

**Women in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mediterranean Culture: A Comparison Between  
Philo of Alexandria and Paul of Tarsus**

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One hundred years ago finding scholarly writings on the role of women in ancient Mediterranean society would have been a frustrating, if not fruitless endeavor. Now, however, due to the influence of a feminist critique of male-dominated scholarship and society, there is no dearth of sources for studying how women were perceived and how they lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Mediterranean world. One figure who has reemerged as an important source for investigating this topic is Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 B.C.-c.A.D. 45), a Jewish scholar who wrote extensively on the Pentateuch. As a near contemporary of Paul of Tarsus we can compare and contrast Philo and Paul's view of women to better grasp the ways in which Paul endorsed or rejected the common views of his day. What we will find is that Philo, like most Jewish men of his time, accepted and argued for the harsh, low view of women that was prevalent in the larger Greco-Roman world while Paul stood in sharp contrast to his larger society as a progressive on the issue of women's roles in marriage, the church, and society.

### *The Categories of "Male and Female"*

Before examining how Paul and Philo viewed a woman's role in society and the home we should first look at the broader topic of how they understood gender. In other words, what importance did they attach to humans as being made both male and female? Philo, it turns out, has much to say on this topic and we will see that his view on the difference between male and female will significantly shape his views on a number of practical issues that will be explored. Paul, on the other hand, does not have as much to say on the theoretical level as his letters were written in response to specific problems and situations. However, the few verses we do have from Paul provide a good foundation for understanding his practical advice to "sisters" in the church and how he interacted

with his female co-laborers.

Much of what we learn about Philo's view of male and female comes from his allegorical interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis. Commenting on Gen. 2:7 in *On the Creation* 134 Philo writes:

After this he says that "God formed man by taking clay from the earth, and he breathed into his face the breath of life." By this also he shows very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man now formed and the man that came into existence earlier after the image of God. For the man now formed is an object of sense-perception, partakes already of quality, consists of body and soul, is man or woman, and by nature mortal. But the man who came into existence after the image of God is what one might call an idea, or a genus, or a seal, an object of thought, incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.

This brief passage is essential for understanding Philo's conception of humanity, and by extension male and female. Influenced heavily by Middle Platonism, one of the reigning Greek philosophies of the day, Philo demonstrates here his belief that the idea of something is perfect, while the physical manifestation of the idea is always imperfect. Thus, the realm of the spirit and mind is *de facto* superior to the realm of the physical. At this point we might think Philo views men and women as equal since they both consist of "body and soul." However, what is espoused here is an ideal human who was asexual, or perhaps androgynous, since it is only after becoming an "object of sense-perception" (i.e. acquiring a body) that the human becomes a sexual being who is either "man or woman" (Baer 1970:21).

In fact, in commenting further on the creation narrative Philo draws sharp distinctions between the first man and woman. While the first man did have a body it was rightly ruled by his rational soul, thereby allowing the man to live in a state of harmony and excellence (36). Trouble knocked, however, when the woman was created. Seeing the woman begat desire in the man, followed by "bodily pleasure, which is the beginning of the wrongs and violation of law..." (Philo *Creation* 152). It was in turning

to the woman and submitting to sexual desire that the man became involved in the created world in a new way and brought on himself “mortality and wretchedness” (152). Woman not only entices sexual desire in the man, but is also the source of *aisthēsis* which is the irrational quality of the soul; that which has feeling or sense-perception. However, *nous*, the soul's rational quality, corresponds to man (Wegner 1982:551). This is not a neutral distinction for Philo tells us earlier that the *nous* is patterned after God, and thus the woman, who has no part in the *nous*, is not fashioned in the image of God (*Creation* 69, Wegner 552). Moreover, the irrationality of the female soul is frequently referenced as the cause for wickedness. It is because the woman lacked the rationality of the man that the serpent spoke first to her in the garden (*Creation* 165). While the man's soul is directed towards God, the woman's soul “clings to all that is born and perishes” (Philo *On Special Laws* 3.178). For Philo the female, sense-perceptible world is a threat to humanity's existence and an embodiment of all that went wrong in the garden (Baer 44).

