

IV FIRST-CENTURY CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS IN THE GRECO-ROMAN EMPIRE

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The purpose of this study is to survey briefly the climate of opinion regarding the place of women among the Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the first century. This is the cultural setting in which the Christian church originated and began its development. Since the church rose in the midst of Judaism and thence spread into the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world of the eastern Mediterranean, and later to the Roman west, these three cultural backgrounds will be surveyed in this order.

Women in First-Century Judaism

There is little direct documentary evidence for first-century Palestine, but the Jewish customs of that time were based either on OT precedents, adapted to postexilic and later ideas, or on the traditions embodied in the “oral Law” and put into writing in the Mishnah about a century later. Though the Mishnah cannot be used as specific and detailed proof of first-century practices, many of its provisions were part of a long-developing tradition, some say stemming from the time of Ezra on. The principal differences between the first century and the Mishnaic period would be the changes in Jewish thought and religious observances resulting from the destruction of the temple and the consequent loss of the ritual system. Therefore, it would not be expected that social customs and attitudes relevant to women would be changed thereby. For this reason the Mishnah, which looks backward seeking to record the older practices for posterity, seems to be a reasonably safe source.

Legally the Jewish woman was under the control of first her father then her husband. In other words, she remained a semi-minor under male guardianship. She could not even make a religious vow without the consent of father or husband.¹ Although she was not forced to marry without her consent (cf. Gen 24:58), she and the bridegroom could merely express preference; the arrangement was made between the fathers of the two partners. The girl could be betrothed as early as twelve and married at twelve and a half.²

Her education would have included little more than the domestic arts taught by her mother. She probably learned to read and write and was given elementary religious instruction—enough to pass on to her small children. But only boys went to the synagogue school to study the Torah (in Hebrew, of course). It is true that one first-century rabbi recommended that a father teach his daughter Torah, because the merit she would thus acquire might stand her in good stead if some day her husband should accuse her of adultery, in which case such merit could suspend the penalty. On the other hand, Rabbi Eliezer (A.D. 90) protested that this would be equivalent to teaching one’s daughter lewdness.³

In spite of the girls’ lack of opportunity for an education, there were women who somehow acquired considerable knowledge of the Torah and even of other subjects. There are records of some rabbis who had wives learned in the law,⁴ and Timothy’s mother and grandmother had

¹Mishnah *Nedarim* 10, based on Num 30. (Mishnah is hereafter abbreviated M.)

²*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s. v. “Marriage,” vol. 11, p. 1028.

³M. *Sotah* 3. 4.

⁴The best known was Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir (Talmud *Pesahim* 62b).

enough knowledge to give him a solid grounding in the Scriptures. There is an allusion in the Mishnah to the possibility of a man's setting up his wife as a shopkeeper or appointing her manager of his business.⁵ But apparently most wives were not taught enough to manage their own business affairs.

At marriage a girl went directly from the guardianship and control of her father to that of her husband.⁶ Although she retained ownership of her own property, proceeds thereof or earnings of her own work belonged to the husband as long as the marriage lasted, and at her death he inherited it.⁷ For her protection a marriage contract, called the *Ketuvah*, specified what she brought with her as her dowry and personal possessions, and the amount added by the bridegroom, so that in case of divorce she could take away what belonged to her. All the husband's possessions were security for this amount.⁸ This document included the agreement of both parties and was considered basic to the marriage. The groom's contribution was set at a minimum (twice as much for a virgin as for a widow or divorcee), but he was expected to exceed that, according to his means.⁹

The husband was obligated to guarantee the wife her marital rights, support, ransom if captured, and burial.¹⁰ The wife was obligated to grind the flour, bake the bread, wash the clothes, cook, make his bed, nurse her child, and work in wool. (Certain of these duties were not required of her if she brought servants to perform them.)¹¹ The work in wool was considered a very important occupation of the wife, who was responsible for the family's clothing.

We know little of the dress of the first-century Jewish woman. There must have been no lack of interest in dress (cf. some of the OT denunciations of the vanity of her ancient ancestors), but descriptions are lacking. Since some of the garments of NT times and later bore the same Greek names as those worn by Greeks, it is probable that a Jewish woman's dress was not dissimilar from that known to us from Greek sculptures. These were long, flowing garments, sewn with loose sleeves or merely draped, portions of which could be turned up over the head for an outdoor head covering. Veiling the face was not a Jewish custom. That probably came in later through Arab influence.¹² Hair style was apparently important as a symbol of one's status. The virgin bride came to her wedding in a curtained litter (or wearing a veil; the translation is disputed), and wore her hair loose and flowing;¹³ but not so a widow or divorcee at her second wedding. The married woman bound her hair up on her head in various styles of braids, fillets, nets, or bands,¹⁴ so that her head was "bound," or "covered," with her long hair. This was a sign of her submission to her husband's authority (cf. the "[sign of] authority on her head" mentioned in the early Christian church, in 1 Cor 11:10, 15, NASB).

