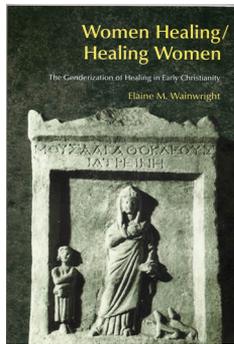


# ○ REVIEW OF ELAINE M. WAINWRIGHT, *WOMEN HEALING/HEALING WOMEN: THE GENDERIZATION OF HEALING IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY*

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This book by Elaine M. Wainwright, Professor of Theology at the University of Auckland, is a welcome addition to the ever-growing corpus of work that considers the intersections of medicine, magic, and religion in the ancient Mediterranean world. Wainwright pays primary attention to the ways in which notions of healing and notions of gender were mutually co-constructed in these overlapping fields. In this way, she joins Helen King and Lesley Dean-Jones in demonstrating especially how medical literature, monuments, and artifacts participated in the (religiously-) gendered ordering of ancient society.

Wainwright possesses a feminist impulse that aims to uncover ancient models of women healing from which contemporary women can trace their genealogies. But she does not resort to an overly-optimistic read of the sources that idealises the roles of women and elides the hegemony endemic to ancient societies. Rather, Wainwright interprets the sources with a moderate eye, seeking to find evidence of women's agency in multiple sites of the power dynamic. She writes: 'attention can be given to women's participation within the world of healing, both as healer and as patient, and to the *agency or power* which women exercised from both subject positions and the consequent contribution they made to meaning within the system' (14). (The title of the book, *Women Healing/Healing Women*, reflects this assessment of such various locations of agency and subjectivity.) In this way, Wainwright productively refines feminist inquiry into subjectivity and agency.

Wainwright is aware, however, that we do not possess direct access to ancient women's subjectivities, but that women's subjectivities have been constructed and represented by elite, male authors. For this reason, 'real' healing women frequently fall out of view when they are 'written' by men, who stereotype, colonise, proscribe, and demonise them. Throughout the book

Wainwright carefully describes each of these ways in which healing women were mitigated in the extant literature. She argues that male authors stereotyped women's healing as 'witchcraft' in order to control and dismiss the great power – especially over life and death – that accompanied their medical knowledge and activity. She demonstrates how women's knowledge of herbs, drugs, and 'women's' illnesses were co-opted and absorbed into the 'professional' literature of the Hippocratics, Soranus, and pharmacologists such as Pliny. She notes prohibitions against medical practice in the Hebrew Bible: 'the constant biblical theme of proclaiming their illegitimacy points to their function in biblical Judaism' (95). And, lastly, she argues that the healing women represented in Luke's gospel were made out to be demoniacs – they were literally demonised – as a way to diminish their power within the community. According to Wainwright, this extensive attestation of healing women – even while mostly negative – confirms that women comprised a large segment of the domestic healthcare system throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

Despite such rhetorical presentations, Wainwright argues that modern readers also can find positive traces of women healing/healing women in the sources when carefully interpreted. In addition to the inscriptions of women cured at various sites of healing, Wainwright draws attention to evidence of public valorisation of female healers. First, Wainwright argues, with historian Nancy Demand, that the birthing scenes found on many *lekythoi* and grave *stelae* should no longer be understood to honor the women giving birth, but rather the midwives who attended such events as medical practitioners, as the inscriptional evidence supports. Next, Wainwright presents the public commemoration of several female 'doctors' (*iatreinailmedicae*), presumably within the newly-emerging professional class from the Hellenistic period into the Roman Imperial era. Finally, Wainwright points to the growing importance of Hygieia (daughter of Asclepius) in Graeco-Roman sites of healing, which, Wainwright suggests, provided a divine model that in turn sanctioned a growing number of professional women healers.

Wainwright, however, is wise to temper an initially-optimistic construal of the sources by recognizing their potential for multiple interpretations. Just as women healers could read the honorific monuments to authorize their own medical training and activity, so too other readers might understand such valorisation to attach not to the healing woman depicted, but rather to her father, husband, or male patron, as a way to honor his administration of the household labour. Moreover, Wainwright astutely observes that in the case of commemorations of freeborn, married women (*iatreinailmedicae*), the praise of their medical activity is regularly balanced by praise for their proper domesticity, suggesting that female healing activity was allowable within prescribed limits (and already-established hierarchies), emptying them of much of their transgressive effect.

One of the most successful contributions from these first three chapters is Wainwright's ability to challenge scholars' too-rigid gendering of several ancient binaries: public/private, honor/shame, activity/passivity, and culture/nature. For example, midwives, who actively worked in the *gynaicum* (the women's quarters) and who were honored through public monuments complicate the facile distinctions between public space associated with 'male' activity and honor and private space associated with 'female' invisibility, passivity, and silence. Moreover, the strict associations of women with nature and men with culture or reason, is complicated when women's knowledge of natural materials are shown to have been taken over by professional male physicians and pharmacologists.

