets” appear prominently, in the title of a section, while marriage fails to rate notice as an economic institution. Given this understanding, it is not surprising that women do not appear in the labels on the diagram of the social pyramid (see Figure 1).³³ This analysis has the effect of producing the erasure of women in the economic system.

The omission of marriage from socioeconomic analysis has engendered a distinction between market and domestic economies that appears in neoclassical and Marxist socioeconomic theory.³⁴ Feminist economists have criticized forms of socioeconomic theory that replicate gender constructions unreflectively.³⁵

27. Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 221.

28. Ibid., 188–89. The sense of religious group as civic assembly is not significant for Elliott’s reconstruction.

29. Elliott does not distinguish between rhetorical goals of the author and possibilities for the historical situation that can be reconstructed from the letter.

30. See discussion of imperial ideology in Introduction.

31. Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O. C. Dean (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 18.

32. Ibid., 18.

33. Ibid., 72. Women do appear in the discussion, however, as belonging to the stratum of their husbands or fathers (66–67).

34. Hannelore Schröder, “The Economic Impoverishment of Mothers Is the Enrichment of Fathers,” in *Women, Work and Poverty*, ed. Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr (Concilium; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 14. She also asserts that feminist economists’ “analysis has to start with the domestic economy and

Household has become associated with women, domestic labor, childcare, unskilled labor, and consumption rather than production.³⁶ Women as workers are perceived as more concerned with family matters than men, thus less committed and less rational, transient, unskilled or semi-skilled. The classification of the work of motherhood as biological rather than socioeconomic has reified an essentialized view of the division of labor. And the historiography of (male) labor has paid little attention to the dependence of subsistence-level families on the labor of women and children within the household.³⁷ The postindustrial dichotomy of domestic and market with its attendant gender assumptions has thereby overdetermined historical reconstructions of ancient households. This has affected our understandings of household systems such as marriage and slavery.

Analysis of women's socio-religious status requires investigation of the socioeconomic status of women in marriage since both are linked to the household. Women's work, including the system of slavery, must be part of historical analysis of the household as an economic, social, or religious organization. The relationship between households and religious groups is not simple; accurate historical reconstruction requires attention to a wide variety of sources with focus on the distinctive features of the different sources.

The situation in the genuine letters of Paul should be investigated separately from the contexts of the letters penned by Paul's followers. Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that the structures of the traditional household were not those of the early missionary movement. The model Schüssler Fiorenza has elaborated for reconstruction of the missionary movement in the cities of Asia Minor features both missionary agents and local associations in house churches,

the domestic dominance fixed by marriage-, family-, and inheritance laws. The historical process is indispensable, for economy begins in the home (*oikos*).³⁸ Ibid., 13.

35. Based on her analysis of scholarship on person and choices, Paula England argues that the distinction between family and market owes its appearance in economic theory to hidden assumptions related to gender. England, "Separative and Soluble Selves: Dichotomous Thinking in Economics," in *Feminist Economics Today: Beyond Economic Man*, ed. Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 33–48. Feminist ethnographers have introduced analyses of intrahousehold and interhousehold dynamics. "Subsistence farming was too often production when men did it and reproduction when women did it." Gracia Clark, "Introduction," in *Gender at Work in Economic Life*, ed. Gracia Clark (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2003), xi.

36. M. Thea Sinclair, "Women, Work and Skill: Economic Theories and Feminist Perspectives," in *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Ideology*, ed. Redclift and Sinclair (London: Routledge, 1991), 3–13. Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 6–15.

37. Baron, *Work Engendered*, 15. See discussion in preceding chapter.

with the full participation and leadership of women in both areas.³⁸ The way women are mentioned in the genuine Pauline correspondence indicates that the status of these women was equal to that of Paul, and that they were independent of Paul.³⁹ The titles Paul uses for women in the missionary movement and house churches do not refer to them with the terms that reflect their sexual status or gender roles, such as widow, wife, or virgin.⁴⁰ Also, the house church of Prisca and Aquila suggests that the house churches were organized as religious cults or private associations since the texts note Prisca and Aquila's travel but neither household nor family.⁴¹ The distinctions between religious association and traditional household that are present in the Pauline correspondence are less clear in other sources.⁴² Indeed, according to Elliott's study of 1 Peter (above), the household provides the model for a religious organization.

