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Edited by Barbetta Stanley Spaeth

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Introduction

BARBETTE STANLEY SPAETH

Over the past few decades, scholars have come to recognize ever more clearly that the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world were interconnected in complex ways and therefore should be studied with an interdisciplinary methodology that both probes significant similarities among cultures and yet recognizes important differences among them as well.¹ Nowhere is this interdisciplinary and comparative approach more fruitful than in the study of ancient Mediterranean religions.² Religious beliefs and practices permeated all aspects of life in the ancient Mediterranean world.³ To be sure, some scholars have argued that the term “religion” is not applicable to antiquity, since it reflects a post-Reformation dichotomy between a pursuit viewed as purely “spiritual” and other more pragmatic human activities, such as politics and economics, whereas in antiquity these activities were closely bound together.⁴ Nevertheless, it seems clear that phenomena that we would categorize as “religious” did exist in the ancient Mediterranean, including such things as beliefs about divine beings, rituals devoted to these beings, and institutions connected with the performance of those rituals. In some cases, religious phenomena were transmitted across cultural boundaries, resulting, for example, in the spread of specific cults across the Mediterranean world, such as those of the Egyptian Isis and the Phrygian Cybele. In other cases, religious phenomena helped to define cultural identity through reinforcing perceptions of difference from surrounding cultures, as in the focus on monotheism in ancient Judaism. The study of ancient Mediterranean religions thus provides an unparalleled opportunity to explore issues of cultural diffusion and hybridity, investigate problems of ethnicity and identity, develop new theoretical approaches to comparative religion, and further the study of individual cultures in the matrix of ancient Mediterranean civilization.

The academic discipline of the study of ancient Mediterranean religions, however, is still in its nascent stages. The relatively recent development of this field may be attributed to a variety of factors. First,

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the trend toward academic specialization in the twentieth century has meant that until recently most scholars have been traditionally trained in fields that have had relatively rigid boundaries. In classical studies, for example, my own field, scholars are trained in one of three major disciplines: Latin and Greek language and literature, ancient history, or classical art and archaeology. Since the study of Greek and Roman religions crosses these disciplinary boundaries, training in this area is absent from the curricula of many graduate programs in classical studies, and so few scholars tend to specialize in this area. Second, the problem of academic specialization is compounded when one considers the large number of scholarly fields that comprise the study of ancient Mediterranean religions, among them classical studies, Near Eastern studies, biblical studies, Egyptology, art and art history, history, archaeology, and religious studies. Scholars are often uncomfortable stepping outside of their own fields and into comparative or interdisciplinary work, and hence often do not attempt research that requires such work. Finally, communication among scholars who work on different aspects of ancient Mediterranean religions has been limited. Scholars tend to associate with others in their field, and so do not come into dialogue with those in other areas. This is signaled, for example, by the fact that very few classicists attend the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and few scholars of biblical studies attend the annual meetings of the American Philological Association and the Archaeological Institute of America.

There are signs recently that this artificial division born of academic specialization is breaking down. Interest has been growing in the interdisciplinary and comparative study of the ancient Mediterranean world and of the role of religion within that world. This interest is marked, for example, by the formation of new scholarly organizations, such as the Midwestern Consortium on Ancient Religions (2002), the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World (2004), the Colloquium on Material Culture and Ancient Religion (2008), and the Society for Ancient Mediterranean Religions (2008). Numerous scholarly conferences have also been held on various aspects of the religions of the ancient Mediterranean, for example, "Sanctified Violence in Ancient Mediterranean Religions" (University of Minnesota, 2007), "Ways of Seeing: Visuality in Late Antique Material Religion" (University of Kentucky, 2008), and "What's Religious about Ancient Mediterranean Religions?" (Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 2009). Moreover, undergraduate and graduate courses are now offered in this field at a number of colleges and universities, and new graduate programs have been formed to serve a rising interest in this area, such as the interdisciplinary

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specialization in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean in the Department of Classical Studies at Ohio State University, the specialization in Ancient Mediterranean Religions in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the concentration in Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Ancient Mediterranean religion is thus coming to be recognized as an academic discipline in its own right.