Apparently the idea of a woman's long hair as a covering for her head was involved in the ceremony of the wife accused of unfaithfulness by her husband. Although the ordeal of drinking

⁵M. *Ketuvoth* 9.4.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4. 5.

⁷*Ibid.*, 8. 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, 8. 8. The *Ketuvah*, or marriage contract, was introduced in the first century B.C. (Philip Blackman, ed. and tr. *Mishnayoth*, vol. 3 (London, 1953), introduction to tractate *Ketuvoth*, p. 122.

⁹*Ibid.*, 4. 7; 5. 1.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 4. 4; 5. 6.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 5. 5.

¹²Roland de Vaux, "Sur le voile des femmes dan l'Orient ancien," *Revue Biblique* 44 (1935): 408.

¹³M. *Ketuvoth* 2. 1, 10.

¹⁴Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 2 (Munich, 1926), comment on 1 Cor 11:5, pp. 427-29.

the bitter water was discontinued in the first century,¹⁵ it is described in the Mishnah. The priest took the woman to a gate between the Court of the Woman and the Court of the Israelites; that is, to the point beyond which women were not allowed to enter, in the temple of Herod (such a segregation of the women in their own court is not mentioned in connection with the Solomonic or the postexilic temple). There the priest tore the woman's garments to bare her bosom and loosened her hair,¹⁶ apparently signifying that she had destroyed her modesty and broken her marriage.

The biblical origin of this method of disgracing the woman publicly may be sought in Num 5:18, which prescribes the loosening of the woman's hair before she is given the "bitter water that causes the curse." The verb *paraC*, translated "uncover" in the KJV, has the meaning of loosen, disarrange; and in combination with *rosh* (head), means to let (the hair) hang loose, untie (unbraid), and is so translated in several English versions.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that in the Mishnah among the grounds for divorce serious enough to warrant dismissing the wife without returning her dowry (which she would ordinarily take with her) was her going out in public with her hair loose.¹⁸ Since loose hair, ordinarily the mark of a virgin, would lead the beholder to suppose that she was unmarried, it would appear that she was thus repudiating her marriage and declaring herself eligible for male attention. Another kind of similarly culpable public behavior, mentioned in the same section, was conversing with any man.¹⁹ Both of these fit in with a dictum of the rabbis that a woman's voice, like her hair, was sexually provocative.²⁰

(Small wonder, then, that we find in the NT indications of surprise when the disciples found Jesus at Jacob's well *talking to a woman*, and of consternation in the Corinthian church at a woman's speaking up and asking questions in public assembly and—worse yet—appearing without the wifely sign of her husband's authority on her head.)

Divorce was the prerogative of the husband only, exercised at his pleasure; though the marriage contract was a deterrent because it entitled the wife, except in case of grave misconduct, to take with her her *Ketuvah*—whatever she owned as listed in that document. But in the case of cruelty she could appeal to the courts to force her husband to divorce her.²¹

A divorced or widowed wife did not return to her father's control. Her property was her own, and although the widow did not inherit from her husband, she and her unmarried daughters were entitled to support by the heirs (the sons), and she was entitled to live on in her husband's

¹⁵After the temple was destroyed (see Blackman, introduction to tractate *Sotah*, p. 329).

¹⁶M. *Sotah* 1. 5, 6.

¹⁷Several Hebrew lexicons give the meaning to let loose, let go, let grow, let hang loose. Köhler and Baumgartner give first the meaning uncover, but add that if referring to hair it means let hang loose; Gesenius (ed. Tregelles) and Holladay emphasize the loosening or hanging loose, especially with the noun *rosh* (head). Texts cited are Num 5:18, also Lev 10:6; 13:45; 21:10; the latter refer to priests. The KJV uses "uncover" throughout, but several new translations, following the newer Hebrew lexicons, use the word "loose." So does the Jewish Soncino translation.

¹⁸M. *Ketuvoth* 7. 6.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Talmud *Berakoth* 24a. Three rabbis, who lived from one to three centuries later but probably echoed earlier beliefs, said that a woman's hair, her leg, and her voice were provocative. Earlier rabbis also regarded woman as a source of temptation, and the Jewish philosopher Philo called woman "the beginning of transgression," "irrational," the symbol of sense perception, but man the symbol of mind (*Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1. 43. 45, 47; 4. 15).

²¹Blackman, introduction to tractate *Gittin*, p. 391.

home.²² If she had no heirs able to support her, she was a widow indeed,” dependent on charitable maintenance.

A Jewish wife, though completely under her husband’s authority, was the mistress of her household. She normally received respect and affection from her husband, and honor from her children.²³ According to her character and capacities, she could exert considerable influence on her husband and sons. But she probably had less freedom in the first century than in earlier and more rugged times. Her sphere was limited mostly to the home and to domestic pursuits.