Having examined Philo's conception of gender we can now turn to Paul with an eye towards similarities and contrasts with Philo. An important verse for this discussion is Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). At first glance there may seem to be a similarity between Paul's thought here and Philo's idea that the ideal human is asexual or androgynous. Is Paul asserting that “in Christ Jesus” there is *literally* “no longer male and female”? This is almost certainly not what Paul had in mind here, not only because of his affirmation of sexuality, to be discussed later, but also because the larger context of the verse indicates otherwise. Key to the interpretation of this verse is understanding why Paul adds “male and female” to an argument that is

primarily about divisions that have arisen in the Galatian church between Jews and Gentiles (Fee 2004:173). Paul is driving home to the Galatians that what is at stake in this debate about Jews and Gentiles is ecclesiology: what is the church to be? The answer is that it is to be “one in Christ Jesus,” an embodiment of the Kingdom of God where the walls of hostility that divide people in the present age pass away. The three pairs of people groups represent the primary ways people were divided: race, social standing, and gender (176). In Christ's body the things which enforce structures of domination and division are relativized and put aside. This means that this verse is *not* about how people are equally justified in God's sight, as has been the traditional argument (176). Paul's message that the boundaries of society have been brought down in the church was surely astounding in a culture where those boundaries were well-defined and nearly impermeable (180). That “male and female” are included in Paul's list leads us to the following conclusions: that he saw gender as something which should no longer divide, that the structure of patriarchy has no place in the church, and that all this stands in sharp contrast to Philo's support for the well-defined and hostile distinctions between men and women.

We will look at whether the above assertions hold true in the actual churches Paul formed, but first we must look at one other apparent similarity between Philo and Paul. When Paul<sup>1</sup> writes “For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim. 2:13-14 NRSV) is he agreeing with Philo that women are primarily responsible for the fall, due to being “weak” or “irrational”? We must answer “no” for three reasons. First, that Adam was

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1 Or someone writing in the Pauline tradition, as most scholars think someone other than Paul wrote 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy.

formed first, and then Eve does not imply “either ontological or functional priority,” but simply “defines a temporal sequence” (Belleville 2004:222). Second, in context, the verse brings to mind the the situation at hand in the church at Ephesus that Paul is addressing: certain women had become deceived by false teachers and were teaching their false doctrines in a domineering way (223). Finally, that Paul uses the example of Eve being deceived as an example of how both women *and* men were being led astray in 2 Corinthians 11:3 discourages the notion that Paul was using this story to negatively compare women-in-general to men-in-general.

### *Salvation and Spiritual Growth*

While Philo certainly saw stark differences between males and females in his allegorical interpretation we might wonder if these differences were just that: allegorical. Perhaps the rational male soul and irrational female soul are convenient categories for talking about the human condition in general. However, this is simply not the case, for, as we shall see in the rest of this paper, Philo's male and female categories had ramifications for real men and women.

One area where we can see the outworkings of his thoughts about gender is in his soteriology. In describing women's progress toward God, Philo writes:

The union of human beings that is made for the procreation of children, turns virgins into women. But when God begins to consort with the soul, He makes what before was a woman into a virgin again, for he takes away the degenerate and emasculate passions that made it womanish and plants instead the native growth of unpolluted virtues. Thus He [God] will not talk with Sarah till she has ceased from all that is after manner of women (Gen. 18:11), and is ranked once more as a pure virgin (*On the Cherubim* 50).

Here we have a description of one of Philo's dominant images for salvation. To become like God one must do away with the “womanish” qualities that pollute the rational male soul.<sup>2</sup> Thus, childbearing, which is associated with sexuality, “turns virgins into women.”

