MORE ON THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY

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Evangelical egalitarians often argue that the biblical writers were progressive in their day. It may therefore be helpful to survey some male views about women in the general period in which the New Testament was being written. We should keep in mind that the New Testament writers were not the only progressive voices in their culture; they were, however, among the more progressive rather than the repressive.

In this article I include some samples, especially (though not exclusively) information I have discovered since writing Paul, Women & Wives (Hendrickson, 1992). It should be kept in mind that these samples tell us more about the ideals of thinkers than about actual male-female relationships (which among both the rural poor and the educated urban elite probably tended to be more equal than such sources would indicate). Nevertheless, they do provide an interesting comparison with similar statements of "ideals" in the New Testament.

THE HARSHEST SOURCES

Athenian orators centuries before Jesus made some of the most dramatic statements. One noted that men could sleep with high-class prostitutes for pleasure, concubines for more regular nurture of their bodies, and wives to bear legitimate children and guard their households (Demosth. Or 59, Against Meidias 79; Sirach 22:5).

Some women, like the empress Livia, held considerable power (Dio Cass. 56.47.1), but they remained the notable exception rather than the rule. Against Meidias 79; Sirach 22:5).

The subordination of women was often rooted in their supposed inferiority of nature, an argument that continued to be used for women's subordination later in Christian history as well. Thus Nature placed male above female among animals as well as among people (Aelian On Animals 11.26). Although Plato believed that males were by nature far more courageous than females (Plato Cratylus 413E-414A), he had some more positive views toward women, and subordinated women far less, than his student Aristotle did. Aristotle believed that men should rule their wives because males were superior by nature, just as masters were to slaves (Arist. Pol. 1254b; 1264b; 1266b; 1277b; N.E. 1162a).

Some philosophers believed that women were capable of the same virtues as men (Sen. Dial. 6.16.1; Diog. Laert. 6.1.12; Crates Ep. 28), despite their weaker emotional constitution (Sen. Dial. 6.7.3). Nevertheless, moral expectations were generally lower for women, who were suspected to have a greater propensity for adultery (Diod. Sic. 1.59.3-4) and other passions (Plut. Bride 48, Mor. 145DE), evil plans (Publ. Syrus 365, 376), secretive evil (Publ. Syrus 20), divisiveness (Juv. Sat. 6.242-43), instability and untrustworthiness (Char. Chaer. 1.4.1-2), and so forth. Some writers doubted the veracity of women (Avianus Fables 15-16), hence their trustworthiness as witnesses in court (Justin. Inst. 2.10.6). This broader Mediterranean distrust for women's witness appears also in Jewish tradition (Jos. Ant. 4.219; Sifra VDDeho. pq. 7.45.1.1).

THE IDEAL OF WIFELEY SUBMISSION

But while most cultures might "look good" compared with classical Athens, some attitudes endured over a long period, and in the rest of this article we cite sources from a wide chronological and geographical range. The ideal for wives—not always followed even among those who promoted it—was their obedience to their husbands (Dio Cass. 54.16.4-5). This included a sort of modesty that might be called "shyness" today (Dio Cass. ibid.; Demosth.

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MORE JEWISH SOURCES

On the whole, the rabbis were probably more progressive than many of their contemporaries. Nevertheless, many Jewish writers contrast with our usual picture in the New Testament. Thus one Hellenistic Jewish source says that Essenes refused to marry women because women were selfish, jealous, and prone to deceive men (Philo Hypothetica 11.14-17); another says that the Essenes avoid marriage because women are prone to unfaithfulness (Jos. War 2.121). Philo thought women had little sense (Prob. 117);
Josephus thought women less trustworthy than men (Ant. 4.219) and opined that God punished both Adam and Herod Antipas not merely for their sin in general but for being so weak as to have heeded their wives' sinful suggestions (Ant. 1.49; 18.255).9

