

WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, 1ST CENTURY JUDAISM, AND 1ST CENTURY GREEK AND ROMAN CULTURE

1) WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament gives us glimpses into the role of women which is a much higher view than the Rabbinic view of the 1st century. She was created from man (or of like substance), and together they were to take dominion. She participated in worship, in prayers, offering sacrifices, attending the feasts, and hearing the reading of the law. There were no women priests. This was probably to stand as a contrast to the pagan cultures, which had women as gods and priestesses, and their worship involved sex rites. In the home the wife was subordinate to the husband, but in the social realm she exercised great freedom, and entered into business on par with the men in the community. Proverbs 31 gives the picture of a model wife who is intelligent and energetic, able to use her mind as well as her hands.

The Old Testament view of women stands in contrast to the Rabbinic picture portrayed in the 1st century. Women came to be thought of as inferior to men. James Hurley explains this degeneration:

“Our discussion of the role of women in Judaism has presented a situation in which the subordinate role of women within patriarchal and Israelite society has hardened to a considerable degree and in which women have been relegated to a position of inferiority. The Rabbis continued many old traditions and produced new ones which they thought would guard their people from sin. Increasingly this meant a separation of the sexes. Perhaps it was this distance which led to suspicion and ignorance, and the ignorance to contempt. As has been frequently noticed, the Rabbis spoke most often of women in a deprecating manner. A woman’s praise was found in her service in the home; criticism of her centered around her sexuality and her ignorance.”

James B. Hurley, Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective, p.73, 34

2) WOMEN WITHIN 1ST CENTURY JUDAISM

In 1st century Judaism, women could not participate in worship in the synagogue. They were seated in a separate section with a separate entrance, and their seating was sometimes separated from the men’s by an iron grating. They were shut up in their own section of the synagogue where they could not be seen. In the synagogue, the men came to learn, the women came to hear. The Scripture was read by men, and when the men read the scripture they covered their heads. The women had their heads uncovered, and were silent. Women were forbidden to teach in any school, even of the very young children. A woman was not to be trained in the law, for “women are of a light mind.” To instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. A woman’s work was to send her children to the synagogue, to attend to domestic affairs, to leave her husband free to study in the schools, and to keep house until he returned. The Rabbis had warnings against talking too much to women, and a Rabbi could never greet a woman on the street, not even if she were a family member. In the morning Jewish prayer, a man thanked God that he wasn’t a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Note Paul uses these three groups in his statement in Gal 3:25.

In Israel, women were pure, the home happy, and the family hallowed. The most desired qualities in a woman were meekness, modesty, and shamefacedness. Modesty was upheld because woman was formed out of man's rib, which is always covered.

In spite of these somewhat demeaning statements about women, a Jewish woman was freer to mingle and be involved in religious interests than the women in surrounding cultures. They were not cloistered in their homes, but moved about freely. This can be seen from all the women mentioned in the Gospels and Acts. They were not locked up at home.

Jewish Veiling Practices: from Hurley's book (see above)

The Old Testament does not regulate the veiling of women, though it does regulate the hairstyle: a woman would not go about with her hair hanging loose. Though they may have drawn a shawl over their head, they certainly did not have their faces veiled as in Islamic culture.

In the Mishnah writing, the same word is used for loosing the hair and uncovering the head; thus it is difficult to know which is being referred to .

From the Talmud it seems that women did practice having their heads (not faces) covered. This was the practice that came in somewhere between 3-6 century BC, but this does not say that it was the practice in 1st century Judaism.

In Jewish, Greek and Roman culture, loose hair was not an appropriate hairstyle. Women's hair was worn up.

3)WOMEN IN 1ST CENTURY GREEK CULTURE

A woman's life in Greek culture was more difficult than that of Jewish women. The place of women in Greek religion was high. In Corinth there was the temple of Aphrodite, which had 1,000 prostitute/priestesses who went out on the streets every evening with their bald heads. In Ephesus the temple of Artemis had hundreds of priestesses called Melissae (bees) who were sacred prostitutes.

It is somewhat difficult to know how the average woman lived because most records deal with the lifestyles of the wealthy. A respectable Greek woman in the upper class led a very confined life. She lived in her own separate quarters which only her husband entered. She did not appear at meals and she never went out on the street alone. She could never attend any public assembly. In Greek culture a woman was to remain indoors: to be obedient, to be seen as little as possible, and to hear and ask as little as possible. A woman had no independent existence and no mind of her own. Her husband could divorce her at will; his only obligation was to return her dowry.