Her time was largely taken up—unless she had slaves—in household and maternal duties, not merely cooking and housekeeping, but grinding flour for baking, and spinning and weaving cloth for the family’s clothing. Hence, she doubtless felt relieved rather than deprived at being exempt” from studying the Torah and from all positive religious commands that prescribed duties at set times, with certain exceptions.²⁴ The principal exception was the observance of the Sabbath. (The Mishnah warns of three duties the neglect of which will cause a woman to die in childbirth; one is lighting the lamp before the Sabbath.)²⁵

Yet for the woman who happened to have time and the inclination to go deeper into the study of Scriptures and religious observances, these exemptions from religious duties must have been restrictive. Some have deduced from the Mishnah that women took Nazirite vows in order to achieve personal participation in religious rites, since the only sacrifices a woman could offer personally were the meal offerings connected with her Nazirite vows or with the ordeal of the bitter water. However, this could not have been true in the early days. As the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* points out, women are mentioned in connection with transgressions that are “atonable by sacrifice”—the trespass offerings (Num 5:6-8; cf. Lev 6:1-7).²⁶

There is no clear evidence in the Bible that there were any professional female participants in the recognized cult of tabernacle or temple. There had been prophetesses at various times, but no priestesses. Perhaps because their pagan neighbors had immoral rites as part of their worship (they had not only priestesses but also a class of religious prostitutes), the Jews had a great advantage in a priesthood limited to males only. Even that precaution did not entirely eliminate priestly misconduct such as that of Eli’s sons (1 Sam 2:22).

The pious Jewish wife and mother, who was the backbone of the national family life and morality and brought up her children from infancy in the ways of obedience to the Law, did more than teach them their earliest concepts of God. She also led out in certain home ceremonies, such as welcoming the Sabbath at the Friday evening meal; and she took part in the Passover rituals, such as removing the leaven and preparing the Passover supper. Also she could accompany her husband and sons, as her time permitted, on pilgrimages to the great feasts. Jewish women were by no means excluded from the benefits of their religion; but neither were they allowed, except in rare cases, to realize their full potential.

Women in Hellenism

The place of women in the Greek-speaking world of the first century was higher than it had been in classical Greece, but not on a par with their freedom and importance in the age depicted

²²M. *Ketuvoth*, 4. 2; 11. 1; 12. 3.

²³M. *Kiddushim* 1. 7.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵M. *Shabbath* 2. 6; *Mekilta Bachodesh* 8.

²⁶M. *Kiddushim* 1. 8; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s. v. “Woman,” vol. 16, col. 624.

in the Homeric poems. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, managed her household and dealt with the suitors as she saw fit, though her son Telemachus was her titular guardian. Other Homeric women moved among men in public as their later descendants did not. In the classical period, at the height of the Hellenic culture (fifth-fourth centuries B.C.), the Greek city-states varied in law and custom.²⁷ Athens exhibited one extreme, the almost complete seclusion of women inside the home (probably derived from the Ionian Greek cities in western Asia Minor, which may have learned the custom from their Oriental neighbors). Sparta, at the other extreme, allowed and encouraged its women to move freely in public and taught the young girl athletic skills intended to develop them as healthy mothers of strong soldier-sons.²⁸ The other Greek states were ranged between these two extremes. A woman occupied, at least legally, a position variously subordinate to or dependent on some man—either father, husband, or guardian of some sort—throughout antiquity; though in practice she sometimes had more independence of action than was spelled out in the legal system.

A Greek man did not marry for love or even for companionship, though a measure of affection could develop in time.²⁹ He did so in order to have children to bear his name and care for his old age and continue the proper rites that would care for his soul hereafter. Aside from the slave woman who was a mere servitor, he recognized three types of women, all used for his service. As an unknown author put it in a speech attributed to Demosthenes: “We have *hetairai* for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily health of our bodies, and wives to give us legitimate offspring and be the faithful guardians of our homes.”³⁰

The penalty for a wife’s adultery was death for her and her paramour, but was not enforced. A man’s unfaithfulness to his wife was not adultery unless committed with another man’s wife. Polygamy was not a Greek practice, but having a concubine was not considered polygamy. The wife often acquiesced, content in the knowledge that when the concubine outlived her charms she would be a household drudge, to the wife’s advantage. As one modern writer aptly expressed it, “All in all, in the matter of sex relations, Athenian custom and law are thoroughly man-made, and represented an Oriental retrogression from society of Egypt, Crete, and the Homeric age.”³¹

A Greek girl was taught very little beyond the domestic arts (except in Sparta, where she was trained in athletics). She was likely married off at fourteen or fifteen to a man twice her age, by arrangement between her father and the groom’s father. Thereafter she was mistress of the house, managed the household, the slaves, if any, and the children. Even a woman who had slaves to do the routine housework customarily spun wool, wove, and made garments for the family.