In harmony with Elliott, Osiek and MacDonald observe, "It is fair to say that by the latter decades of the first century, Christianity became grafted onto conventional patterns of family life in some church circles."⁴³ In contrast, Yuko Taniguchi has analyzed 1 Timothy and reconstructed a possible historical situation in which the author of 1 Timothy sought to impose household organization on a community operating according to the norms of a voluntary association.⁴⁴ This reconstruction depends on a contrast between the assembly rhetoric associated with an idea of egalitarian relationships among siblings versus the household rhetoric involving hierarchical order in terms of age, gender, and class.⁴⁵ Taniguchi applies socio-rhetorical-historical criticism to 1 Timothy in order to reconstruct the possible community and situation addressed by the letter.⁴⁶ In her interpretation, "the wo/men benefactors were leaders with authority in the democratic association of the *ekklesia*" (26). She further suggests that benefaction in the community could have created equal access to decision-making for all the members, including widows, elders, and

38. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 168.

39. The women include Prisca, Apphia, Phoebe, Junia, and four more in Rom.16:6 and 12, plus Euodia and Syntyche.

40. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory*, 169.

41. *Ibid.*, 180.

42. I return below to the question of whether group organization resembled either association or household.

43. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*, 233.

44. Yuko Taniguchi, *To Lead Quiet and Peaceable Lives: Rhetorical Analysis of the First Letter of Timothy* (Harvard University Th.D. Dissertation, 2002).

45. *Ibid.*, 156.

46. In contrast to this method, traditional historical criticism positions the text of 1 Timothy as more transparent to reconstruction and reduces the level of conflict by adopting the author's perspective.

slaves (156). Taniguchi's study draws on a contrast between (free and slave) women's status in a voluntary association and such women's status in a household. The type of analysis performed by Taniguchi allows one to distinguish among rhetorical constructions embedded in the text and possibilities for historical reconstruction of the situation in which that text intervenes. The interpretation preserves tensions among proponents of different organizational systems in the religious movement. While the household has played a preeminent role in scholarship on women's status, an understanding of women's religious status requires study of voluntary associations as well.

ASSOCIATIONS

Philip Harland has studied associations in Asia Minor extensively, including early Christian and Jewish ones.⁴⁷ He argues persuasively for many lines of continuity among these groups. He does not, however, specifically inquire about the roles of patrons and of women. Many other interpreters have also emphasized the similarities between Christian and Jewish and other religious groups. Reggie Kidd's commentary has centered on wealth and class analysis in the Pastoral letters.⁴⁸ He concludes that the social setting of the community of the Pastorals was the "upper strata of the imperial municipalities."⁴⁹ His main concern is with the relationship between benefactors, conceived as wealthy male Christians, and the community of 1 Timothy as a voluntary association. In this discussion of women, the possibilities inherent in economic status are subordinated to women's status in the traditional household (100–106). Kidd assumes the presence of wealthy women but sees only men as patrons of early Christian and Jewish communities. However, it is not clear that patronage was restricted, and scholars have disagreed about the role of patrons.

Studies on the status of wealthy women as patrons have drawn on inscriptions from Asia Minor. These texts present numerous instances of office-holding by women. Tessa Rajak and David Noy have discussed benefaction by women who supported synagogues, and they assess women's roles: "The synagogue service is not the correct setting for that [functional] equality, and the contribution of women, just as that of men, must be envisaged as patronal and perhaps ceremonial rather than religious."⁵⁰ The authors do not explain

47. Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003).

48. Reggie M. Kidd, *Wealth and Beneficence in the Pastoral Epistles: A "Bourgeois" Form of Early Christianity?* (SBL Dissertation Series 122; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990).

49. Kidd, *Wealth and Beneficence*, 156.

their understanding of “religious,” but the usage implies that a religious role is distinct from a patronal role.

