Introduction

Defining the task

Among the second-century critics of early Christianity, Celsus was the most prolific. Unfortunately, we possess very little information about his life. His book The True Doctrine, written about 170 CE, no longer exists, and it is known to us only from a rebuttal composed by Origen some seventy years later, Contra Celsum. Luckily Origen quotes Celsus at length, and we are thus in a good position to recover much of what Celsus originally said. Of particular importance for this study is Celsus’ remarkable interest in the presence of women among Jesus’ followers, and in their role in the development of Christianity. In fact, Celsus describes the Christian resurrection belief as having been created by a ‘hysterical woman’ who was deluded by sorcery:

But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body . . . But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery; who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or which is more likely, wanted to impress others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.¹

The mention of a hysterical woman may be simply a general attempt to ridicule the beliefs of a cult which sprang from the

¹ See Orig. C. Cel. 2.55; 3.55; trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge University Press, 1953). The identification of the hysterical female as Mary Magdalene and the text as a whole are discussed fully in Part I pp. 104–9.
Introduction

foolish imaginings of women; as we will see, other foreign religions had been critiqued similarly. But Celsus’ knowledge of the Christian tradition is substantial enough that it is possible that he was familiar with the important role women play in resurrection accounts, and with the role of Mary of Magdala in particular. The lingering memory in early Christian circles about Mary as a follower of Jesus, a witness to the resurrection, and a herald of the news of the appearance of the risen Christ, is made clear by her prominence in New Testament traditions (Mark 16.1–11; Matt. 28.1–8; Luke 24.1–11; John 20.1–18) and in several gnostic writings from the second and third centuries CE.2 Celsus noted that women continued to play a prominent role, acting as leaders in church groups after the death of Jesus, and he described the participation of women in Christianity’s sedulous evangelizing tactics. If Celsus’ remarks were substantive rather than simply being a stereotypical attempt to chide early Christians, he was asserting that from its inception to his own day, Christianity had been very much a women’s religion.3

Celsus’ labelling of a woman with a talent for the invention of religious belief as ‘hysterical’ reflects a well-attested sentiment in the Roman Empire that women were inclined towards excesses in matters of religion. Commenting on Celsus’ description of early Christianity as a lurer of women, the historian Ramsay MacMullen stated, Ardent credulity was presented as a weakness characteristic of the sex, pagan or Christian.4 At times this weakness took the form of addiction to religious matters, a trait said to be found only rarely in men.5 At times it took the form of outright allegiance to a strange new religious group. According to the

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3 See OrIG. C. Colo. 3.55. The notion of ‘women’s religious’ is an important concept in the recent excellent study by Ross S. Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World (Oxford and NY: Oxford University, 1992) 3.
5 See Strabo, Geography, 7.3.4 (c. 297); trans. H. L. Jones (LCL 1924); cited in Kraemer, Her Share, 3.
Defining the task

ancient author Plutarch, fidelity to one’s husband meant fidelity to his gods and the ability to ‘shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favour.’

The Greek term ‘πάροιμασίας’, rendered here as ‘hysterical’, deserves special attention at the outset. I have opted for this translation and not for the alternate, and no doubt less ‘loaded’, translation of πάροιμασίας as ‘frenzied’. I have done so because ‘hysterical’ in the modern world is so strongly associated with women’s behaviour which is out of control, with female nature that has gone morally and intellectually awry, with weakness and vulnerability inherent in the female sex. When Celsus’ description of the woman witness to the resurrection is read in relation to his descriptions of other women these stereotypical perceptions about

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6 Plutarch, Moralia (Advice to Bride and Groom) 140c; trans. F. C. Babbitt (LCL 1926). For more evidence that women were considered especially susceptible to strange religious impulses see Margaret Y. MacDonald, ‘Early Christian Women Married to Unbelievers’, SR 19:2 (1990) 229–31; Kraemer, Her Share, 211 n.1; MacMullen, Married Woman, 137 n.33.