The clothing³² of the Greeks, both men and women, consisted essentially of two simple garments, a loose wool tunic and an outer garment, a folded and draped piece of cloth. Women wore their hair done up in a variety of styles, fastened with hairpins, fillets, nets, or metal circlets; young girls let their hair hang long and loose.

²⁷For a general discussion of Greek life, see Leonard Whibley, *A Companion to Greek Studies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1916). For the place of women, see pp. 610-17.

²⁸Euripides scorned the Spartan girl athletes in their short dresses (*Andromache*, lines 596-600).

²⁹See *Greek Anthology*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1939), no. 340, for a tomb inscription expressing affection and a deep sense of loss.

³⁰Oration “Against Neaera” 122 [1386].

³¹Will Durant, *The Life of Greece* (New York, 1939), p. 305.

³²For discussions of dress, see Whibley, pp. 624-32; Percy Gardner and Frank B. Jevons, *A Manual of Greek Antiquities*, 2nd ed. (London, 1898), pp. 54-63; for detailed drawings, see Mary G. Houston, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Costumes*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1965), pp. 46-67.

The wife was practically limited to the women's quarters of the home, and was occupied with her home duties. She went out only occasionally, if properly attended, to religious ceremonies, tragic plays (not comedies, which were not proper for her ears), and in some places to the women's public baths. In public it was improper for her to speak to any man. Pericles of Athens is credited with saying that the best woman is the one least known for either good or evil.³³

With practically no cultivation of her mind beyond learning to read and write, she had no education of the sort to enable her to talk intelligently with her husband on his level of interests. A fictional account of a conversation has Socrates asking a friend, "Is there anyone to whom you commit more affairs of importance than you commit to your wife?" "There is not." "Is there anyone to whom you talk less?" "There are few or none, I confess."³⁴

In the same work is a husband's description of how he trained his bride to her new duties. "She was not yet fifteen years old when she came to me, and up to that time she had lived in leading strings, seeing, hearing, and saying as little as possible."³⁵ After overcoming her timidity he lectures her on the difference between the man's work and the woman's, and tells her exactly how he wants the house organized. He explains how God gave woman the indoor tasks because she is naturally fearful, but "he who deals with the outdoor tasks will have to be their defender," for which he has been meted out "a larger share of courage." But both man and woman are granted "memory and attention," and "the power to practice due self control."³⁶ After hearing this monologue on wife-training, Socrates is made to come up with a remark that sounds familiar even now: "Upon my word, . . . your wife has a truly masculine mind by your showing!" "Yes," replies the husband, "and I am prepared to give you other examples of high-mindedness on her part, when a word from me was enough to secure her instant obedience."³⁷

This sort of wifely paragon was to keep house and bring up the children—those, that is, that the husband decided to keep. Weaklings and most girls were "exposed" at birth, left in a public place to die or be picked up by someone and reared as a slave. The wife was to provide private meals, which she could eat with her husband, and dinners for his guests, during which she retired to the women's quarters, for the guests were male. Nor did she go out with her husband to banquets, which were strictly "stag" except for the paid entertainers—flute players and *hetairai* ("companions").

Hetairai might be mere high-class entertainer-prostitutes; but a minority, who were sketchily or fairly well educated, could augment their physical attractions and dinner-table with conversation on the topics of the day—perhaps on the theater or even on philosophy—that no wife could furnish. They sometimes made more or less permanent attachments with their distinguished clients. Some were foreigners, whom no citizen could marry. Some were of the citizenry but preferred to forgo the security of wifely imprisonment for their independence and the company of—and sometimes influence over—the leading men of the time.³⁸ These higher-grade *hetairai* were the only free women in Hellenic society, going wherever they pleased; and—according to one secondary work that cites no source—without the head covering expected of a lady, and often with their hair cut and hanging down around their ears.³⁹ (An interesting bit, if

³³Thucydides 2. 45. 2.

³⁴Xenophon *Oeconomicus*, 3. 12, in his *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 387, 389.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 7. 5, p. 415.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 7. 25-27, p. 423.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 10. 1, p. 447.

³⁸See Durant, p. 300, and the sources cited.

³⁹Gardner and Jevons, pp. 63, 66.

verifiable, in view of the later NT allusion to the shame of a Christian woman's cutting her hair. This was in Corinth—at that time a proverbially immoral crossroads seaport with a mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and assorted Orientals and with a famed temple of Aphrodite, or Venus, served by a thousand beautiful *hetairai*, the delight of seamen from all shores. Is this abhorrence of a shorn woman connected with the fear of her being mistaken for a *hetaira*?)

