Erica A. Mathieson

Christian women in the Greek papyri of Egypt to 400 CE (Studia Antiqua Australiensia, 6), Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014, xii+311 p. ISBN 9782503552415.

This study, which resulted from Mathieson's PhD thesis defended at Macquarie University in Sydney, presents a survey and a critical analysis of the earliest evidence of Christian women exploring their religious beliefs, practices and experiences as seen in private letters and documents. The ambition of the author is to make the voices of women heard even though she admits that they do not come to us unmediated. In order to do that the focus is shifted, from the formal markers of Christian identity and the significance of the texts for the history of the early church (such as the role and status of ascetic women), to the religious self-expression of women in the context of their everyday social life, an aspect which has been overlooked before.

The introduction provides a concise outline of methodology and establishes the chronological framework of the study limited largely to the 4th century CE, the period within which most of the preserved Greek letters produced by women have been assigned. The author chooses to include in the study not only letters and documents composed by women (which they wrote on their own or through a male assistant) but also texts from the same time span where women are addressed or referred to. While the first six chapters discuss only letters by women, the last three chapters complement the discussion by expanding the context with three more sets of texts: letters featuring women but written by men; documents mentioning ascetic women; and magic texts composed on women's behalf. The author acknowledges that the material in Ch. 7–9 does not contribute to the study of subjective attitudes of female believers, but argues nonetheless that it is based on the common religious understanding between the recipient and the addressee or reveals the beliefs of the commissioner (in the case of magic texts).

In Chapter 1 Mathieson presents a careful and comprehensive selection of 26 papyrus texts produced by women. This includes letters that undoubtedly derive from the Christian context as well as those the "Christianity" of which can be questioned (e.g. P. Abinn. 34 and P. Abinn. 49 where the possibility of the Jewish context cannot be excluded). The Greek text of the documents is presented along with the apparatus, translation and preliminary commentary identifying, in brief, Christian and other religious elements. Chapters 2–6 cover the language of these papyrus texts, the religious beliefs and attitudes expressed in them (labelled by the author as theology), the role of religious practices in women's everyday life and social relationships, and the involvement of the women in the church communities that the papyrus documents

imply. In most cases the texts of the New Testament serve as comparanda for discerning Christian elements, concepts, and values.

In Chapter 2 Mathieson demonstrates that women adopt Christian conceptual framework and patterns, including biblical vocabulary and imagery, when speaking about their own experiences, and argues that this adoption reflects the process of Christianisation of the society. In Chapter 3 the language is highlighted as a medium for conveying one's understanding of God through various statements about life situations. The author's assumption is that women's expressions of faith were informed by theological concepts. Mathieson concludes that the conviction in God's active presence in everyday life forms an important part of Christian women's beliefs at that time. In Chapter 4 Mathieson deals in detail with opening and closing prayers in the letters making an interesting observation that these prayers help to establish personal relationship with other people. The texts that refer to women's relationship with clergy show the general involvement of women in the life of the church. In Chapter 6 on marriage and family, the conclusion is that the Christian community could play a role of an alternative family whenever the real family male members were absent or failed to fulfil their role of mediators, financial or legal assistants. Chapter 7 is, like Chapter 1, a collection of texts referring to Christian women with brief commentary, but no text or translation is given. In Chapter 8 Mathieson discusses the evidence of papyri about ascetic women which reveals that they were not secluded and continued living in urban environments connected to their family, friends and each other, owning property and paying taxes. Magic texts written for women's benefit are collected and discussed in Chapter 9.

The argument throughout the book shows that the Christian women do not articulate their attitudes and emotions in distinctly Christian terms, but rather, use contemporary social models. At the same time, the author suggests that, given the Christian context, these patterns may have received a new – Christian – meaning. For instance, Mathieson signals that many of the linguistic ways as well as theological concepts used by women to express their faith are not exclusive to Christian texts, but in fact are common for pagan, Jewish, and Manichean usage. The author concludes that Christian women did not present themselves as a separate group in the society. The commonality of the expressions in the texts poses a serious methodological problem for the interpretation of the material, namely, whether there is genuine belief and emotional engagement behind a certain expression or it serves just as a social convention and does not indicate any personal attitudes of the writer. Mathieson argues that religious beliefs can be still discerned, even behind standardised practices

and formulaic expressions, and that the conventionality does not exclude religious expression.

From the reader's perspective, the book is not the easiest one to use. Although it is equipped with an index of papyri which helps to navigate, I found it highly inconvenient that Mathieson does not assign her own numeration to the papyrus texts in the first chapter to facilitate the references to them in Chapters 2–6. Numbering of chapters and subchapters would be also desirable so that the readers do not confuse chapter titles with numerous subtitles (not included in the table of contents). Few minor editor's slips include dots under letters shown as iotas subscripts (pp. 22, 24); and the footnotes situated on the following page, too far from the sentence to which they refer (p. 23).

The book will be extremely helpful for students of history, sociolinguistics, and gender aspects of early Christianity showing how fluid and complex our evidence on the subject could be. Perhaps, the next step in the discussion, which is touched on in the book but not treated systematically, could be a comparison between women's patterns of expressing themselves and male ways of presenting women's as well as their own beliefs.

Elena Chepel

School of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Russian Presidential Academy
of National Economy and Public Administration
euchepel@gmail.com