7 Orig. C. Cels. 2.55; 2.59. See Patristic Greek Lexicon, G. Lampe (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) s.v. πάροιμασίας. In adopting the translation of this term as ‘hysterical’, I am following Chadwick (see n.1 above). I am grateful to my research assistant Dlys Paterson for pointing out the fluid meaning of this word. I am also grateful to Steven Muir for the study he undertook of this term and its cognates. Some of the results of his investigation can be seen in ‘Rebellion, Debauchery, and Frenzy in the Septuagint’, NTS 16:2 (1993) 19–21. Although this is not a common word, it is derived from the more common term ὀμπονίας which refers to the sting of the gadfly, and metaphorically to frenzy or madness. It often has a sexual connotation: Euripides, Bacchus, trans. A. S. Way (LCL 1916) 32; 1229 offers an especially appropriate illustration of this sense. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), s.v. ὀμπονίας. The term πάροιμασίας is to be distinguished from ὄμπος, the Greek term from which the English ‘hysterical’ is derived. The literal meaning of ὄμπος is ‘suffering in the womb’, a disease of women which produces such broad symptoms as apnea and convulsions. Although there are some convergences in meaning, in ancient literature ὄμπος does not seem to be as directly associated with deranged behaviour as πάροιμασίας. On the Greek term ὀμπονίας see Liddell and Scott, Greek English Lexicon. In the medical writings of Soranus and Galen this condition is said to produce such symptoms as apnea, fainting, and convulsions. According to Soranus, deranged behaviour appears as a type of after-effect of ὄμπος, See Galen, On the Afflicted Parts, 6.5; trans. Rudolph E. Siegel (Basil: S. Karger, 1976); Soranus, Gynecology, 3.4.26; trans. Oswar Temkin (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1956). It is interesting to consider the implications of the association of involuntary celibacy with ὀμπονίας in ancient medical writings. This point will be discussed further in Part 2.

8 Chadwick translates the term as ‘hysterical’ (see n.1 above). Note, however, that Harold Remus adopts the translation of Celsus’ phrase as ‘frenzied woman’ in Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1983) (107).
Introduction

women emerge clearly. It is precisely these perceptions that I would like to recall for my readers in order that they might reflect upon how strongly stereotypes impinge upon characterizations of female behaviour both in ancient and modern societies – in order that they may sense the seemingly timeless imprint of stereotypes on the collective imagination.

I have, however, decided to set the stage for my discussion with Celsius’ description of the hysterical woman for a further reason. The account moves quickly from testimony that a woman behaved in predictably deranged ways to an unwitting admission of the importance of her involvement in the telling of the tale. Moreover, while he clearly sought to downplay success, Celsius’ efforts belie the fact that by the second century CE a significant population found the ‘cock-and-bull’ story to be convincing. The description of the ‘hysterical woman’ calls to mind the ambivalent attitude in antiquity towards religious talents displayed by women: these talents were both admired and held in great suspicion. For an illustration of this perception of religious talent we might consider the Sybil, a prophetess of obscure origin known to us from Jewish and pagan sources. Her proximity to early Christian circles is revealed by her appearance in an early second-century Christian text, *The Shepherd of Hermas*. During the course of his adventures Hermas mistakenly assumes that an elderly lady seen in a vision bearing a book of ‘revelations’ is the Sybil (she turns out to be the church).9 Hermas’ assumption and the disclosure of the woman’s true identity are perhaps inspired by a need to respond to a common opinion of non-Christians about the prominence of female prophets and teachers in the early church. Celsius recounts that some early Christians are in fact ‘Sybillists’.10 Within early Christian groups the influence of women teachers was a subject of concern and could sometimes even elicit wrath, as is suggested by the haunting depictions of the suffering that will befall the prophetess Jezebel of the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2.19–23).11

The word ‘hysterical’ (πάροξυσμός) employed by Celsius in

10 Orig. C. Cels. 6.34.
11 See also Kraemer’s interesting discussion of Jewish ‘witches’ in *Her Sham*, 90, 108–9.
Defining the task

conjunction with the term ‘sorcery’ certainly calls to mind the notion of a deluded, deranged female, but we should be cautious about reading Celsus’ clearly derogatory description as implying that the prototypic Christian (hysterical) woman was powerless or without influence. Important male figures in the development of Christianity receive similar categorization. In other places in Celsus’ account (as recorded by Origen) παροιμίες refers to the utterings of false prophets and messianic pretenders, which Origen takes to mean the prophets of Hebrew Scripture. Furthermore, far from being simply deluded and immobilized by hysteria, the woman described by Celsus was an active witness, a teller of a fantastic tale. As will be discussed later in this volume, Christians could likewise describe women as both victims (e.g. 2 Tim. 3.6–7) and dangerous perpetrators (e.g. 1 Tim. 5.13) of fantastic tales. Thus, Christians and non-Christians shared the sentiment that women were inclined toward excesses in religious matters. The result, I will argue, was that early Christian women who risked public censure for their religious activities also were often the object of careful monitoring by those inside the church.