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<sup>2</sup> A rather strong connection can be seen here to the cryptic saying in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas that

In order to become saved one must become a “virgin” again by fleeing from sensual pleasure, the effeminate, the weak, and instead emphasize the “active, dominant, male mind” (Baer 54). Spiritual progress is a matter of actively pursuing the male soul while getting rid of the feminine soul (55). Again in this passage, the categories of male, female, and virgin are being used allegorically to describe the spiritual life for both men and women, since men too have fallen into the realm of the bodily and sexual. However, contra Baer, I do not think this leads us to think that Philo “is not speaking about actual men and women...” (52). Philo's reference to having children as being what turns virgins into women, his reference to an actual woman, namely Sarah, and the fact that language is not only descriptive, but also reflects and legitimizes social relations, leads me to believe that Philo saw this description of salvation as especially applicable to women (Sly 1994:183).

At a practical level Philo does affirm that women can take part in the spiritual journey, which stands in contrast to some of his Jewish contemporaries. For example, the Essenes were an ascetic group of Jews who lived in the desert awaiting the apocalypse, but they did not allow women to be part of their community. Additionally, the Mishna, a codification of Jewish oral law from the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., dissuades fathers from teaching their daughters the Torah because they lack wisdom (Van der Horst 1995:48). Philo, however, does think women can learn the laws of the Torah, but only from their husband; they are not to actually attend the synagogue (Sly 183). Additionally, he encourages women to go to the temple in order that they might “make [their] oblations and offer [their] prayers to avert the evil and to gain the good” (*Special Laws* 3.174). Finally, there is also Philo's high regard for the “aged virgins” in the Therapeutae sect he

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“every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven” (114).

describes in *De Vita Contemplativa*. The Therapeutae were an ascetic group, similar to the Essenes, who practiced a life of contemplation. This community outside Alexandria had women who had adopted the contemplative life with a “zeal and yearning for Wisdom, with which they are eager to live” (Philo *On the Contemplative Life* 32). Philo's description of these women certainly stands in striking contrast to the all-male Essenes who, according to Hippolytus, would not allow women in because they “do not trust women in any way” (Quoted in Taylor and Davies 1998:15). However, we should note that part of the reason he so highly regards these women is that “[t]hey take no heed of the pleasures of the body and desire not a mortal offspring...” (*Contemplative Life* 32). Here again the theme of becoming virgins arises and we are reminded “that his standard for assessing the worth of women remains male” (Taylor and Davies 15). Indeed, for Philo “the female is nothing else than an imperfect male” (*Questions in Exodus* 1.7)

Paul differs from Philo in not making any distinction between how women and men are saved. Even those who advocate that Paul believed women should be subordinate to men in the home and church affirm that men and women are equally justified by faith, equally children of God, and equally clothed with Christ (Piper and Grudem, 1991:71). Additionally, many modern translations agree that the Greek word *adelphoi* should be translated “brothers and sisters,” and thus Paul is addressing both men and women in his letters when he affirms that they are “beloved by God” and chosen by God (1 Thess. 1:4 NRSV). Both the “brothers and sisters” of the Roman church are “to present [their] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...” (Rom. 12:1 NRSV). And while Paul often encourages Christians to “be conformed to the image of [God's] Son” (8:29) and to have Christ formed in them (Gal. 4:19), this has nothing to do

with Jesus' maleness. Being conformed to the image of Christ is never spoken of in gendered terms, but is always a reference to the sacrificial and self-giving love exemplified in his incarnation, life, and death (c.f. Phil. 2:5-11).

