

Book Review

Women's Socioeconomic Status and Religious Leadership in Asia Minor in the First Two Centuries C.E.

By Katherine Bain (Fortress, 2014)

REVIEWED BY JEFF MILLER

This book is a PhD dissertation, published in Fortress Press's selective "Emerging Scholars" series. Indeed, it reads like a dissertation, and only specialists will resist the urge to skim through the survey of scholarship and explanation of method in the introduction and first chapter. (That is not to say these sections are of no value.)

Bain's approach builds on the "kyriarchy" of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Bain's main doctoral professor at Harvard University. Borrowing its first syllable from a Greek word for "master" (*kyrios*), kyriarchy is "a model of the comprehensive structure of domination and stratification in the Roman Empire" (14). One principle of a kyriarchal approach is that literary sources tend to adhere to stereotypes more than inscriptions (such as tombstones) do. Bain thus argues that "the view from below in kyriarchal analysis highlights subordinated persons who remain invisible in other models of socioeconomic status" (171). Simply put, inscriptions give a clearer picture of marginalized people than literary texts do.

In short, Bain's study demonstrates first that studying women in the Hellenistic cultures of the first two centuries AD is more complex than has typically been recognized. Gender is not an isolated indicator of status. Rather, gender, marital status, and socioeconomic status are interwoven. An understanding of women's religious leadership therefore rests on integrated knowledge of these and other factors. Second, Bain makes a compelling case that the number of women who functioned as heads of households, possessors of wealth, and leaders in civic and religious arenas is greater than is often supposed.

Chapter 2 concerns "Wealthy Women and Household Status." Here Bain surveys images and inscriptions that describe women as heads of households, citizens, professionals, and as women with civic status and legal liability. She goes on to add similar insights from the Socratic dialogue *Oikonomikos*, written by Xenophon of Athens (c. 430–354 BC) and from two letters sent to the Christians of Smyrna by Saint Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 50–110). In the latter, Bain sees Ignatius promoting a kyriarchal understanding of marriage and household.

This same chapter affirms other scholarship, notably that of Charlotte Methuen and Anne Hanson, that "widow" (Greek *chēra*) typically "connotes a woman who did not live with a man" (69) rather than a woman whose husband has died. Other points of interest for egalitarian biblical studies include that Judean wives could in fact divorce their husbands (69), Greco-Roman city neighborhoods tended to have workplaces and residences for both rich and poor clustered together (83–84), and not all wealthy Greco-Roman wives held the title "matron" (85–86).

Chapter 3 describes a handful of women patrons, utilizing both inscriptions and literature. Most prominent among these patrons are Tryphaena from the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and Phoebe from Rom 16. Bain's section on Phoebe is especially interesting. Some of her conclusions follow:

As a wealthy widow, she expected to engage in patronage and demonstrate leadership. Phoebe . . . served as more than host and financial supporter. . . . Wealthy widows' patronal religious leadership could have included reading and preaching in assemblies, evangelizing, occupying a prominent seat, wearing distinctive clothing, hosting travelers, reading and writing letters of recommendation, and making organizational decisions. (132–33)

Chapter 4 asks whether and to what extent slave and freed women participated in patronage and leadership. Bain's answer is affirmative, and she gives examples of slave and freed women performing numerous occupations and gaining wealth sufficient for such participation. These occupations sometimes involved managing businesses, land, or slaves. One surprise (both to me and to Bain) is a burial inscription mentioning a slave who herself also owned a slave (149–50). Bain goes on to examine Jewish manumission inscriptions and Ignatius's *Letter to Polycarp*, in which Ignatius advises that Christian slaves, male and female, "should not long to be set free through the common fund, lest they be found slaves of passion" (164; *Ignatius to Polycarp* 4.3). Bain argues that Ignatius "sought to strengthen kyriarchal structures in the ekklesia [church] by urging slaves to accept a religious status that spiritualized slavery while reinforcing the socioeconomic status quo" (166).

Though not lengthy (176 pages), the book is highly technical and aimed at specialists. It should be in all seminary libraries but on precious few living-room bookshelves. It is an especially helpful resource for those who, though already informed about the subject matter, are in need of updated and nuanced information.

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