

Roman Wives, Roman Widows

The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities | By Bruce W. Winter | Reviewed by Kevin Giles

I was very pleased to be asked to review Bruce Winter's book on women in first century Roman society and the Pauline churches. Bruce and I studied together at Moore Theological College in Sydney in the mid-1960s. He went on to complete a doctorate at Macquarie University, Sydney, and is now the warden at Tyndale House Cambridge. Bruce's scholarship shines through in this work. He is completely conversant with Greek and Latin texts from the first century and makes excellent use of them.

His primary thesis is that in the early first century "a new woman" emerged in Roman society: a woman who was free of the sexual constraints of an earlier period. She was the exception to the norm and invariably of higher social status. This "new woman," attested to in popular writings, legislation, and philosophical treatise, had an unsettling influence on the status quo, and her freedoms and promiscuity were generally condemned.

Against the backdrop of this limited emancipation of a very few women in Roman society, Winter turns to the New Testament documents to see if there is any indication there of this revolution in its pages. He begins with 1 Corinthians 11:2-6. His argument is that the issue Paul is addressing is the practice of married women taking off their veils in church, the very thing that distinguished them as married women. This was shameful and opened up Christian women to the same criticisms as were levelled against "the new woman." The problem with this thesis is that it seems Paul's advice is to women in general, not just married women. The evidence is as follows: 1) Paul is here ruling on how men and women as such should dress when leading in church, marriage never comes into view; 2) repeatedly he speaks of "every man" and "every woman" [vv. 3, 4, 5]; 3) in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 men as such are born of women not husbands of wives; 4) there were unmarried women in the church at Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 7:8, 25)—does Paul ignore them? From Acts we know that some women prophets were unmarried (Acts 21:9). Then we have the problem of what Winter does not discuss in this chapter. I personally think the fact that Paul allowed women to lead in prayer and prophecy in church, the most significant ministries at Corinth, is an indicator that early Christianity had its own chaste emancipation agenda.

Next Winter turns to 1 Timothy 2:9-15. This text he believes contrasts "the virtues of a modest wife with those of women who lead an alternative lifestyle" (p. 97). The author of this epistle is intent on opposing the "new woman." The godly Christian woman is to dress modestly, show self constraint, wear little or no jewelry, not speak in church, and continue in childbirth rather than seeking an abortion (this is what Winter thinks v. 15 is speaking about). While I would readily

acknowledge that part of the problem at Ephesus was that women were breaking social norms by speaking in church, the prohibition in verses 11-12 seems to me to envisage a far more specific and pressing problem. The exceptional verb *authentien* suggests an exceptional situation. Women were giving false teaching and Paul writes to tell them to stop. It is true that in verse 15 married women come into view, but along with most commentators I think the passage as a whole has women in general in view. In the next chapter of his book, Winter discusses Paul's advice to young widows, arguing that possibly 40 percent of women in that church aged between forty and fifty may have been widows. Were all these women allowed to teach? To limit the directives exclusively to married women simply does not make sense of the text.

Regarding the advice to young widows (chapter 7) and young wives (chapter 8) in the Pastoral Epistles, Winter also interprets these as a conservative reaction to the "new woman." Then in the final section of the book, women in the public sphere are discussed. Winter takes Phoebe mentioned in Romans 16:1 and Junia in Romans 16:7 as possible Christian examples of the "new women" active in public life but finds neither of them fit this category. Phoebe is merely a "patron" in the use of her home. She has no public role. He argues that in calling her a "deacon" Paul simply highlights her practical and common service to the men she provided for in her home. Winter does not mention the fact that when the verbal form of the Greek translated "patron" and the word "deacon" is used of specific men in the Pauline corpus it signifies a Christian leader. The status and ministry of Junia, the wife of Andronicus, is similarly discounted. She and her husband, Winter tells us, are not apostles. To make this case he appeals to Burer and Wallace's extremely unlikely rendering of the Greek to mean this couple were "well-known among (i.e. to) the apostles," not as virtually all modern commentators and translations hold, prominent or well known apostles. If the former is what Paul meant to imply, then the Greek speaking Chrysostom did not understand his own native tongue because he took Paul's words to mean Junia and Andronicus were both apostles. In a forthcoming article in the journal *New Testament Studies*, our own erudite Linda Belleville dispatches this argument with overwhelming evidence that Paul was speaking of a woman named Junia who was an apostle like Barnabas, Apollos, Timothy, etc.

There is much in this book that is informative of first century Roman life and culture. The focus is always on the historic sources and so there is not one word in favor or in opposition to women in leadership in the church today, or to the contemporary partnership view of marriage where decision-making is shared. However, the way the evidence is given seems to make a historical case for reading the Pauline corpus' comments on women pre-eminently as a conservative rejection of the emancipation of women in the first century. On this basis hierarchical-complementarians may say that if Paul was in principle and practice consistently opposed the very limited emancipation of women in the first century, how much more would he be opposed to the full emancipation of women today. But this is not the only problem this book raises for those committed to egalitarian ideals on a biblical basis. Based on my reading, Winter in each instance seems to interpret key texts in dispute in a way completely in sympathy with the

hierarchical-complementarian agenda. If his exegesis were compelling we would need to listen, but it is not.

Winter conclusively shows that in the basically patriarchal context of first century Roman society *very few* women of high standing had gained some freedoms, mainly of a sexual nature. In contrast, the New Testament shows Paul thought that the coming of Christ had in principle liberated *all* Christian women and given them (and men) new incentives and strength to be chaste. So he encouraged women to be involved as “co-workers” with men in the spread of the Gospel, allowed them to lead in prayer and prophecy in church worship, to exercise the gifts of the Spirit, to lead home churches, and he told Christian husbands to think of their leadership of their wife not in terms of being “boss” but as a servant willing to give their life in love for the one they served. Only disruptive behavior by women that unsettled the life of the church forced him on three occasions to regulate these Gospel-given freedoms (1 Cor. 11:2-16, 1 Cor. 14:33-34, 1 Tim. 2:11-12).

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