There is one passage, however, where some see Paul arguing that women are saved in a different way from men. In a perplexing and endlessly debated passage on the role of women teachers in the church, Paul adds: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Tim. 2:15 NRSV). The verse is notoriously difficult for commentators, but none think it means that women will experience salvation through having children, for that is at odds with all of Paul's other writings (Kimberly 1992:482). Some have posited that it could be translated "saved through the birth of a child," which would be a reference to Mary's bearing of Jesus, but that translation is grammatically strained and requires that one infer that Paul is referring to Mary even though she is not mentioned (486). One persuasive interpretation is that Paul is responding in this verse to gnostic influences in the Ephesian church which deprecated the body and sexuality, and, by extension, giving birth to children (c.f. 4:1-3). In fact, the Gnostic deprecation of childbirth is well-documented and appears to have its source in Philo's view of salvation that was discussed earlier (485)! It would appear, then, that Paul is saying that childbirth is not an occasion for condemnation for women and that he restores childbirth as a valid vocation for women in contrast to the Gnostics who deprecated it and made virginity the ideal (486).

### ***Marriage and Sexuality***

The above discussion about Philo's view of salvation as "becoming a virgin" begs the question of how he viewed women's sexuality and their role in marriage. As

discussed earlier Philo saw Adam as being in full control of his sexuality, if not asexual, until Eve was created, enticed desire, and they fell into wickedness. Philo does, in theory, affirm the goodness of creation on the basis of Genesis, yet, in practice, most of his writings posit a sharp distinction between the transcendent realm of the divine and the created world (Baer 76). It appears that in this arena Philo allowed Platonic dualism to push aside the goodness of the body and sexuality for all practical purposes. For example, Philo believes women to be passion-driven while men can choose whether or not they are ruled by their sexuality (Sly 178). Furthermore, males are charged with keeping women's sexuality under control, since a woman who lost her virginity before marriage brought shame on her household (Ibid.). In marriage sex was to be ignored except when it was necessary in order to procreate (Ibid.).

Marriage, in and of itself, also appears to hold an ambiguous position in Philo's eyes. On the one hand he acknowledges that the male soul "was but half the perfect soul" and needs the female sense-perceptible soul to complete it (*Cherubim* 59-60), thus indicating that he believed man cannot function without woman (Wegner 555). However, in a fragment found in Eusebius' *Hypothetica* Philo justifies the Essenes for not taking a wife by describing a wife as "a selfish creature, excessively jealous and adept at beguiling the morals of her husband by seducing him by her continued impostures" (*Hyp.* 11.14-17). In terms of roles in marriage Philo unambiguously states: "wives must be slaves to their husbands, a servitude not imposed by violent ill-treatment but promoting obedience in all things" (*Hypothetica* 7.3). Philo, for the most part, sits firmly in line with the larger Greco-Roman and Jewish world in describing the relationship between husband and wife in harsh and patriarchal terms (Toews 1990:30).

Many interpreters of Paul down through the ages have read Paul as largely supporting a patriarchal view of marriage and sexuality, but a fresh reading of Paul shows him to be ahead of his times in this area. For example, Paul writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians that “the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (7:4 NRSV). Moreover, sex is to be a part of the marriage unless “by agreement” they decide to deprive one another for a short time (7:5). In these verses we gain confirmation that Paul did not intend Galatians 3:28 to mean that sexual differences were denied or that human sexuality was a sin that needed to be overcome. Rather, Paul affirms that a Christian marriage is to be two-sided, fully sexual, and mutually edifying (Bartchy 1978:59-60). Obviously, when this advice is set in conversation with Philo's views, discussed above, it is truly remarkable.

In the remainder of 1 Corinthians 7 Paul continued to give advice regarding marriage and sexuality. In doing so he paid no regard to one of the dominant social codes of his day, namely that the male was in sole control of any decisions of the women in his household. Throughout the chapter Paul gives advice to both men and women as “brothers and sisters” treating them as moral agents “who are free to act apart from the authority of their fathers or concerns of their blood families” (Bartchy 2003:140). For example, a woman was expected to worship her husband's gods and adopt his religion in first-century Greco-Roman culture. Paul, however, confirms that “sisters in Christ” who have pagan husbands are the spiritually dominant partner in the marriage and, moreover, the holiness of the “sister” is stronger than the defilement of the pagan husband (7:13-15). Such a rejection of the spiritual dominance that every male believed to be his in

