Introduction

Sarah Iles Johnston

When Croesus, the king of Lydia, was debating about whether to attack the Persian Empire, he decided to seek advice from the gods. Being a cautious man, however, he decided first to determine which source of divine advice was the most reliable. He sent envoys to each of the famous oracles in the ancient world (which happened to be in Greece and Libya) and instructed them to ask the gods what he was doing in faraway Lydia one hundred days after the envoys had left his court. He then devised an activity that he was confident no one could guess: he boiled the meat of a tortoise and the flesh of a rabbit together in a bronze cauldron, covered by a bronze lid. When the envoys returned with written records of what each oracle's god had said, Croesus discovered that only two of them—Delphic Apollo and Amphiaraus—had correctly described his strange culinary experiment. He proceeded to make enormously rich offerings to Apollo (and lesser offerings to Amphiaraus, whose oracle was not as prestigious) and then asked Apollo's advice. Upon receiving it, Croesus attacked Persia (Herodotus 1.46ff).

Croesus's experiment serves as an apt parable for this volume because it is one of the earliest examples of what might be called religious comparison shopping: rather than simply asking his own experts to obtain the gods' advice, Croesus checked out all the divine resources within his reach and staked his future on the one that looked best. The general concept should be familiar enough to readers who live in America or western Europe, where religious plurality offers a spectrum of deities, practices, and beliefs to which one might pledge allegiance. Our immediate environments (in sad contrast to more distant parts of our world, including some where Croesus once walked) offer us easy access to numerous variations of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as a plethora of newer religions such as Wicca and Scientology. Some of these are imports from other cultures; others are combinations of previously existing religions.

Only relatively recently, however, have scholars recognized the extent to which ancient peoples, as well, were exposed to a diversity of religions, both indigenous and imported—or even, indeed, acknowledged that ancient peoples were exposed to a diversity of cultural influences of any kind. The historical reasons for this failure are political and ideological, as well as intellectual, among which three are especially interesting, as Walter Burkert and other scholars have shown (see esp. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*). First, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, following a long period during which scholars of the Bible and of classical antiquity had taken cultural interaction in the ancient Mediterranean for granted, the boundaries between academic fields were redrawn in universities, and what we now call classics and theology strove to assert themselves as independent entities. As they did so, each one naturally stressed the grandeur and achievements of the cultures it represented—respectively, ancient Greece and Rome, and the ancient Near East. Second, at about the same time, Romantic nationalism developed. In their desire to show that particular myths, literatures, and forms of religion could be tied to particular ancient cultures that served as models for contemporary nation-states, Romantic nationalists not only discouraged any assumption of cross-cultural influences within the ancient Mediterranean, but also brought new energy to the old quest of tracking the specific, discrete origins of each culture's practices and ideas. Finally, and also at about the same time, notions about a lost "pre-language," shared by the Greeks, Romans, Germans, and other "Aryan" peoples—but not by the Semites—crystallized into the proposal for the language we now call "Indo-European." Linguistics provided another reason for separating the (Indo-European) western Mediterranean from the (non–Indo-European) eastern regions.

One might have expected the scholarly barrier between east and west to erode during the later 19th and early 20th centuries, which brought such advancements as the deciphering of hieroglyphs and cuneiform writing and of the Hittite language (an Indo-European language attached to an "oriental" culture), along with the discovery of Mycenaean civilizations and of orientalizing elements in Greek art. Some erosion did in fact begin to occur, especially in the fields of art history, ancient history, and the study of ancient magic (a field that was itself only in its infancy). Yet during the period between World War I and World War II, scholars, particularly in Germany, once again sought to assert the unique character of each Mediterranean culture. In 1946, publication of the Hittite creation myth, which offered significant thematic parallels to Hesiod's Theogony, reopened consideration of the question of cultural exchange in the ancient world. Slowly but surely, a new consensus emerged: the Mediterranean Sea had been not a barrier between disparate cultures after all, but rather a conduit, through which both material goods and ideas were easily transported. No ancient culture was left untouched by its neighbors. In the mid-1960s, scholarly publications based on this now widely accepted understanding began to appear, and have continued ever since.

Religious beliefs and practices, which permeated all aspects of human life in

antiquity, were inevitably transmitted throughout the Mediterranean along with everything else: itinerant charismatic practitioners journeyed from place to place, selling their skills as healers, purifiers, cursers, and initiators; vessels decorated with illustrations of myths traveled along with the goods they contained; new gods were encountered in foreign lands by merchants and conquerors and, when useful, were taken home to be adapted and adopted.

The essays in this volume are drawn from *Religions of the Ancient World,* a larger reference work that both collected information about religions in the ancient world and organized it in such a way as to encourage readers to investigate those religions within the comparative framework that is now considered essential for their comprehension. By presenting material from the ten cultures and traditions that it investigated side-by-side, *Religions of the Ancient World* strove to inform its readers and generate comparative thought in complementary ways.