The respectable Greek wife did not envy the *hetaira*, who was looked down on socially in her prime and who most often died in poverty and misery. The wife was probably reasonably content with her lot, partly for lack of knowledge or anything different, and partly for the security and status that were hers. Her husband administered her property and enjoyed the use of it, gave her whatever measure of affection he might feel, and, if he pleased, divorced her and retained the children. But if divorced she could reclaim her dowry and return to her *kyrios*—her father or other male guardian through whom she had to conduct any legal business. Herodotus, accustomed to the Greek seclusion of women, was surprised to see women in Egypt outdoors buying and selling.⁴⁰

The Hellenistic period, however, saw a change. In the older Greek society of the classical era the city-states had been, as Toynbee puts it, “freemen's clubs into which there had been no admittance for women or slaves,” but in the Hellenistic period, after the city-states had been replaced by the kingdoms of Alexander's successors, “these two long disfranchised classes were now regaining something of the footing in society that had been theirs in the ‘heroic’—or barbaric—age before the rise of city-states had left them out in the cold.”⁴¹

However, as Tarn points out, although the women of the Macedonian ruling classes in the eastern Mediterranean area enjoyed more independence than before, this was possible only for those individuals who actively sought a greater role in society. The increased opportunity for the minority did not affect the masses in either Greece or the East. There was still a cultural difference between men and women because of the educational difference. Some women wealthy enough to own slaves were illiterate.⁴²

For most women, their husbands still controlled their lives. Ancient custom and economic conditions both operated to the continuance of the practice of exposing unwanted infants, mostly girls. Tarn cites statistics for the ratio of sons to daughters in certain families, which indicates an unnaturally high proportion of males.⁴³ More vividly than any figures, a single sentence in a letter—a papyrus written in Greek, from Egypt—pictures the cruel situation of an expectant mother who reads a letter from her husband—an otherwise kindly letter: “If it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out.”⁴⁴

In the first century, under Roman administration, Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean remained Hellenistic—a mixture of Greek and Oriental—with little but the provincial governments affected by Rome, except in certain Roman colonies and municipalities. Greek was the language of half the empire, used extensively in Rome itself. The “Greeks,” or “Hellenists,” who had synagogues in Jerusalem and from whose ranks came Christian converts, were Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora—Jews who lived in the Hellenistic lands of the eastern Mediterranean.

When eastern religions spread into the Hellenistic and then the Greco-Roman world, many women and slaves were attracted to them in great numbers. Many were attracted by the high

⁴⁰Herodotus, 2. 35.

⁴¹Arnold J. Toynbee, *Hellenism* (New York, 1959), p. 135.

⁴²W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation*, 2nd ed. (London, 1930), pp. 89-91.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 92-94.

⁴⁴*Select Papyri*, vol. 1, ed. A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar (Cambridge, 1959. Loeb Classical Library), no. 105.

moral tone of Judaism. When Christianity, in particular, spread into this Hellenistic world, it “appealed to the women; for, though the status of Hellenic women had been improving in the post-Alexandrine age, they had not attained the standing and influence that were attainable, in the social life of the Christian Church, by women who won respect for their personalities through devoting themselves to the Church’s service.”⁴⁵ We may find in Lydia of Philippi an example of a Hellenistic businesswoman.

The Roman Woman

Before the first century began, the Roman woman⁴⁶ was freer than her Greek counterpart; by the end of that century she was able to enter marriage in virtual equality with her husband, at least legally, and probably had more independence than her nineteenth-century descendants.⁴⁷ This new status of women directly affected the Roman citizens, mostly of the upper classes, but it must have reached to some degree the upper class of non-citizens. Nevertheless, the masses throughout the Empire probably felt little change by the process. The eastern half of the Mediterranean world was never Romanized; it remained Greek in language (plus the local languages, of course) and Greek-Oriental in customs.

In the first century the Roman husband no longer had power of life and death over his wife; but the father—the *paterfamilias*—still held it over his children, even his married sons unless he “emancipated” them. That was the law, but by this time the right was almost never used because it was condemned by public opinion.⁴⁸ In one respect, however, a father still exercised, regularly and without censure, a form of life-and-death power—in the exposure of unwanted newborn infants, mostly bastards and girls. The mother had no more voice in the decision than the Greek mother.

The Roman girl, until marriage, was under the *patria potestas* (“paternal power”) of her father or grandfather. By an older form of marriage she came under the *manus* (“hand”) of her husband, to whom she stood legally in the place of a daughter; but under the increasingly common form of marriage, without *manus*, she remained a member of her paternal family and, even after divorce or widowhood, under the *patria potestas* of her father or the guardianship of a male relative, who had to represent her in conducting any legal business. Her dowry did not belong to her husband, though he enjoyed the benefit of it as long as the marriage lasted. At her death it returned to her family.

The Roman bride was as young as her Greek counterpart. In spite of her relative independence, with her own property and her freedom of movement, she nevertheless stood in a subordinate position, under some form of male tutelage. Probably to the vast majority of women the home was their sphere. On her wedding day the bride brought to her new home her distaff and spindle and was given fire and water—emblems of her domestic occupations. She was not

⁴⁵Toynbee, p. 223.