William Countryman has advocated a similar assessment in his evaluation of the community of the Pastoral Epistles. He argues that the patronal role was limited to the donation of funds; donors abdicated administrative control.⁵¹ Rajak and Noy argue that the evidence used to establish the role of the head of synagogue has been misinterpreted in some scholarship, and that this office, just as those in other associations in Greek and Roman cities, was “honor-driven.”⁵² It seems that having wealth was the primary qualification for the position. Indeed, scholars agree that high socioeconomic status was a routine prerequisite for office-holding in the ancient world.⁵³ However, it is not clear whether or not fulfilling the function of donor precluded the possibility of acting in other functions. The conclusion seems to rely on a modern assumption that these ancient people understood social roles as distinct from religious ones.

A discussion of women’s religious patronage appears in the history by Osiek and MacDonald, who again provide a handy reference for trends in scholarship. This study recognizes as patrons the religious women Phoebe, Tavia, Alke, and some women in the audience of 1 Timothy.⁵⁴ In their detailed discussion of the source texts for “Christian women who host house churches,” Osiek and MacDonald situate these patrons in a community organized along the lines of the household.⁵⁵ While they maintain that “in early Christianity there was little difference between the patronage of men and women” (219), they qualify this assessment elsewhere in their discussion of the activities of patrons (248). In their elaboration of the mechanics of patronage, presiding at the communal meal appears as an activity distinct from reading and teaching after the meal.⁵⁶ Referring to 1 Tim. 2:11–15, Osiek and MacDonald see women’s teaching as eclipsed by “traditional norms that sought to silence

50. Tessa Rajak and David Noy, “*Archisynagogoi*: Office, Title and Social Status in the Greco-Jewish Synagogue,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993): 87.

51. L. William Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire: Contradictions and Accommodations* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1980), 164–65.

52. Rajak and Noy, “*Archisynagogoi*,” 84–86.

53. The Roman system in the eastern Mediterranean could combine benefaction with minimum training for elite officials because slaves were an important source of expertise in administrative tasks. However, it does not follow that the duties of such offices were not considered political.

54. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 214–18.

55. Osiek and MacDonald shared Elliott’s focus on women in the household. They develop a reconstructive model based on women’s presence in the household as the “unifying element.” *Ibid.*, 243.

56. Osiek and MacDonald suggest that the presider at the communal meal might select the “invited expert” teacher and facilitate the conversation. *Ibid.*, 163.

women in public functions.”⁵⁷ Implied in this argument regarding women’s teaching is that men patrons would not be restricted in the same sense. In this view, some religious leadership was open to women patrons, that which involved food and meals, while other areas, which involved reading, teaching, and preaching, were restricted. Thus these scholars envision a significant difference between women’s and men’s patronal leadership. The basis for this difference is not the capacity of the patron per se, but a gender ideal in which women are silent in public.⁵⁸ However, archaeological records suggest that wealthy women appeared frequently in public offices and monuments. Hence, one cannot assume that they did not do so also in religious assemblies.

The question of whether or how wealthy women’s roles differed from that of men has appeared in studies of Asia Minor in the Roman era. Riet van Bremen has conducted an extensive study of women who held offices and provided benefaction in Roman Asia Minor.⁵⁹ She argues that representations of wealthy women patrons during the early empire were marked by the elite’s self-representation as oriented toward family, in concert with the example set by the imperial family in Rome.⁶⁰ For both men and women, the vocabulary and images of family became the currency for establishing the legitimacy of leadership.⁶¹ The representation of elite women in families in the imperial era is intertwined with the representation of ruling. Thus an analysis of women’s patronage requires scrutiny of the overall sociopolitical context.⁶²

57. The reconstructive model is one of decline for the status of women, “the restriction of women’s leadership opportunities,” as time went on. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 234. However, these authors also name a number of female teachers who appear in early Christian sources.

58. Iteration of women’s silence in the biblical canon may testify to an ongoing controversy surrounding women’s speech. Another possible reading of the same passages recreates them in a framework of conflict between the proponents of women’s teaching authority and those who favored women’s silent submission.

59. Riet van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996).

60. Ibid., 165. Beth Severy explored imperial implications in household rhetoric in Roman sources, and suggested that portrayals of family life under the emperors arose from “the politicization of the family in the Augustan period, and continuing public status of the imperial family as an institution of the empire. The most important public figures of the day were evaluated and presented in the context of their familial relationships.” Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 249.

61. Bremen, *Limits of Participation*, 163. The right to rule was based on ideological constructs and the “presentation of these aspects in a coherent self-image on the public stage.”