In the second part of the book, Wainwright turns her attention to the constructions of healing and gender articulated in three early Christian gospels: Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Wainwright

begins with the earliest gospel, Mark, and argues that the Markan author and community focused not on miracles in general, but singularly on healings, as evidenced by thirteen stories of healing or exorcism in the first ten chapters alone. Wainwright convincingly demonstrates the clinical backdrop to several of these stories: the description of Simon's mother-in-law's fever parallels cases described in the Hippocratic *Epidemics*; touch, Jesus' dominant means of healing, is also employed in several Asclepian narratives; the symptoms of Jairus' 12-year old daughter are best understood according to the Hippocratic texts, *Diseases of Young Girls* and *Diseases of Women*; and the anointing of Jesus' head with oil resembles a characteristic healing act. Positioning these healing stories beside medical literature is quite persuasive. It is confusing, therefore, when Wainwright then argues that the Markan author aimed to distance Jesus from the 'professional' medical sector and rather to set him within the magico-religious arena of folk healing. While it is clear that certain stories contrast Jesus' healings with professional healers (e.g., Mark notes that although many professional physicians had failed to heal the haemorrhaging women, Jesus proves able to accomplish the medical feat), it is unclear what Wainwright gains here (and elsewhere throughout the book) by creating such rigid boundaries between medical sectors (in addition to Christian and non-Christian communities) that were surely more fluid than she suggests.

In the next two chapters, Wainwright analyses the changes made to Mark's healing stories by the redactors of Matthew and Luke's gospels. She finds more agency among the women healing/healing women in Matthew's accounts. The actions of the haemorrhaging woman are made to parallel those of Jairus (rather than his daughter) and even of Jesus in the previous story, as emphasis in each healing account is placed on the act of reaching out and touching. Moreover, according to Wainwright's reading, Matthew's gospel underscores the lasting, transformative effects of Jesus' healing, which remain in/on the bodies of the healed women and enable them to fully participate in the ministry of Jesus. Although Wainwright's interpretation productively demonstrates her stringent renegotiation of agency within the power dynamic of the healing situation, I wonder if the author may also have stressed the lasting effects of Jesus' healings in order to disallow charges of magic, which was understood in antiquity to be illusory, temporary, and thus uncovered with time.

Wainwright then articulates how Luke's gospel significantly shifts the meaning of these healing episodes by presenting the ailing women as demon-possessed. She argues that depictions (or charges) of demon possession characteristically stemmed from one group or individual's concern to invalidate another's social power and prestige. From this premise, Wainwright assumes that the women in these stories must have held a degree of power in the community – a power possibly derived from their knowledge and ability as healers – and that by presenting them as demon-possessed this community would be able to circumscribe their healing activity. Meanwhile, Luke's gospel alternatively encourages women to finance and serve, evidencing the community's views about 'proper' forms of women's ministry. While a provocative suggestion, Wainwright fails to provide the necessary evidence that links these demon-possessed women specifically to the healing arts.

While I found this book to be a useful addition to the literature on women and ancient medicine, I wanted Wainwright to expand her analysis of the genderisation of healing and medicine beyond women healing/healing women in order to account for 'gender' that is more than simply code for 'woman.' For instance, Wainwright lays the foundation to discuss the gendering of 'foreign' medical knowledge; how was Greek medical literature received and even

'colonised' in the Latin West in a way that paralleled the absorption of 'women's knowledge' into professional literature? Additionally, although she discusses the stereotypical depictions of individual women healers as 'witches', I am left to wonder how these representations helped to construct a cumulatively feminised portrait of 'magic' in general? Moreover, how did the feminisation of this sector relate to the gendering of the newly-emerging 'professional' sector, whose theorists self-consciously stylised their knowledge, methods, and theory as hyper-masculine through contradistinction against not only 'women's medicine', but also magic? Is it correct to assume that the absence of women in the professional literature at this time is historically reliable or might this silence be yet another rhetorical move on the part of the professional class, a deliberate gendering of the sector intended to shore up the legitimacy and authority of the fledgling science? If so, we should understand the later representations of female doctors not to reflect a 'real' shift toward increased opportunities for women, but rather evidence of a more stable field of science that no longer needed to rely on such narrowly gendered presentations in order to remain credible. Along these lines, the hyper-gendering of the gospels' healing stories also might be understood according to the desire for social prestige and authority by a nascent religious movement.

In spite of the above reservations, this book represents a useful collection of fresh interpretations and analyses of an array of sources dealing with women and medicine in antiquity, and is a useful resource especially for students in biblical studies who have little background in the medical world that surely informed early Christian communities and texts.