Such misogyny may have stemmed from Greek influence on these Jewish writers. Palestinian Judaism was probably more progressive than many other sources; Jewish sources praised women (1 Esd 4:14), and their stories certainly praised the wisdom and devotion of their heroines (e.g., Judith 11:21; Sara and others in Tobit).10 But Joshua ben Sira, one of the most popular sages, warned against sitting among women because they spread evil (Sirach 42.12-13). He complained that a man's evil is better than a woman's good (42.14). Many sources also warn men to avoid women because of sexual temptation (e.g., Sirach 9:9; Test. Reub. 6:1; ARN 14, §35B),11 though it is possible that had the sources been advising women they might have warned of men as temptations. Some early teachers viewed women as especially prone to sorcery and witchcraft (m. Ab. 2:7).12

CONCLUSION

The list of sources could continue, but hopefully this sample is sufficient to show that the New Testament views of women fall among the more progressive voices of their day. It must also be clear that the earliest Christian writers addressed a cultural situation far different from our own, requiring far different strategies than ours to evangelize their culture. This observation does not automatically settle the matter of what strategies we should employ today, but it does confront those who assume that we cannot take into account different cultural situations when we read Scripture—including when dealing with gender roles.

1 Greeks were aware of different customs elsewhere, for example, the masculine courage of women among the Gauls (Diod. Sic. 5.32.2), the work of women in the fields among the Ligurians (Diod. Sic. 4.20), and the burning of new widows in India (Diod. Sic. 17.91.3). Most relevant would be the greater equality for women in traditional Egyptian culture, which the Greeks (who held the upper hand in most of the cities and towns of Roman Egypt) considered strange (Diod. Sic. 1.27.2). But in the first century hellenistic culture dominated most of the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the urban centers Paul's letters address.


3 Some ancient writers (e.g., Pliny the Younger) were more progressive than others (as an extreme example, Juvenal); see e.g., E. S. Dobson, "Pliny the Younger's Depiction of Women," Classical Bulletin 58 (1982): 81-85.


5 Ancients often praised women's courage (Diod. Sic. 10.24.2; Plut. Bravery of Women; Mor. 243E-263C), partly because they expected it far less from men (Dion. Hal. 4.82.3; 6.92.6; Apul. Metam. 5.22); they compared cowardly men with women (Diod. Sic. 12.16.1; Dion. Hal. 9.7.2; 10.28.3). Such expectations normally demanded greater mercy toward women (e.g., Dion. Hal. 8.24.4-5).

6 The connection between willful and slave subordination was explicit in Aristotle's system. Cf. also one kind of Roman law which included as dependents both those "in marital subordination" (in manu) and those "in bondage" (in mancipio, i.e., slaves; Gaius Inst. 1.49).


8 Although fathers generally loved their daughters (Plut. Brute 36, Mor. 143B), sons were preferred, in Jewish (Sifre Deut. 138.2.1; 141.2) as well as Gentile sources (Arrem. Oneir. 1.15; 4.10), partly partly for economic reasons (e.g., Gen. Rab. 26:4). On the preference for sons, see especially Tal Ilan, Jewish Women in Greece-Roman Palestine (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 44-48, but noting that Jews, unlike Gentiles, took no steps to reduce the number of daughters artificially. Ilan is probably the most balanced work on women's roles in Roman Palestine.

9 Despite Josephus' views, he did think some women--like a well-to-do woman he married after divorcing another--could have nobler character than others (Jos. Life 426-27).

10 The degree to which women's roles in myth and historical fiction reflect genuine social reality is debated; see e.g., Helene P. Foley, "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama," pp. 127-68 in Reflections of Women in Antiquity, ed. Helene P. Foley (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1981) and a number of essays in Women in the Ancient World, ed. Peradotto and Sullivan.

11 Cf. also Test. Is. 3:5; Test. Reub. 2:8; 5:1-4. Other early sages advised avoiding women (m. Ab. 1:15; b. Ber. 45b, bar.; p. Sota 7:1, $2); for gossip and other negative traits, see Gen. Rab. 45:5; 80:5.

12 Later, see b. Ber. 53a; Pes. 111a. In practice, probably few Jewish women were (see especially Ilan, Jewish Women, 221-25).