

# Book Review: *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*

By Lynn H. Cohick (Baker Academic, 2009)

REVIEWED BY SHIRLEY L. BARRON

Lynn Cohick's extraordinarily detailed book shows us an accurate reconstruction of women's ways of life in the Greco-Roman world of the first century A.D. The book seems to be aimed toward academics and other well-informed readers.

The author wants to show the reader the differences between *prescriptions* for women's life and behavior (often by biased writers of philosophy, theology, or satire) versus *descriptions* of women's lives as seen in letters, inscriptions, business documents, and such. The former information is often uncritically accepted by contemporary persons without considering the motives of the ancient writers. The latter seems more likely to be fairly unbiased.

Cohick wishes to tell the story of average women, their life passages, opportunities, limits, joys, and sorrows. She investigates women as daughters, as mothers, as wives, as slaves, as businesspeople, as benefactors, both Jewish and Gentile, as well as those who became Christians.

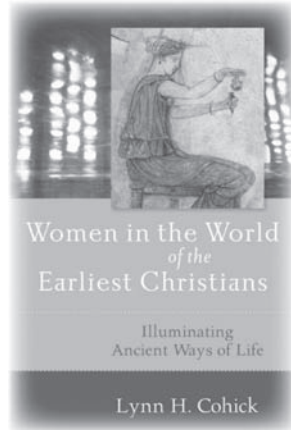
One prominent point the author makes is that Roman women in general were much freer than Greek women of previous centuries. We have been told about the extreme backwardness and seclusion of Greek matrons, and we have often extrapolated this to the first-century world. Not so! Roman women were not sequestered: They owned property; they could engage in business; they had some religious rites and customs that excluded men; they could be patrons and benefactors of their own clients. Of course, slavery was everywhere present in the Greco-Roman world, so slave women were also numerous. Slave women were often used in the sex trade or were taken as concubines by free men. Still, many slaves obtained their freedom and often prospered afterward, women as well as men. Regardless of their work or position in society, "women drew social status from their character, not their work. Unlike men, who derived their social esteem from their work, women gained social prestige from their virtues . . . being a faithful wife and mother, working diligently, and caring for the home" (241).

The chapters on marriage and wives have copious quotations from Roman, Greek, and Jewish authors on how marriage is "supposed" to be and what married women are "supposed" to do. The concepts of honor and shame were pervasive. These concepts made it necessary for women in general to be faithful, virtuous, and chaste in a sense not required of men. The New Testament writers were careful to state that Christianity taught the impor-

tance of these ideals, and that Christian women complied with them. Oddly, in the first-century Roman Empire, the vast majority of marriages contracted were non-licit, since only Roman citizens could enter into licit marriages. In addition, in most licit marriages, the control of the bride did not pass to the husband. This usually meant that she could retain property and other assets apart from her husband's authority. For non-citizens, a man and woman needed only agree about their intention to marry; there were no legal documents unless a dowry contract was involved, and there were no religious rites required. If either spouse wished to end the marriage, he or she simply expressed the wish to do so, and the marriage ended. Again, there were no documents. What of children? Generally, it was expected that children would be born, but it was uncommon that marriages were ended because of lack of children. Many Roman marriages, licit and non-licit, seemed to be based on companionship and affection more than on need for heirs.

Jewish marriage was rather different, as we can see from references in the New Testament. The author discusses at some length several New Testament women and wives, particularly the Samaritan woman (John 4). She suggests that we have a skewed view of this woman's history. The likelihood is that the woman had been widowed once or twice and may have been dismissed by one or more husbands for something like infertility or lengthy bleeding problems (compare the woman who had bled for twelve years who touched Jesus' garment) and was perhaps a concubine or secondary "wife" of a man who would not enter a licit marriage. The author also analyzes the relationship of Priscilla and Aquila and suggests that perhaps the reason Priscilla is named first is that she was *sui iuris*, that is, responsible for her own legal affairs.

The long chapter on religious activities is very interesting. In Roman religion, the vestal virgins were of high status, and the cult of the Bona Dea (good goddess) was important. Women were the priestesses in this and other cults. Women were also significant in Dionysian worship and Isis cults. In spite of what we have been led to believe, there were many women among the Essenes. Many Roman and Greek women were attracted to Judaism and became God-fearers or proselytes. They did this without regard for the



SHIRLEY L. BARRON, M.A., M.D., taught Latin briefly at Wheaton College while in graduate school. She has practiced medicine in public health, pathology, and general practice for many years. She is a faculty mentor for Columbia Evangelical Seminary, Fairview, Washington, teaching Greek and New Testament studies. She has also taught basic Koine Greek to interested members of her local church.



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beliefs of their spouse or family. Many of these women seem to have come to Christian conversion from contact with Judaism—Lydia might be such a one.

Another area that Cohick discusses at length is the ancient role of patron or benefactor. I was familiar with this concept from my Latin studies, but I admit I did not know that there were many women patrons. Jesus refers to this role in Luke 22:25, “. . . those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors.” A female or male patron accepted “clients,” was available to them regularly, usually helped them with money and other benefits, and could call on them for favors. Perhaps the most powerful patron was the Empress Livia (wife of Augustus). Of New Testament characters, we have Phoebe, described as a patron or benefactor of Paul and many others (Rom. 16:1–2). In other documents and inscriptions, we know of a number of women, both Gentile and Jewish, who were known as patrons. The patron was usually a wealthy individual with some degree of power or authority in her or his sphere. Cohick’s emphasis on this role for women is important, helping us understand how the women of the first century lived.

There is a great amount of detailed information about first-century women in this book, all well-organized, including quite a few pictures. The details are for the purpose of showing as much as possible about the everyday life of women from birth to death. The book requires considerably close attention in reading, and thus is not a quick or “easy read.” But, the vast amount of material definitely gives the reader the flavor of women’s lives in ways I have hardly seen elsewhere.

There are some annoying misprints and errors, such as misspelling the Gracchi brothers’ name (135). There was mention of a “Demicus” (sic) Brutus several times, finally disentangled as “Decimus” (103, 124). He was not the “lead conspirator” against Julius Caesar, as stated; that was Marcus Brutus, his cousin.

The author is very evenhanded in interpretations of women’s activities. When discussing Christian women, she shows all possible meanings of the terms used, such as *diakonos* (deacon or minister). She has good discussions of a number of New Testament women: Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, Joanna, Junia, etc. She points out that Joanna, wife of Chuza, and Mary Magdalene should both be considered to be patrons in the usual first-century sense. The book is scholarly and absolutely free of any polemic that I can detect.

With little or no bias, this book gives the reader a good picture of the first-century world and the women who lived there. When we go to the New Testament documents and put them in the actual first-century context, attempting not to read into them what is not there, Cohick’s book is very helpful, as we discover many women contemporaneous with Lydia, Priscilla, Junia, Phoebe, and others. The details we have about these non-biblical women can help us flesh out the lives of Joanna, Mary, Euodia, and the rest. We should know as much about this background material as we can, and Cohick’s book is a major resource for us.