⁴⁶For general discussions of the Roman woman, see Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven CN, 1940), pp. 76-105, 180-83; Ludwig Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire*, 2nd ed., tr. Leonard A. Magnus (New York, n.d.), 1:228-67; John Edwin Sandys, ed., *A Companion to Latin Studies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 184-90.

⁴⁷As late as the mid-nineteenth century there were women in the United States whose possessions passed automatically into the husband’s ownership at marriage. See Leo Kanowitz, *Woman and the Law* (Albuquerque, NM, 1969), p. 36.

⁴⁸For a chapter covering the Roman family and laws relating thereto, see John Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (Ithaca, NY, 1967), pp. 98-138. This is relevant to this and several following paragraphs.

excluded from her husband's dinner parties and was given due respect as a matron. She did not, as in the old days, sit at her husband's side⁴⁹ while he reclined at the table; she now reclined with him and all the others. The less affluent and the villagers probably sat at meals, as had all the Romans before they adopted the eastern custom of reclining.

Roman women wore the equivalent of the Greek dress, with differences.⁵⁰ The hair was done up in varying style, rather more ornate after the first century. It was often bound with a bandeau, or a band rising in front like a section of a cone. A fold of the mantle could be pulled up over the head. According to Plutarch (writing in the first century), it was usual for Roman women to go out in public with their heads covered, though in following a father to the grave they did the opposite—going with uncovered head and with hair unbound.⁵¹ Apparently by that time the covered head was usual, but the uncovered head was not scandalous; for another first-century writer cites as an example of “horrid arrogance” an earlier Roman who divorced his wife because he saw her outdoors with uncovered head, which he contended no one but himself should see.⁵²

In NT times Roman women were better educated than their Greek sisters. Both girls and boys attended elementary school (if their parents could pay) from age seven to twelve. Higher education was for boys; but women were by no means barred from whatever learning they could acquire by reading, attending lectures, and the like. Some women were aspiring poets and writers. Some studied philosophy. There were even women physicians.⁵³ Many women, seeking food for their souls, followed Oriental cults; and a number were attracted to Judaism. Christianity found an audience among women who were knowledgeable enough to become “fellow-workers” with the apostles (though most of the names in Rom 16 are not Roman but Greek).

In the last century of the Republic upper-class Roman marriages and divorces were largely a matter of political alliances and realignments; few wanted to rear children. Shortly before the first century began, the emperor Augustus promulgated laws⁵⁴ relating to marriage and the family in an effort to stem the decline in the birth rate and the instability of the family among the higher classes. These laws penalized the unmarried and childless, changed the punishment for adultery from death for the woman to a monetary penalty applied equally to both offenders, recognized the status of a concubine as lawful but inferior to that of a wife (a “second wife” being automatically a concubine since monogamy was the law), and encouraged the remarriage of the widowed and divorced.

Divorce was still allowable on mutual consent, or on the wish of either party or of either *paterfamilias*. But it must be declared in the presence of seven witnesses, and the wife's dowry must be returned unless some portion was claimed by the husband for the maintenance of the children or for loss due to the wife. Further, a mother of three children (of four if a freedwoman) no longer had to have a guardian in order to conduct business. Thus there were Roman women carrying on their own affairs, managing their property, and living independent lives.

However, the laws were unsuccessful in stabilizing marriage among the upper classes. In high society partners were changed on the basis of money instead of republican politics, or retained in name only because of the dowry or for prestige. A satire of Juvenal, written a few

⁴⁹Valerius Maximus 2. 12.

⁵⁰Carcopino, pp. 164-70; Sandys, pp. 195-200; Houston, pp. 108-116.

⁵¹Plutarch *Roman Questions*, no. 14, in *Plutarch's Moralia* 4 (Loeb Classical Library): 24-27.

⁵²Valerius Maximus 6. 3. 10.

⁵³For an enumeration of varied occupations and pursuit of Roman women in the first century, see Carcopino, pp. 180-83.

⁵⁴Crook, p. 106; Carcopino, pp. 97-100.

years after the end of the first century, caricatures such people and their foibles and excesses, especially the goings-on of the women. Some of the targets of his tirades appear merely amusing—such as the mannish woman who barges into men’s meetings and talks to uniformed generals with her husband standing by. But others exemplify all the sins catalogued in Rom 1. One of the conversations has a curiously modern ring. “We agreed long ago,” retorts an unfaithful wife when discovered, “that you are to do what you want and I can do as I please. You can yell and confound sea and sky, but I am a human being!”⁵⁵

Of course not all in the upper classes were of this sort. There were high-minded people, conscientious administrators, and devoted couples, such as Seneca and Paulina, Paetus and Atria, or Pliny and Calpurnia, as attested by letters,⁵⁶ epitaphs, and historical narratives. And among ordinary people there were many who still retained to some degree the Old, stern Roman virtues. Multitudes, seeking something to give meaning to their lives, were attracted to various eastern religions, including Judaism, and many of them found hope in Christianity.

