The Social Status of First Century Women In Relationship to Scriptural Household Codes

Introduction

It is difficult to make sweeping statements about the status of women during the first century because there were exceptions to any characterization that might be made. However, there were laws, widely accepted codes, and assumptions regarding roles of women. These provide insight into the sort of life women lived during this period. As might be expected, there was a wide range of lifestyles for women depending on family wealth, family standing, whether the woman was enslaved or free, urban or rural, Greek or Roman or Jewish, etc. The descriptions in this paper apply best to first century free-women who live in urban settings and were reasonably comfortable economically.

Historical Attitudes Regarding Women

Roots of the First Century attitudes toward women can be found in the writing of the Greek, Hesiod, around 700 B.C.E. In his writings, superior, rational male gods overthrew the rule of inferior, emotional female deities. The woes of mankind are attributed to Pandora, and Zeus subordinates the unruly female deities (Pomeroy, 2).

In addition, Pythagoras identified women with dark and evil (Bullough, 107), while Plato contrasted higher love with physical love. It was ideal for men to be celibate. But women lure men away from this, therefore women are evil (Bullough, 108). Females

represented emotion and senses, men rationality. Women, however, could be more male-like by remaining virgins (Bullough, 109).

The codes themselves come from the classical Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle and are taken up by Philo and Josephus. These "are continued down into the later Roman period" (Lincoln, *Household,* 100).

Women in Greco-Roman Culture

"In the Jewish tradition, a woman was regarded more as a piece of property than as a person. She was without rights or power" (Demarest, 177). Women were "also held to be nonpersons on the Greek side" and respectable Greek women "did not appear in public alone" (Demarest, 177). Women could be seen alone in public only in places like Ephesus where they were prostitutes for the goddess Diana (Demarest, 178).   People "were bound into a certain 'station'." It was believed that the gods had created things that way. Women were things and had no rights (Dunnam, 232).

There existed "the notion that the man is intended by nature to rule as husband, father, and master, and that failure to adhere to this proper hierarch is detrimental not only to the household but also to the life of the state." This proper order was "a matter of crucial social and political concern." (Lincoln, *Letter,* 653).   This "great concern for proper management of the household" was based on the idea that the security and unity of the state depended on it (Bartlett, 278).

Compared to Greek women, Roman women "were emancipated". They did not have to go veiled. They could spend time with their husbands. They could go out alone and

could even talk to other men (Bullough, 95). Unlike Greek women, Roman women were educated. Wealthy women had tutors in the home and poorer women went to school. Even some female slaves were educated (O'Faolain & Martines, 70). Among Romans it was possible to find emancipated, respected upper-class women. (Pomeroy, 149).

However, legally, Roman women were seen as suffering from "weakness and light-mindedness" and in need of the *pater familias* to provide guardianship (Pomeroy, 150). This was usually a woman's father or someone who received guardianship from her father. Guardianship did not pass automatically to a woman's husband (Pomeroy, 152). There were some advantages to women being under their fathers, since women lived in the home of a husband who had no authority over her. This also helped protect her from abuse (Pomeroy, 155). Women were required to "conform themselves to their husbands and a man could kill his wife for merely drinking wine (Pomeroy, 153). Furthermore, under first century Roman law, only the husband could initiate a divorce (Pomeroy, 154).

Until late in Roman history, women lacked names and were called by family names with feminine endings. Sisters had the same name and were identified as "elder" "younger", "first", "third", etc. (Bullough, 82). Girl children were not listed as survivors on their mother's tombstones, as were boys. The *pater familias* had "absolute control" (Bullough, 83).

