

Introduction

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This volume grows out of a conference held at Brown University during the winter of 2005. Its purpose, like that of the event which preceded it, is to advance our understanding, both contextually and comparatively, of a distinct and widespread ancient religious phenomenon – household and family religion – within a number of discrete cultural and historical settings of Mediterranean and West Asian antiquity. In order to achieve these goals, we invited a paper, and begin with a chapter, outlining the salient theoretical and methodological issues raised by the study of household and family religion in itself and showing the importance of cross-cultural comparisons for effective theory-formation. A series of essays follows, addressing the phenomenon of household and family religion in a number of different cultural contexts: Second Millennium West Asia (Mesopotamia, Emar, Nuzi, Ugarit); First Millennium West Asia (including Israel); Egypt; Greece; and Rome. A comparative essay by the editors concludes the volume.

Family and household religion is a cutting-edge topic in several of the fields represented here. In some it is just emerging as a distinct subject of interest. In others it has long been studied, but often with a teleologically Christianizing bias that has obscured its essential nature. Past emphasis on religion as manifested in state-sponsored or civic temple cults has tended to give way in several fields to a new recognition that religious expression outside the physical and social contexts of national, regional, or civic worship – expression associated with household, family, and domicile – is also significant and must be investigated in a serious way. Such religious expression might include supplication of a household's patron deities or of spirits associated with the house itself, providing for ancestral spirits, and any number of rituals related to the lifecycle (rites of pregnancy and birth, maturity, old age, and death). And it might occur in a number of different *loci*. For a number of the cultures represented here, the domicile was evidently a central locus for petition

of family gods and, in some settings, for contact with dead ancestors. But for some of the cultures of interest to us, the domestic locus hardly exhausts the phenomenon we are calling household and family religion, for the household and family are social units, and the religious activity of their members might also occur in places other than the home, such as at extramural tombs and local sanctuaries. Furthermore, as Stanley Stowers emphasizes in his essay in this volume, the temporal dimensions of household and family religion cannot be ignored. Lifecycle events occur at particular stages of life, in a particular sequence. Thus, any study of household and family religion ought to be shaped by considerations of where a given ritual took place, in the presence or interest of what social group, and when – not only at what time of day (if that is known) but, in certain cases, at what times of year and at what stage in the life of either the participant or the property itself.

Readers might find redundancy in our title and wonder why we have chosen to refer to the phenomenon of interest as “household and family religion” rather than simply “family religion” or “household religion.” Because usages within disciplines vary, and because the phenomenon itself takes different forms in different cultural contexts, we did not want to prejudice the issue by imposing a single name, nor did we wish to become overly distracted by debate about nomenclature. Our primary interest is the phenomenon itself, how it was constituted and how it functioned within the cultures under consideration, rather than achieving a consensus regarding terminology. With the goal of approaching the subject from that perspective, we invited our contributors to use whatever terminology they preferred for the phenomenon in question but asked them to justify their usages by explaining the parameters of the territory that each term covered. We asked them, in other words, to begin to theorize the phenomenon for their own fields, thereby providing us with a basis for comparison among cultures.

Most contributors tend to prefer one term or the other, but some are inclined to speak of a “domestic cult” or “popular religion” instead of “family” or “household” religion. Predictably, perhaps, definitions of “household” and “family” vary by cultural and disciplinary context, but most can be broadly classified according to a few basic oppositional categories: families are generally conceived of either broadly, as comprising all descendants of a single male ancestor (a clan), or more narrowly, as constituting a smaller group of closer relatives. Within the latter category, the family can be further defined as either nuclear, having the triadic configuration of mother, father, and offspring, or extended, including also more distant relatives and often spanning several generations. Households, similarly, can be classified as either simple, consisting exclusively of biological kin, or complex, comprising household dependents (principally but not only domestic slaves) as well as blood relatives – in short, all who live within the house (or, more accurately in certain contexts, all who fall within the power of the head of the family). Within these basic categories much variation, of course, is possible – the compositions and configurations of complex households, for example, differed substantially among the cultures under consideration – and practically there is often considerable overlap among them, but fundamentally “family” and “household” characterize different realms,

one primarily biological with an important temporal element, the other architectural with an important physical component. The terms chosen for our title may thus be seen to represent two related but essentially different ways by which the phenomenon of interest can be identified and, in a preliminary way, defined.

In addition to textual representations of cultic activity outside of the major sanctuaries, whether epigraphic or literary, relevant materials for reconstructing household and family religion include the material remains of distinct domestic or other loci, related utensils understood to serve cultic purposes, and pictorial representations of cultic acts, deities, or other relevant phenomena. For some cultures, the onomasticon forms another distinct class of pertinent data (e.g., Egypt, Emar, Israel). In some fields, recent archaeological discoveries have increased considerably the material available for study and have stimulated further investigation into the phenomenon. The evidence of Ammonite Tell Jawa, for example, has had considerable impact on discussions of Levantine household and family religion. Our authors draw on various kinds of sources, and their treatments of them are shaped both by the range of evidence available to them and by the questions they ask of it. Some privilege texts in their investigations, others material remains, including visual representations. Still others strive to balance the different classes of evidence. What they share in common is a focus on a distinct religious phenomenon attested cross-culturally and through time.

Why contextual *and* comparative perspectives? Studying family and household religion from the viewpoint of each individual cultural context of interest to us requires little justification. Such a contextual approach has been and remains routine in all of the fields represented in this volume and, what is more important, provides the requisite material for any attempt at comparison. In fact, there can be no worthwhile comparison without a detailed consideration of the phenomenon in each individual context. Thus far, such contextual work has been attempted in only a few of the settings under consideration here (e.g., Second Millennium Babylon, First Millennium Israel, classical Rome). For a number of other cultural contexts, the essays collected in this volume represent a significant initial step, a first attempt at a comprehensive understanding of household and family religion in a particular setting. In contrast to contextual work, which is uncontroversial in itself, being at worst harmlessly antiquarian, comparison has sometimes elicited resistance from scholars in the various fields represented in this volume, as Stowers notes in his essay. Whatever the reasons for such resistance – there are probably more than a few – comparison strikes us as particularly welcome and even necessary when the phenomenon under study, however it is to be more precisely defined, is attested as broadly and cross-culturally as is household and family religion. Comparison has the potential to generate new questions and novel insights; it can lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the category of religious behavior that interests us by revealing points of similarity as well as difference; and it can enable us to distinguish that which is common to a larger Mediterranean and West Asian cultural sphere from that which is particular to one or another cultural setting. First, however, we must explore the nature of the phenomenon in its various manifestations across the

region. We therefore begin with a series of studies of household and family religion in individual civilizations, arranged chronologically and consequently moving (roughly) from east to west, in order to gain insight into the phenomenon of interest as it is evidenced in a number of discrete cultural settings over time. These individual studies are followed by an essay in which a preliminary attempt is made at comparison, in the hope of advancing our understanding of the nature of household and family religion across the larger Mediterranean and West Asian world of antiquity.