Mixed Cultural Heritage of Christians

The ethnic and cultural background of the NT Christians was mixed—Jewish, Greek-Oriental, and Roman. Even in the capital, if we can judge from the names of those in Rome itself to whom Paul sent greetings (Rom 16), most were not Romans but Greeks, Hellenized Jews, or other Hellenistic easterners. The fact that Paul wrote to them in Greek indicates that they spoke that language. Lists of the early bishops of the church at Rome show only four Latin names out of the first fifteen.⁵⁷ Priscilla and Aquila, who lived at Rome before they met Paul in Corinth, had Latin names. Priscilla may or may not have been Roman; her husband was a Jew from Asia Minor (Acts 18:2). A majority of the early Christians came from social strata that were less affected by the increasing independence of upper-class women. Working-class women throughout the Empire had always moved about freely because their labor in field or shop was an economic necessity. Hence they had a freedom and a value to the family higher than their mere legal status. Similarly, in earlier stages of culture women in general had been freer—in the early Hebrew period and the pre-classical age of Greece and Rome—when in agricultural and pastoral societies men and women shared the work.⁵⁸ Doubtless the Christians were more repelled by the vices of contemporary high society than attracted by the increased opportunities open to the ordinary high-minded woman. Christians found their freedom in Christ, in the freedom to use their abilities in His cause; and woman’s charter of freedom was expressed in the assurance that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:28, 29).

Is it surprising that some Christians in the infant church, in seeking to put this great principle into effect, made mistakes? Rejoicing in their new release from the Mosaic “yoke of bondage” or from their pagan superstitions, some of them expressed their Christian liberty in ways that tended to put a stumbling block before their weaker brethren or to alienate their non-Christian

⁵⁵Juvenal *Satires*, no. 6, lines 281-84.

⁵⁶Pliny (the Younger) *Letters* 4. 19; 6. 4; 7. 5.

⁵⁷*New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, s. v. “Popes, List of.”

⁵⁸In the OT, women move freely in public places: Rebekah meeting Isaac at the well, Rachel watering her flocks along with the shepherds, Zelophehad’s daughters speaking up in public assembly, the admired woman of Prov 31 buying property, engaging in business, and opening her mouth in wisdom. Homeric women contrast favorably with their classical-age sisters, and pre-Homeric Cretan women are pictured in public gatherings.

neighbors. In at least one church they produced confusion in public worship and transgressed Jewish and Greek ideas of propriety.⁵⁹

The reaction to this kind of situation was the call for moderation and for doing everything “decently and in order” (and, of course, the determination of what is decent and in order is bound up with the ethnic and cultural background). In other churches also the counsel was for caution in asserting one’s Christian liberty at the expense of others (Gal 5:13; cf. 1 Cor 8:9) or of the cause, “that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed” (1 Tim 6:1), by those outside the church.

Perhaps there is a parallel to this early-church problem of public opinion in a modern experience in our own church, a reaction to an ethnic and cultural environment. Ellen White taught that great principle of unity in Christ, by which, as she put it, “Jew and Gentile, black and White, free and bond, are linked together in one common brotherhood, recognized as equal in the sight of God.”⁶⁰ She applied the principle by saying that black members should be received as members of white churches.⁶¹

A few years later, in the face of segregation by law and of stiffening opposition from outside the church (which at one time nearly closed J. E. White’s *Morning Star* mission), she cautioned against inviting opposition unnecessarily. “If you see that by doing certain things which you have a perfect right to do, you hinder the advancement of God’s work, refrain from doing those things.”⁶² Therefore she advised separate churches for black members “where demanded by custom; not, she explained, “to exclude them from worshiping with white people” but rather “that the progress of the truth may be advanced,” and she added, “until the Lord shows us a better way.”⁶³

Subsequently, as the *SDA Encyclopedia* relates, this policy of separation, though begun as “the result of local necessity,” “eventually came to be so taken for granted that probably a majority of SDA members in areas where segregation was the custom believed it to be a fundamental teaching of the church.”⁶⁴ Consequently some people, not knowing that it was originally contingent on a changing ethnic and cultural situation, have cited the authority of Mrs. White for perpetuating segregation.

In the NT epistles—the “letters to young churches”—we see the emerging Christian congregations gathering converts of varying ethnic and cultural heritage; meeting differing local situations; sometimes facing a choice between insisting on the new Christian freedoms and avoiding offense to their neighbors outside the church. But letters omit explaining points that are already familiar to both writer and recipients. Hence it is sometimes difficult for us today, lacking such information, to read between the lines. Is a given decision or instruction based on a universal principle, on a response to a local church situation, or on consideration for public opinion? Not surprisingly, conclusions have differed as to the reasons why certain things were said or done.

For that matter, historians assign various reasons for the wide differences in the place of women in the Roman Empire, ranging from extreme Greek seclusion to Roman Independence.