62. Patronage by men in antiquity has been most often located in the context of friendships, civic organizations, and voluntary associations.

Studies on women's status have raised questions about the organizational structure of religious groups. Scholarship on "Christian" groups has been divided on whether their model of social organization more closely resembled a household or a voluntary association. The two forms of organization embody different views of the ekklesia in its internal relations and structures of authority and leadership. The sources indicate that the form of social organization was contested in some groups.⁶³ However, the ekklesia in the uncontested Pauline letters resembled associations to both insiders and outsiders.⁶⁴

In sum, women's status has been inadequately theorized as determined by dominant cultural ideals, honor/shame, the traditional household, or gendered spheres of activity (such as patronage). We have seen that understanding the household context is critical for determining women's status in marriage and slavery. Since wealthy women were also patrons of religious associations, we also need to investigate the workings of patronage. Thus the question of women's religious status is complicated by the need to study socioeconomic institutions: marriage, slavery, and patronage.

SOCIOECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Steven Friesen has emphasized the need for socioeconomic analysis with his critique of use of the category "social status" in contemporary "capitalist criticism."⁶⁵ According to Friesen, mainstream New Testament studies discuss social status in terms of individuals and their social and psychological issues rather than the economic basis of social status.⁶⁶ Speaking of the field generally,

63. On 1 Timothy, see Taniguchi, *Quiet and Peaceable*.

64. Richard S. Ascough, "The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 311–28. Ascough has also suggested the term "elective social formations," in a talk at Harvard Divinity School, May 11, 2007. See the many essays in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996). And most recently, Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations*.

65. Stephen J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 3 (2004): 323–61. Capitalist criticism reflects the commitments of its interpreters, "from Diessmann's perspective of bourgeois industrial capitalism of the early twentieth century, to the new consensus perspective of bourgeois consumer capitalism in the late twentieth century. At both ends of the century, the dominant interpretations of Paul's assemblies fit comfortably with their respective contemporary, dominant, Western ideologies. As a result, the discipline of Pauline studies in the early twenty-first century appears to have no interest in why people were poor or how the Pauline assemblies dealt with economic injustice" (336). Exceptions include literature cited in the following section.

Friesen declares, “The discipline does not validate economic inquiry.”⁶⁷ Fortunately, a few studies of women in religious groups have already begun the work of economic analysis.

Some scholars have subordinated gender in their socioeconomic analyses. Luise Schottroff has focused on the poor as a corrective to the histories of early Christianity from both socialist theorists and their antisocialist critics.⁶⁸ According to Schottroff, socialist theorists construct the religious groups as composed of the poor, but fail to see a revolutionary precursor to socialism. Antisocialists, on the other hand, ignore socialist scholarship and focus on the wealthy.“My critique is not directed against the assumption that rich women and educated men were part of the Christian communities but against the fact that, on account of them, the majority of the uneducated, poor, and weak (in the sense of 1 Cor. 1:26ff.) becomes invisible and the gospel of the poor and the option for women disappears.”⁶⁹ A sustained focus on the poor, and concentration on Christians as revolutionaries, mark Schottroff’s analysis. Her socioeconomic examination of differential access to resources has contributed many insights. However, this approach emphasizes access to wealth at the expense of gender analysis, a move that tends to eclipse investigation of the full range of possibilities for women’s status in religious groups.

A weakness in Schottroff’s approach appears in her discussion of slave women. For instance, where the text of the Acts of the Apostles indicates that Lydia’s entire household was baptized (Acts 16:15), Schottroff accepts the author’s representation of the slaveholder’s dominance. She assumes that female slaves would have experienced Christian slaveholders as liberating. “A Christian owner, female or male, would hardly have been able to prevent them from living in sexual abstinence, in marital fidelity, or in divorce. What the ancient church has to say about Christian female slaves matches this picture. When they belonged to a Christian owner, they could expect to be granted free time and sexual independence.”⁷⁰ However, support for this opinion is absent. In contrast, Jennifer Glancy’s work has argued persuasively that Christian

66. Ibid., 334. Wayne Meeks’s work on early urban Christians contextualizes religion in a study of society that emphasizes adherents’ social formation and belief. Meeks cites Max Weber and Moses Finley for the development of the category “social status,” which is crucial to his analysis. See Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 53.

67. Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies,” 335.

68. Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 150.

69. Ibid., 150.

70. Ibid., 126.

slaveholders would not have viewed the beating or sexual use of a slave as immoral.⁷¹

Schottroff's conception of the "option for the poor" and women in biblical texts derives from her subordination of gender in a liberation-theological perspective based on Marxist class analysis. Kwok Pui-lan has noted that an adequate analysis should include the phenomenon of "indigenous elites employed as colonial agents."⁷² Even as a convert, a slaveholder retained the privilege protected by the Roman Empire that allowed her to dominate slaves. This example illustrates the need to rethink socioeconomic concepts so that they include gender, access to wealth, legal, and colonial status as interlocking oppressions.

In other approaches to the history of religious women, the model used to represent the socioeconomic system of the Roman Empire cannot account for nuances present in evidence about the Roman system. Ivoni Richter Reimer's reconstructions of women's socioeconomic status have provided many valuable references for this study even though her concern for "what the story teaches us" concedes too much influence to the rhetorical shaping of women in Luke-Acts.⁷³ She portrays Prisca of Ephesus as an artisan-class tentmaker and missionary alongside Paul.⁷⁴ Her model of the Roman economy features a split between a few elite and masses of the poor; this model is the basis for her critique of exegetes who place Prisca and Aquila among the "well-to-do," in contrast to early exegetical tradition.⁷⁵ Reimer refers to inscriptions and other material remains to reconstruct persuasively the context and socioeconomic status of female laborers in the eastern Roman Empire. In her view, early Christian women were offering support in their homes and doing missionary work; they were independent heads of churches and active in trades.⁷⁶ All belonged to low socioeconomic levels. Her reconstruction of women depends on a socioeconomic model that does not account for middle levels of property ownership. Thus Reimer does not explore the possibilities for propertied women and their access to patronage in religious associations.

71. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 39–70, 130–56.

72. Kwok Pui-lan, "Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004): 99–106, quotation on 105.

73. See the account of Sapphira's moral culpability in Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 14–16.

74. In common with Schottroff, Reimer reads the Alexandrian text of Acts as more primary and less misogynist than the Western text. Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, 197–99.

75. Ibid., 199–200.

76. Ibid., 250–52.

Finally, another group of publications conceives gender unreflectively as secondary status. James Malcolm Arlandson emphasizes women's socioeconomic status in his study of rising and falling motifs in Luke-Acts.⁷⁷ Following the Lukan author, Arlandson writes of Prisca as a teacher of Apollos but fails to describe her as a leader or "religionist."⁷⁸ He does not consider the possibility of women's religious leadership. Commenting on Luke 8:1-3, Arlandson views with disfavor "the idea that the women are patrons of Jesus and the twelve, as if Jesus and the twelve depended on them. Jesus and the twelve have a special place in the kingdom; it is not likely that they would be depicted as permanently depending on anyone—male or female—but God."⁷⁹ Arlandson's view of women's secondary status seems to accompany a stereotypical view of religious practice. "Jewish women hearing of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet may have been surprised, since it was indeed rare for women to do this. But Gentile women hearing of Mary would not have been surprised, since in their social experience women followed itinerant philosophers."⁸⁰ This perspective suggests that Jewish women were less likely to be educated than other women, but Arlandson offers no support for this view. This example again illustrates the need to read a text's rhetoric critically for gender, access to wealth, and race or ethnicity.

The main element still missing from this body of scholarship is an investigation of women's status with an adequate analytical socioeconomic model. Schottroff, Reimer, and Arlandson are concerned to show how religious conversion alleviates the harsh conditions suffered by the masses of poor women depicted in biblical texts.⁸¹ This goal curtails the possibility of directing sufficient critical attention to women's status, since men remain at the center of biblical theological activity. Why were women seen as lower status (if, or when, they were)? On what basis was status conceived? What were the structures of domination that determined and perpetuated women's socioeconomic situation? How were relations of power maintained? And, how do the answers to all these questions change for wives, widows, slave women, wealthy women, Romans, and provincials?