In order to gain a greater sense of the dual image of the hysterical woman as both deluded female and influential evangelist, it is valuable to assemble the references to women made by the first non-Christian observers of early Christianity. In Part 1 of this book I examine the comments of second-century pagan authors who refer specifically to early Christian women. The early church works from the first and second centuries CE (including the New Testament) discussed in Parts 2 and 3 offer further indications of how women figured in public opinion about Christianity. My goal in Parts 2 and 3, however, also is to shed light on how public opinion about women in the church shaped early Christian teaching concerning women and, therefore, affected the lives of women. Generally, I aim to illustrate in this book the importance of the issue of female visibility in the relationship between the early church and Greco-Roman society. I seek to show what aspects of

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12 C. Cel. 7.9–10.
13 The word ‘pagan’ has no derogatory meaning in this book. It is employed in the usual sense adopted by scholars of the ancient world to distinguish Jews and early Christians from others in the Greco-Roman world.
Introduction

the lives of early Christian women caught the attention of outside observers, and I consider how that attention may have been related to the increasing tension between church and society as the church moved into the second century.

To assess how church women figured in general public opinion is admittedly somewhat problematic. We have a few statements of intellectuals and government officials (representatives of elite social circles), which are the earliest descriptions of church members by non-Christians. These statements are of debatable value for determining popular reaction to Christianity. However, the second-century critiques of the early church which I analyse in Part 1 of this book reveal the strong influence of the rumours, impressions, and stereotypes which reverberate throughout society at all levels, elite and popular. In turn, the early Christian sources I discuss in Parts 2 and 3 disclose concern not only about highly visible behaviour of women which might cause reprisals from government officials, but also about the negative assessments which generally might result from chance encounters between outsiders and worshipping early church women. My contention in this book is that it is important to study the literary records of non-Christian observers of the church in conjunction with church texts which reveal sensitivity to the impressions of outsiders. In this way, we get a comprehensive picture: we see the importance of women in opinions about the church formed both in elite circles as well as the sectors of society that made up the remaining ninety-nine per cent of the population, the sectors of society from which virtually all early Christians came.14

A focus on the place of women in public opinion about the church can increase our knowledge of the history of early Christian women in two important ways. First, the remarks of non-Christian observers sometimes can offer details about the lives of early Christian women which either augment what is known on the basis of Christian sources or, more often, cause one to assess Christian evidence somewhat differently. For example, Lucian of

Defining the task

Samosata’s description of Christian widows accompanied by children calls into question the tendency among scholars to polarize the lives of married early church women and unmarried early church women.\(^\text{15}\) Secondly, a focus on how women figured in public opinion about the early church leads one to probe how the lives of early Christian women were shaped by stereotypical perceptions about women’s roles in religion and society. I argue in this book that, for a variety of reasons, the early church threatened images of the ideal woman that existed in the ancient Mediterranean world. There was, in fact, such extensive convergence between notions of the ideal wife and mother in antiquity, despite a great range of time and geography, as to lead the ancient historian Mary Lefkowitz to offer the following assessment of the marital advice given by Plutarch in the second century CE: ‘He was an antiquarian and historian and he studied and read enough to know that the concept of a married woman’s role had not changed very much over seven hundred years.’\(^\text{16}\) Early Christianity sometimes came to be seen as threatening the portrait of the ideal wife that typically included the virtues of chastity, proper care for husband and children, and exemplary management of the household. Instead of the ideal mother described by Tacitus whose greatest pleasure came from managing her own house and giving herself to her children, the early Christian woman was the wicked woman of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* who combined secret religious rites with unchastity.\(^\text{17}\) Instead of being discreet and modest, she was excessive and hysterical.

The writings of church authors from New Testament times onwards contain indications of the need to explain and direct the behaviour of women that arose in response to the critical remarks of outsiders and their unjust treatment of Christians. A key text for understanding early church response to public opinion about Christian women, 1 Timothy 5.5–16, suggests that the author of the Pastoral Epistles restricts the activities of young widows in

\(^{15}\) See Part 3, pp. 227-30.


\(^{17}\) See Tacitus, *Dialogus*, 28.4–5; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 9.14. While the description in the *Metamorphoses* might refer to a woman who was a Jewish proselyte, it may also express a typical pagan observer’s opinion of the Christian wife of a mixed marriage.
Introduction

direct response to the community being reviled by outsiders. More accepting of Christian women’s initiative and more vocal about the cruel treatment of Christians, Justin Martyr’s Apology 2.2 explains how an exemplary Roman matron’s efforts to divorce an immoral pagan husband culminate in the execution of her Christian teacher. 1 Timothy 5.3–16 and Justin’s Apology 2.2 are examples of early Christian texts that I have selected for analysis in this book because they combine a discussion of women’s behaviour with concern about the reaction of the outside world. Displaying a sensitivity to public perceptions about the activities of early Christian women, they lead us to reflect about the central issues involved in the church’s interaction with Greco-Roman society. I have chosen to study particular texts produced in various church settings on the basis of their relevance for the topic, but there are no doubt other texts which are pertinent to the discussion. It is my hope that this investigation will serve as a point of departure for further exploration.