Because of its relatively recent development as an academic discipline, there are few published works that focus on ancient Mediterranean religions, particularly at an introductory level.⁵ This *Cambridge Companion* is intended to fill this gap: to introduce advanced undergraduates, graduate students, scholars in related fields, and interested general readers to a new and burgeoning discipline. The volume provides an introduction to major religions of the ancient Mediterranean from the prehistoric period to late antiquity, that is, from around 4000 BCE to 600 CE, and explores current research regarding the similarities and differences among them. The book is intended to be useful for upper-level undergraduate courses in the field, as well as to serve as a reference for graduate students and faculty in a variety of disciplines. It also is intended to open up more dialogue among the scholars who work on the different religions of this region from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The format of the *Cambridge Companion* as an edited collection of articles suits the field of ancient Mediterranean religions quite well. Since the disciplinary boundaries remain strong, experts in the various disciplines that make up the field can contribute their particular expertise to provide an overview of the field as a whole. In recognition of this strong disciplinary focus, this *Companion* is divided into two parts. Part I offers nine essays that provide an overview of the historical development and characteristics of the major religions of the lands and peoples of the ancient Mediterranean and are written by experts in these fields, including Egypt (Emily Teeter), Mesopotamia (Beate Pongratz-Leisten), Syria-Canaan (Shawna Dolansky), Israel (Mayer I. Gruber), Anatolia (Billie Jean Collins), Iran (W. W. Malandra), Greece (Jennifer Larson), Rome (Celia E. Schultz), and early Christianity (H. Gregory Snyder). The religions covered obviously do not comprise all those that were practiced in the ancient Mediterranean, but they do represent the core of this vast field. The regional organization of this section is based not only on scholarly tradition, but also on the current intellectual interest in the interrelationship of religion and landscape, the use of religion

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as a marker of geographical and ethnic boundaries, and the reciprocal connections among religion, society, and ecology. Part II of this volume contains five longer essays that deal with key topics in current research on ancient Mediterranean religions: violence (Bruce Lincoln), identity (Kimberly B. Stratton), the body (Elizabeth A. Castelli), gender (Ross Shepard Kraemer), and visibility (Robin M. Jensen). The chapters in this section take an explicitly comparative approach to these topics and set them in the context of recent theoretical and methodological advances in contemporary scholarship.

To facilitate comparison of each religion with the others covered in the volume, the contributors to Part I of the volume were asked to follow a common outline. First, each contributor was asked to provide a brief introduction to the geographical, ethnic, and chronological reach of the religion under discussion. Then, he/she was to outline its historical development, including the effects of contact with other Mediterranean cultures on its evolution and its own effects on the religions of other Mediterranean cultures. The important characteristics of the religion were to be outlined next: its beliefs (divinities, cosmology, eschatology), practices (prominent rituals, concepts of sacred time and sacred space, structural organization), and social context (role of social divisions in the practice of the religion, relationship of the religion to other aspects of society, especially politics, and role of ethics and philosophy in the religion). Finally, each contributor was asked to consider the state of research on the religion (major sources for our knowledge of the religion, historical development of scholarship on the religion, current questions being asked by scholars about the religion). In addition, each contributor was to provide a brief description of works that they would recommend to non-specialists to direct further reading on the topic, a chronological chart for the historical development of the religion, a list of works cited in the chapter, a glossary of terms and names of divinities that might be unfamiliar to the non-specialist, and a list of important sites related to the religion to appear on a map of the Mediterranean world at the front of the book. Of necessity, this map does not cover a specific historical period, but rather shows a variety of sites that existed at different periods, in order to orient the readers to the geographical locations associated with each religion covered in the volume. The names of the regions on the map correspond to the titles of the chapters in the volume. In order to accommodate the diversity of the religions in the ancient Mediterranean, the authors in this section were allowed some flexibility within the set outline of topics, in that they could choose to skip or compress certain topics in order to focus on others more germane

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to the religion in question. Although the project of comparison is not explicit in this first section of the *Companion*, I hope that the reader will find many points throughout useful for understanding both the similarities and differences among the various religions covered.