The first part of that work reprinted here, "Encountering Ancient Religions," consists of eleven essays whose topics cut across cultural boundaries, such as Cosmology, Myth, and Law and Ethics. The authors of these essays were charged with stepping back from the particular cultures on which their own scholarship usually focuses and taking a broader look at the given phenomena as they were found throughout the Mediterranean: What remains consistent as we cross from one culture or tradition to another? What changes, and why? What, if anything, can we say about the core functions and expressive modes that the phenomena manifest across several millennia of ancient Mediterranean history? The authors also were asked to consider what essential theoretical or methodological problems confront us as we approach these topics: How can we define "magic" in contrast to "religion," for example—or should we even try to do so? How does the transition from an orally based religious culture to one that is scripturally based affect not only the practices and beliefs themselves, but also our approach to the evidence for them? The first essay in this part asks a question that stands behind all the others: What counts as "Mediterranean religion" anyway? Or to put it otherwise: In spite of the long history of Mediterranean cultural interaction that scholars now accept, what aspects of the disparate religions most closely coalesced to form a sort of *koinē,* or common language, that could have been understood by anyone traveling through the ancient landscape?

The second part, "Histories," includes essays that trace the histories of religions in each of the cultures and traditions between about the 3rd millennium BCE and the 5th century CE, offering accounts of how each of the cultures and its political, social, artistic, and religious institutions changed over time. Here readers will find, for example, a description of the Greek polis system and its effect on civic religion, a discussion of the centrality of *maʿat* (justice, order) within Egyptian thought, a description of how Zoroastrianism developed within earlier Iranian religions, and a discussion of literary sources for Ugaritic religion. The Epilogue is an important complement to the entire volume. It poses and begins to answer questions that earlier essays, which focused on dis-

crete topics, were unable to tackle. By asking what the phrase "ancient world" signifies, for example, the Epilogue compels us to recognize another aspect of the concern with definitions that first was broached in "What Is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?": once we have arrived at a working definition of Mediterranean religions and have investigated them as fully as possible, what can we then say about the way they differed from religions of later periods? Are the common assumptions that we make about ancient religions serviceable or misleading in understanding the transition? And was there a definitive transition at all—can we even identify behaviors that are more characteristic of ancient religions than post-ancient?

Some hundred and forty scholars contributed to *Religions of the Ancient World,* nineteen of whom are represented in this volume. Each brought his or her own methodology, style, and interests to the topics assigned. Rather than attempt to impose an artificial consistency on their contributions, the book's editors left them alone as much as possible. Thus, some essays concentrate primarily on conveying facts, whereas others produce a synoptic view of the topic at hand, adducing facts only as necessary.

To some degree, these variations reflect differences in the state of research among the fields: most of the texts and many of the archeological remains of Greece and Rome have been available for two millennia; the texts of biblical religion have been around for about the same length of time, while its monuments have come to light more slowly; both the texts and the monuments of other Near Eastern cultures were almost completely hidden until recently. Egypt stands somewhere in the middle: its monuments have always loomed on the landscape, but the languages of Pharaonic Egypt were unreadable until about two hundred years ago. Fashions in scholarship and ideological agendas also helped to condemn some cultures and their religions to near-obscurity for most of the modern era. Some fields have been more eager than others, too, to embrace new theoretical methods of study—to their benefit or sometimes their detriment. Although the editors have worked to ensure that each essay presents the basic facts that are salient to its topic, we have left the overall design and approach of discussions to individual authors. We have even allowed occasional disagreements between authors to stand, as indications of ongoing debate within the larger scholarly community.

When Croesus asked Apollo whether he should attack Persia, the god answered that if he did, "a great empire would fall." Assuming this meant the Persian Empire, Croesus attacked. But Apollo really meant the Lydian Empire, and so Croesus eventually found himself standing on a pyre in front of Cyrus, the Persian king, condemned to be burned alive.

Interpreting what someone else says is always a risky business, even if the speaker is not a god famous for enigmatic pronouncements. Comparative work

is particularly fraught with risks because, try as we might, those of us who are not trained in the languages and history of a given culture can never quite understand its complexities or catch its nuances. We are apt to make innocent but grievous errors, assuming, for instance, that the sacrificial act in Egypt had the same resonance as it did in Greece, or that the professional priesthoods found in many ancient Mediterranean cultures had correlates in the rest. To carry off a project such as this volume requires a team of people who are not only excellent scholars but also excellent communicators.

Throughout *Religions of the Ancient World*'s development, the exchange of ideas was vital, and I could not have asked for better colleagues in this respect than the members of the Editorial Board. Members of the Board of Advisors—Elizabeth Clark, David Frankfurter, Albert Henrichs, Gregory Nagy, John Scheid, and Claus Wilcke—were crucial to this process as well; all of them have contributed their expertise to the project and some of them were called on frequently. The contributors, some of whom wrote more than one essay, are to be thanked both for their scholarly efforts and for their patience.

I cannot leave Croesus on his pyre. Just as the flames were licking at its edges, Cyrus engaged Croesus in a debate about the meaning of happiness. Impressed with his captive's answer—Croesus held to a dictum he had learned from the Greek statesman Solon, according to which no human life could be counted as happy until one saw how it ended—Cyrus ordered that the pyre be extinguished. It was too late, however, for human intervention to quench the flames; only through Croesus's earnest prayers to Apollo did help arrive, in the form of a sudden rain shower. Stepping down from the pyre, Croesus went on to become Cyrus's staunch friend and advisor. And so ended Croesus's experiment in religious comparison shopping. Led astray through his misinterpretation of a Greek god's advice, saved when he adduced the words of a Greek sage and prayed once again to the Greek god, Croesus the Lydian finished out his life helping Cyrus (who was himself half Mede and half Persian) carry Persian rule throughout much of the ancient world: Croesus became a true Mediterranean cosmopolite. May the present experiment in religious comparison prove to be just as inclusive in its embrace and just as fortunate in its fate.