As a convenient way of managing the discussion, I have organized the early Christian material in relation to two themes. In Part 2 of the book, I deal with celibate early Christian women, including virgins, divorced women, and widows. In Part 3, I consider the lives of married early Christian women, both those who were married to Christian husbands and those who were married to non-believers. Although I have chosen this organizational framework, I do not mean to imply that there were diametrically opposite public reactions to early Christian married and unmarried women. In fact, I will argue that there is considerable overlap both in how married and unmarried women figured in public opinion about the church, and in early Christian responses to that public opinion. Not only by admitting celibate women, but also by accepting into membership married women unaccompanied by their spouses, church groups inevitably came into conflict with conventional ideals of female identity and behaviour. Yet, church authors also took great care to prescribe rules governing the lives of women (both married and unmarried) that matched the household ethics of Greco-Roman society. This ‘balancing act’ between challenge and acceptance of mainstream ethical values can be seen, for example, in the remarks of the author of 1 Peter. The effect of
Defining the task

1 Peter 3.1–6 is to legitimate the continuing relationship between Christian wives and pagan husbands. Such an effort flies in the face of Greco-Roman notions of marriage propriety which call for a woman to share the religion of her husband. In essence, 1 Peter sanctions a type of insubordination. But the author of 1 Peter also ensures that wives behave in the submissive, chaste, and reverent way that would appease a pagan husband and most likely also quiet any slander. Much of my study is devoted to understanding how women participated in the often ambivalent early church overtures to the Greco-Roman world.

The era which is relevant for the topic of early Christian women and public opinion about the Church begins in New Testament times and reaches to the Age of Constantine. However, with respect to the early Christian sources treated in this book, I have confined my study to the New Testament and Patristic material from the middle of the first century to the middle of the second century CE. There is inevitably a need to set realistic limits for a given research project. In addition, my choice to set my point of investigative departure at about 50 CE, when Paul was in the midst of his missionary campaign, and my end-point at about the time of the writing of Justin’s Apology to Antoninus Pius around 156 CE, has been made because of a desire to understand the specific historical developments in this formative period of church history. In this study I am especially interested in the transition from a group (or groups) which would have appeared to observers as one Jewish faction among many, to a group (or groups) which by the early second century was clearly recognizable as a distinct entity, was increasingly subject to hostility, and was beginning to engage in sustained efforts at apology. This book aims to shed light on the part played by women in the increasing visibility of early Christianity and the growing dialogue between early Christianity and Greco-Roman society.

There is substantial overlap in terms of dates, social setting, and subject matter between New Testament works and the earliest church documents studied by Patristic scholars. Yet, the theological importance attributed to the New Testament in Christian circles has traditionally meant that the New Testament Canon continues to determine the division of labour between New
Introduction

Testament scholars and scholars of the earliest Patristic literature. Probably because the parameters of fields of scholarship are generally slow to evolve, even scholars who are primarily interested in the historical study of early church texts have been reluctant to cross these self-imposed subject boundaries. In my opinion, this tendency has led to an incomplete understanding of the important developments in church history during the first half of the second century CE. Our understanding of the lives of early Christian women is strengthened, for example, when we analyse the developments evident in the Pastoral Epistles in light of similar developments apparent in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, both works probably dating from the early second century CE and sharing similar interests in the development of church offices and the encouragement of Christian marriages. Moreover, scholars generally accept the thesis that the end of the first century CE onward was characterized by an increased ‘patriarchalization’ of the church that manifested itself in an appeal for Christian wives to be model wives according to Greco-Roman ideals of fidelity and subjugation; such patriarchalization is said to have occurred as a direct result of early Christian concern for their public image in the face of growing societal hostility. But in order to evaluate the validity of this thesis it is vital to undertake a thorough overview of the part women played in the interaction between church groups and Greco-Roman society from Paul’s day to the period when the last New Testament writings and earliest extra-canonical early Christian documents were produced.

Paul’s letters are central to my study because they offer fascinating evidence from the earliest period of church history of patterns of life which could pose challenges to Greco-Roman society. Although Paul demonstrates some concern for social respectability which becomes even more developed in writings of his successors, 1 Corinthians 7 still provides fruitful material for exploring how the early church encouraged women to behave in highly controversial, if not counter-cultural, ways. For example, when Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.40 advised widows (without limiting his instruc-

18 See discussion in Part 3, pp. 236–7 where I consider in detail the work of scholars who support this thesis.