Because her life was so confined, a Greek woman put a great deal of emphasis on elaborate dressing and braiding of the hair. Even the Greeks and Romans themselves were shocked by the love of elaborate adornment that characterized their women. The Greek mystery religions had some regulations which are similar to Paul and Peter's guidelines. They said, "A consecrated woman shall not have gold ornaments nor rouge, nor face whitening, nor head bands, nor

braided hair, nor shoes, except those made of felt or skins of sacrificial animals.” (Barclay, Letter to Timothy, Titus, & Philemon, p.68)

Cato the Censor insisted on simplicity. Lucius Valerius said, “Why should men grudge women their ornaments and dress? Women cannot hold positions of office or priesthood, or gain triumphs; they have no public occupations. What can they do but devote their time to adornment and dress?” Epictetus the Philosopher: “When women realize that they are destined solely to be man’s bedfellows then they put all hope in that, and so devote their time to adornment.” Epictetus said we should make them see that they are honored for appearing modest and self-respecting.

Women’s adornment in Greek and Roman culture

There many ways of dressing one’s hair. It was waved, curled and dyed in fashionable colors. Some blonde wigs were even found in the Christian Catacombs. Hair for wigs was imported from as far away as India. There were hair pins and combs of ivory, boxwood, tortoise shell, and gold studded with gems. A quotation of Balsdon in James Hurley’s book, p. 258, illustrates the elaborate hairdos of Roman women:

“A well known bust of Julia, daughter of Titus, who led the overthrow of Jerusalem in AD 70, provides an example of the elaborate hairstyles which were worn at the Roman court in the first century, and set the styles for elsewhere. Balsdon remarks on the bust, ‘This was the time when, one must assume, hours upon end were devoted to the curling tongs. Curl climbs on top of curl, and over the forehead there arose something which at its best looked like the masterpiece of a pastry chef, and, at its worst, like a dry sponge. At the back the hair was plaited, and the braids arranged in a coil which looks like basketwork. The towering splendor was to be viewed from one direction only, the front, and women must have maneuvered at social gatherings to keep out of view the ridiculous anti-climax which the back of their heads constituted.’ “

The elaborate hairstyles were matched by equally showy ornamentation. Gold, jewels and pearls were worn on the body, in the ears and on the hair. In his Natural History, the elder Pliny complained of the vast sums being spent on such items. Seneca, in speaking of Greek women, said that some of them had two or three fortunes in their ears.

Graeco-Roman veiling practices

“Veiling was not required in Graeco-Roman culture in the first century, but specific coiffures were important. In Roman culture men had short hair; Greeks had hair a little longer, sometimes shoulder length. Adult women had long hair which was worn up in various styles. For the Roman woman, her hair was where she showed off her dignity and affluence.” (Hurley, James, Men and Women in Biblical Perspective, p.256-259)

4) WOMEN IN 1ST CENTURY ROMAN CULTURE

In Roman law women had no rights; they were considered forever a child. They were under the rule of their father, who had the power of life or death over them, or when married they were under the power of their husband, and subject to his mercy. Cato the Censor wrote, “If you were to catch your wife in an act of infidelity, you could kill her with impunity (freedom from punishment), without a trial.”

Ignatius beat his wife to death when he found her drinking wine. Sulpicius Gallus dismissed his wife because she once appeared on the street without a veil. Antistus Vetos divorced his wife because he saw her secretly speaking to a freed woman in public. Publius Sempronius Sophus divorced his wife because she went to the games.

The attitude was: No woman would dare to make a decision for herself.

CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN THE 1ST CENTURY

With this background one can imagine the incredible courage it took for a woman to become a Christian on her own while her husband remained an idol worshipper. If a man became a Christian, he would bring his wife to church with him, but for a woman this was not the case. It is into this type of situation that Peter gives counsel to Christian women in 1 Peter 3:1-6.

Christianity's effect on women

Christianity raised the level of women to equality with men as joint heirs and fellow workers in the Gospel. In God's sight both man and woman are created in His image, and are of equal value. Women had new freedoms in Christ. They could participate in worship services; they could pray and prophesy. The Spirit had been poured out on them and they had received spiritual gifts. They were an integral part of the Body of Christ. They could learn the things of God. Joint submission of husband and wife was recognized. Instead of male domination, husbands were to model Christ's loving, serving example to their wives.

Equally sons of God - Gal 3:28

Fellow workers - Rom 16:3, Phil 4:3

Could meet in assembly with men, pray & prophesy - 1 Cor 11

Could teach - Titus 2:3; Acts 18:26

Joint heir with husbands - 1 Pet 3:7

Could decide to be a Christian apart from unbelieving husband - 1 Pet 3:1,2 ; 1 Cor 7:13

Could hold church offices - Deacons - 1 Tim 3:11; Rom 16:1

Rom 16:17 - Most agree that Junia is a feminine name, thus opening the possibility that a woman could be an apostle.

John of Chrysostom (344-407 AD) said Phoebe was an ordained deacon.

Origin (185-254 AD) said apostolic authority was given for the appointment of women ministers in the church.