⁵⁹At Corinth, in matters of hair styles, of disorderly speaking in tongues, or of women asking questions in church (see 1 Cor 10; 11; 14).

⁶⁰7T 225.

⁶¹“Our Duty to the Colored People,” p. 11, reprinted in *The Southern Work*.

⁶²9T 215. For the background of increased opposition from outside that forced this change in practice, see Ronald D. Graybill, *E. G. White and Church Race Relations* (Washington, 1970).

⁶³9T 208, 206-7.

⁶⁴S. V. “Regional Affairs, Office of,” rev. ed. (1976), p. 1194.

Research in that field would require more primary sources than are available. However, a few secondary works may be cited for various theories, mostly undocumented from ancient sources.

The classical Greek seclusion and inferior status of respectable women, most extreme in Athens, has been explained variously as due to the rise of city states;⁶⁵ to women's lack of education;⁶⁶ to a supposed Greek belief that the father was the child's only parent, and that its mother, alien to the paternal family, was only its incubator, as it were⁶⁷ (which looks suspiciously like a contrived explanation); even, in a recent psychological theory, to the man's reaction against his first seven years spent in the women's quarters, under total female domination.⁶⁸ The opposite extreme in Sparta has been explained by the danger from the vastly more numerous Helots.

The Roman woman, though never confined to separate quarters, had been legally almost in the position of her Greek sister; then in the third century B.C. she began to gain economic and then other freedoms by legal detours by-passing the restrictions.⁶⁹ Various writers attribute her success to her Roman temperament,⁷⁰ to her opportunity to control family property during the men's long absences in the Punic Wars,⁷¹ to increased wealth,⁷² to marriage without *manus*, without the husband's control,⁷³ and, in the late Republic, to her value in political marriage alliances.⁷⁴

The Jewish woman of the first century, enjoying more freedom than her Greek sister but less than the Roman matron, was in some ways less free than in early postexilic times.⁷⁵ Why? Possibly there had been a Jewish reaction against the influence or Hellenism since Maccabean times, and a disgust with Roman laxity. The rabbis extolled women's domestic virtues, piety, and motherly wisdom—even, on occasion, her accomplishments. But they also often cast her in the role of temptress, citing Genesis for Eve as the originator or transgression and the cause of man's downfall.⁷⁶ Paul—himself a rabbi, trained by Gamaliel—also cites “the law” (1 Cor 14:34, 35) for woman's subordination to her husband; by “law” he might have meant the Pentateuch, the OT, or the whole Jewish system.

⁶⁵Toynbee, p. 135; Verena Zinserling, *Women in Greece and Rome* (New York, 1972), p. 23.

⁶⁶James Donaldson, *Woman* (London, 1907), pp. 52-53. This contributed to men's dependence on the *hetairai* as companions (*ibid.*, pp. 56-59).

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 197; cf. Philip E. Slater, *The Glory of Hera* (Boston, 1968), p. 163. There is disagreement as to whether this view belonged to the Homeric period or the time of the classical playwrights who attributed it to Apollo. See Aeschylus *Eumenides*, lines 658-64; Euripides *Orestes*, line 552.

⁶⁸Slater, pp. 7-10.

⁶⁹Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Women of the Caesars* (New York, 1911), pp. 5-6, 9.

⁷⁰Donaldson, p. 89; illustrated by her willingness to defy male disapproval to make public protests on her own behalf (*ibid.*, p. 99); see also Mary R. Beard, *On Understanding Women* (New York, 1968 [original ed., 1931]), pp. 234-35.

⁷¹Beard, p. 235.

⁷²Donaldson, pp. 105-9; Zinserling, p. 8.

⁷³Ferrero, p. 5; Samuel Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (reprint; Cleveland, 1956), p. 79; cf. Donaldson, pp. 106-110.

⁷⁴Zinserling, p. 49; Ferrero, pp. 16-18.

⁷⁵On the improved status of women in the exilic and postexilic periods, see Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2 vols. (New York, 1952), 1:112-14, and n. 16, p. 348.

⁷⁶Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (reprint; Grand Rapids, 1957), pp. 139-40, citing Tanch. 28. 6; see also Philo, in n. 20 above.

Conclusion

The first-century Christians, beginning in Palestine, then spreading in the Hellenistic East, probably felt Roman influence least in their daily lives (though church organization later followed Roman models).⁷⁷

As for the place of women, the Roman laws of personal status and family relationships were binding on Roman citizens; but there is evidence that non-citizen provincials were most often dealt with in their own legal systems.⁷⁸ Certainly Roman customs were not transplanted wholesale into the much older societies in the eastern half of the empire—the area with which the NT deals principally. Hence the ethnic and cultural background relevant to this study seems to have been primarily Jewish and Greek, and only incidentally Roman.

⁷⁷Such terms as “diocese” are taken from names of administrative units of the Roman Empire as reorganized by Diocletian in the third century.

⁷⁸Crook, p. 283.