The authors of the chapters in Part II of this volume take a more explicitly comparative approach to the study of ancient Mediterranean religions. The authors of these essays were asked to focus on a particular aspect of ancient Mediterranean religions that crosses cultural boundaries and engages new theoretical and/or methodological perspectives. Each author was requested to branch out from his/her particular field of expertise to embrace the study of at least three different ancient Mediterranean religions and to incorporate a variety of types of evidence, such as texts, archaeological remains, and inscriptions, in their consideration of the topic at hand. Again, at the end of their essays, the contributors were asked to provide a brief description of works recommended to non-specialists for further reading on the topic, a list of works cited in the chapter, and a glossary of specialized terms. Since the chapters of this section of the volume do not follow a common organizational scheme, and their approaches to the topics under consideration are quite varied, I summarize each of these chapters in the following paragraphs.

In the first chapter of Part II, Bruce Lincoln theorizes the role of violence in ancient Mediterranean religions. Lincoln first addresses the nature of violence and its relation to domination, defining the former as the deployment of physical force to convert human subjects into depersonalized objects and the latter as the cultivation of fear through the threat of violence in order to produce a semi-objectified state among the fearful. He then outlines four relatively common ways that violence was invested with religious significance in the ancient Mediterranean: (1) Conquerors viewed their conquest as divinely sanctioned; (2) the conquered saw their defeat as salutary humiliation bringing them closer to the divine from which they had become estranged; (3) the conquered engaged in millenarian revolts sanctioned by the divine and led by a salvific hero; and (4) ascetics on a more individual level practiced mortification of the flesh to liberate themselves from base matter in order to come closer to the divine. Lincoln closes his discussion of this topic by examining martyrdom, which he sees as the embracing of violence by its victims to discredit and delegitimize their adversaries and to elevate their own moral and religious status, thus rejecting the objectifying effects of violence and preserving and enhancing their own roles as subjects.

The next essay, by Kimberly B. Stratton, investigates how new theoretical and critical approaches can be applied to the construction,

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negotiation, and representation of religious identity in the ancient Mediterranean world. Her investigation concentrates on two fundamental modes by which religious identity was expressed, inculcated, and maintained: narrative and performance. Under narrative, she considers how myths about one's group or others might be understood to be defining, either by creating an idealized past around which a social group could rally, or by constructing an "other" as a foil upon which unwanted characteristics could be projected. Under performance, Stratton discusses how ideas of self and community were constructed through actions that moved the individual body through space and place in socially meaningful ways. She also considers how the type of gods worshipped, as well as the geographical location in which they were worshipped, affected concepts of identity, and how religious actions could either sharpen or blur the boundaries around which collective identities coalesced.

The essay by Elizabeth A. Castelli explores the role of the body in ancient Mediterranean religions, alternating between representations of the body (the body as signifier, metaphor, and ideological construction) and bodily enactments (performances, rituals, and other embodiments), and noting instances when the two overlap or intersect. The issues she considers include the nature of the divine body and its connection with the human body, the reciprocal relationship between the macrocosm of the cosmos and the microcosm of the human body, the use of the body as metaphor and as allegory in religious discourse, the role of bodily purity and pollution in the performance of ritual and the preservation of sacred space, the use of religious and magical practices to heal the ailing body, the application of ascetic practices in the service of religious devotion, and the nature of the resurrected body.

Gender is the theme of the chapter by Ross Shepard Kraemer. Kraemer begins by examining gender-specific religious practices in the ancient Mediterranean and their role in bringing about the cultural production of properly gendered persons, both female and male. She also considers how attention to gender and its relation to social hierarchy illuminate other religious practices, such as prayer, prophecy, baptism, and the holding of cultic office. She follows with a discussion of the central role of gender in the cosmology and cosmogony of ancient Mediterranean religions. Finally, Kraemer takes a brief look at the effects of Christianization on gender construction in the region in late antiquity.