As women gained freedom, men's fear grew (Bullough, 87). It was believed that "religious groups that attracted women and slaves were … particularly likely to be subversive of societal stability" (Lincoln, *Household,* 101). For example, "when a woman became a Christian, she was, for the very first time in her life regarded fully as a human

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being" (Demarest, 178). "The household was a major feature of the Jewish world, and the *oikos* likewise in the Greco-Roman world. When women became Christians without their husbands, there was a "disruption of the family." In addition, converts had a strong obligation to their "'kin' in the faith" (Wright, 68)

Christian Adoption of Household Codes

Christian concepts of household structure were influenced by Jewish, Roman, and Greek ideas (Bullough, 105). "Christian household codes were profoundly affected by the best "pagan" wisdom of their time" (Bartlett, 287). The codes were "conventional formulations" and mirrored the codes employed by street philosophers in the first century. They were derived from the Neo-Pythagorean authors, as well as Plutarch, and Charondas (Standhartinger, 122). The codes represented conventional tradition-material only partially revised (Standhartinger, 123). Some scholars view the Christian adoption of household codes as "the paganization of Christianity" (Balch, 319). In addition, dualism started creeping into Christianity. Ideas of opposites such as light/dark, good/evil/, spirit/flesh, male/female often resulted in female being associated with dark, evil, and flesh (Bullough, 106).

Why Did Christians Adopt Household Codes?

Some scholars think that household codes were adopted by Christians in order to answer the concerns of outsiders (Standhartinger, 125). To the established Greco-Roman culture, the Christian movement was suspicious. Slaves and women were being converted, choosing their own religions. The adoption of household codes showed that

Christianity was not subversive. (Lincoln, *Letter,* 653). In addition, the delay of parousia made more real the need to avoid "unnecessary" disruption of status quo (Lincoln, *Letter,* 654). The "leadership and behavior of women and slaves became restricted and defined according to the patriarchal standards of Greco-Roman society so that outsiders would not take offense at their insubordinate behavior."

However, Christianity still allowed wives and slaves to be independent enough to choose their own God (Balch, 319).   For example, the code in 1 Peter 2:18-3:7 is an exhortation for Christians to show good behavior in an unbelieving society. There is an assumption of more believing women than men. Although at that time, wives were expected to have the same faith as their husbands, Peter assumes that women have the right to their own faith. Where both spouses are believers, both spouses are addressed. This is unlike pagan codes and shows mutuality by expressing expectations of husbands too (Bartlett, 278).

Although the adoption of the codes could "have been due to the need to respond to accusations from outsiders and to set standards in awareness of common notions of propriety," no new restrictions were placed on women. The household codes "simply legitimized their subordinate roles in the patriarchal household" (Lincoln, *Household,* 105). But a new perspective is added, that "Christ is also the Lord of the household" (Lincoln, *Household,* 106). The letter to the Ephesians argues that submission was the way of Christ, not the natural order. And Scripture states that all should "count others better than themselves" (Phil. 12:3), even husbands (Dunnam, 232).

Household Codes in Perspective

Finally, to fully understand the role of household codes among first century Christians, three underlying assumptions of the period need to be understood.

1. "The subjugation of one group by another seems embedded in the first-century Mediterranean mindset."

2. People held "the notion that orderly management of the household ensures an orderly society."

3. People believed "that accepting one's place in that order constituted a noble goal." (Henderson, 423).

Furthermore,

1. Scriptural household codes affirm Christ's lordship in that "'subjugation' occurs within the framework of Christ's lordship" (Henderson, 424).

2. Conventional wisdom is transformed by the fact that the author is "directly addressing the weaker member... which imputes to them a degree of autonomy."

3. The codes do "address the superior parties, [calling] not for their assertion of control but for the tempering of it."

So Scriptural household codes can be seen as "a deliberate effort to apply the logic of the cross to the household standards of the day" (Henderson, 424-425).

Conclusions

Scriptural household codes did not place new restrictions on women. They simply instructed and exhorted women to behave in a manner appropriate to their society. The fact that some of the codes also addressed husbands is significant. Husbands were instructed to behave kindly toward their wives. This was very uncommon among household codes in the Jewish or the Greco-Roman world. The position of wives in Christian marriages was greatly elevated in comparison with the world around them.

I find Suzanne Henderson's approach to these codes to be most helpful. She writes of the author of the Colossian household codes, "The non-negotiable concern of this writer remains clear: to establish households that embody the 'new life in Christ' in a manner that captivates, rather than repels, the residents of the surrounding world" (Henderson, 431-432).

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