I have argued that a critical analysis of women's religious status requires investigation of the principal institutions that affected women in religious

77. James Malcolm Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997).

78. Ibid., 125, 146, and 193.

79. Ibid., 163 n. 14.

80. Ibid., 138.

81. None focus on historical reconstruction of the possibilities for women's leadership.

associations: marriage, slavery, and patronage. While scholarship has not ignored these institutions entirely, we have not yet developed frameworks adequate to theorize gender in socioeconomic analysis. The analysis must also allow us to think about how women's status depended on the ways economic institutions overlapped and intertwined. For instance, how did a woman's household or legal status affect her patronage? Furthermore, study of these institutions must be contextualized in an analysis of the larger political, social, and economic situation in colonized Asia Minor. Reconstruction of the socioeconomic history of women requires development of a socioeconomic model that foregrounds and integrates gender, differential access to economic resources, as well as marital, legal, ethnic, and colonial status.

Perusal of a recent publication on socioeconomics and early Christianity demonstrates the need for a specifically materialist socioeconomic framework. The argument in Bruce Longenecker's *Remember the Poor* is based on socioeconomic analysis and, in this respect, represents a positive step for biblical studies.⁸² Longenecker builds on a theme of "elite acquisitiveness" in his description of the Roman economy. Although Longenecker implies systemic exploitation, that critique is softened by its characterization as acquisitiveness. "[F]or our purposes, the sole feature that needs to be highlighted is the acquisitive character of power in advanced agrarian cultures in general, with the elite being well-placed to use their power to acquire the resources of others." One might deduce from this articulation that socioeconomic inequities resulted principally from greed, theft, and corrupt magistrates. Materialist analysis shifts attention to political and socioeconomic systems. "One of the key concepts of historical materialism is this recognition that the production of life is a *systemic* process, one that takes place through a system of related activities. Historically, these activities have taken the form of divisions of labor or relations of production, organizations of state and of consciousness or culture."⁸³ A feminist materialist analysis of the Roman economy investigates how precisely the elite exploited others and extracted surplus through such *systems* as slavery, the household, and patronage. Longenecker's discussion of "the economic attractions of Paul's communities" could be nuanced by addressing how gender, marital status, and legal status (among other factors) overlapped to produce socioeconomic status.⁸⁴ In kyriarchy, we have a framework adequate to perform

82. Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 19–35.

83. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, "Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism," in Hennessy and Ingraham, eds., *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

robust analysis of the Roman Empire since kyriarchy predicates a materialist feminist analytical framework.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have reviewed studies of texts about women's religious status in Asia Minor in the first two centuries of the common era. A few scholars have proposed that wealthy women held positions of religious leadership in antiquity while the majority maintain that women's secondary status precluded or limited such leadership.

Scholars have discussed women's subordination in terms of dominant cultural values, honor/shame, household roles, and patronage. However, none of these has proven complete because none has fully investigated socioeconomic aspects of women's status in households and patronage. While some studies have included socioeconomic analysis, each omits some factors crucial to the determination of women's status. Thus the question of wealthy women's religious leadership remains open because prevailing frameworks have not developed a robust analysis of gender.

Histories of women's secondary status have relied on analytical models in which gender appears to be fixed in the landscape of the historical milieu. In contrast, the approach I proposed in the preceding chapter in the framework of materialist feminism views gender as a fluid variable, and thus asks of each historical source, "How does this source present or construct gender?" In addition, since gender is just one of the preconstructed systems operational in kyriocentrism, a materialist feminist approach simultaneously investigates other ascriptions of status, whether configured as race, ethnicity, class, wealth, age, or legal status. Modeling social relations as kyriarchy allows analysis of multiple factors of oppression in an interlocking system of material economic and political relations. Thus the analytical question is more accurately framed as, "How does this source represent gender in interaction with wealth, ethnicity, marital, and legal status in material relations?"

Rosemary Hennessy's materialist feminist theory predicts that investigation of particular historical economic and political relations will uncover contradictions and ambiguities that the iteration of kyriocentric ideology obscures (since competing ideologies are always present). More specifically for this study, the theory hypothesizes that analysis of presentations of women's status in marriage, patronage, and slavery with respect to kyriarchy will reveal

84. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 259–78.

that women's status varied with their positions in these institutions as gender interacted with wealth, ethnicity, marital, legal, and occupational status. The following chapters pursue this investigation.