Finally, in the last essay of this volume, Robin M. Jensen explores the role of visibility in ancient Mediterranean religions, focusing on images as reflective and performative instruments of religiosity. Jensen begins by outlining the role of visual studies in the history of religions,

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and then considers the question of reality and illusion that is central to religious visual practice through examining ancient theories of sight and the reliability of the senses. She then turns to examining the ways that the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean perceived the visual images of their gods and how they imagined their gods to look. She also investigates the problem of divine visibility or invisibility, particularly in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Jensen finally considers how pictorial narratives were produced and how sacred stories were transmitted and interpreted through visual art.

I hope that this *Cambridge Companion* will introduce readers to the exciting new work that is being done in ancient Mediterranean religions. My own interest in the topic was kindled by a seminar on Roman religion sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities at the American Academy in Rome in 2002 and led by Karl Galinsky, in which I came in contact with a number of scholars of early Christianity and Judaism, including Greg Snyder, Nicola Denzey, Jonathan Reed, and Jeffery Brodd, and learned how their work could help inform my own. I furthered my interest in this topic by participating in two conferences that Steve Friesen, Dan Showalter, James Walters, Christine Thomas, and John Lanci organized on the religious and social landscape of ancient Corinth in 2007 and 2010 at the University of Texas at Austin, and in two of the Colloquia on Material Culture and Ancient Religion that this group of scholars led in 2010 in Israel and 2011 in Greece. In 2008, Eric Orlin and I co-founded the Society for Ancient Mediterranean Religions (SAMR), which has rapidly expanded over the past five years to more than 200 members. I have profited greatly in my own work from the exchange of ideas among scholars of many different disciplines that SAMR has helped to promote. I hope that this volume will generate even more interest in the field of ancient Mediterranean religions and help it gain the wider recognition that it deserves.

A volume such as this one represents the work of many different people who have come together for a collaborative interdisciplinary exercise. I would like to thank the fourteen contributors to this volume for lending their knowledge and expertise to this project and also for their patience and good humor over the period of time it took for it to come together. I also wish to express my gratitude to the various editors and editorial assistants at Cambridge University Press who worked with me to see this volume to completion, including Andrew Beck, Jason Przybylski, Emily Spangler, Amanda Smith, Isabella Vitti, Elise M. Oranges, and Beatrice Rehl. I am also grateful for the suggestions that my friends and colleagues offered for this work, including William Hutton, Linda Reilly,

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Naama Zahavi-Ely, John Oakley, and Molly Swetnam-Burland. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Bob for his support and encouragement while I worked on this volume, without which it certainly would never have been completed.

Notes

- 1 On the study of "Mediterraneanism," especially for the ancient Mediterranean, see Chambers 2008, Horden and Purcell 2005, Harris 2005, Malken 2005, Morris 2005, Braudel 2001, and Horden and Purcell 2000. For the concept of Mediterraneanism in general, see the seminal work of Braudel 1995, originally published in French in 1949.
- 2 On the history of the study of ancient Mediterranean religions, see most recently Johnston 2007:viii–ix.
- 3 On defining what is "Mediterranean" about ancient Mediterranean religions, see Graf 2007, Woolf 2005, Chaniotis 2005, and Horden and Purcell 2000:403–460. On defining what is "ancient" about ancient Mediterranean religions, see Lincoln 2007.
- 4 On the problem of defining "religion" as a category for pre-modern or non-Western societies, see Asad 1993, Fitzgerald 2000, and McCutcheon 1997.
- 5 Other recent works that treat ancient Mediterranean religions include Johnston 2004 (an encyclopedic reference work), Johnston 2007 (a condensed version of the encyclopedia), and Hinnells 2007 (a survey of a variety of ancient religions across the world).

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