marriage would have been truly shocking to the first-century ear (141)! Later in the chapter Paul addresses widows in an equally startling manner. A widow was under obligation, under the law of guardianship, to consult and obey the wishes of the males in her family regarding remarriage. Paul, however, states that she “is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord” (7:39), thereby ignoring “filial piety and patriarchal authority” (141). Lastly, we should note that Paul undermines the assumption that a woman should gain her identity from her closest male relative when, speaking of his own celibacy, he wishes “that all were as I myself am” (7:7 NRSV). Paul makes it clear that both men and women could be complete Christians without marriage because their new identity was “in Christ” (Bartchy 1978:60).

It was not only in the Corinthian church that Paul gave instructions on how Galatians 3:28 worked itself out in the life of the church. Since the time of Aristotle it had been common for philosophers to give instructions to males on how to govern the members of their household, namely wives, children, and slaves. Not surprisingly, then, Paul gives a Christian version of these household codes in Ephesians and Colossians. Some have accused Paul in these passages of accommodating his message to the patriarchal structures of his culture. However, while Paul works within the structural norms of his day he radically undermines the conventional household code, thereby setting a trajectory towards a mutually submissive, non-patriarchal marriage (Fee 183). Our first clue that Paul is redefining the household code is in verse 21 of Ephesians 5 which sets the tone for the rest of the code in calling all believers to “[s]ubmit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (TNIV). Second, Paul gives duties to all members of the household, whereas most household codes simply gave instructions to the

*paterfamilias*, the head of the family, on how to govern the members of his household (Keener 1993:588). Perhaps even more surprisingly, Paul doesn't give instructions to husbands on how to govern his wife, but instead instructs them to love their wives with the same kind of agape-love Jesus taught and modeled (Bartchy 1978:77). This is not the language of the common household code. Lastly, the only place Paul defines the content of the wife's submission is in verse 33 where a wife is told to “respect her husband” (TNIV). Paul's view of what submission entails could not be much weaker considering, as we saw in Philo's injunction that wives were to be slaves to their husbands, that submission encompassed far more than respect in Greco-Roman culture (Keener 589). Therefore, while Paul does call on wives to submit in some sense we can conclude that he does not thereby approve of the patriarchal structures as divinely ordained institutions and, in fact, works within them to subvert them.

### ***Participation in Society***

Philo envisions women's primary role as “household management” which he sees as the best place for them since they are “weak” and “naturally domestic” (Sly 182). The options open to women, according to Philo, are limited. Women were to remain virgins until they reach puberty, marry, and have children. Of course, there were also those few “aged virgins” of Therapeutae, discussed earlier, who were likely post-menopausal women who could be “virgins” again since their days of bearing children were over (Sly 177). Philo lays out his ideal for the place of men and women in society in the following passage:

Market-places and council-halls and law-courts and gatherings and meetings, where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air life with full scope for discussion and action – all these are suitable to men in both war and peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house.... Organized communities are of two sorts, the greater which we call cities and the smaller which we call households.

Both of these have their governors; the government of the greater is assigned to men under the name of statesmanship, that of the lesser, known as household management, to women (*Special Laws* 3.169-70).

It is evident from the passage above that while household management is necessary and good for a society to function properly, it is also the only realm in which good women were allowed to function.

Paul gives no specific instructions to women on their role in society, but he does give a good deal of information on how they were to function in the church. First, Paul assumes that women will publicly pray and prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5), the latter of which is a gift to build up the church (14:4) and ranks second only to apostles (12:28). Second, Paul consistently refers to the members in the church as “brothers”, “sisters,” or “brothers and sisters” as a strategy for creating a “society of siblings” in which disciples of Jesus treat each other as biological siblings had been taught to do (Bartchy 1999:70). In ancient Mediterranean culture the closest and most enduring relationship, even above husband and wife, was the one between brothers and sisters (68). Thus, by consistently employing sibling terminology Paul endeavored to create a tight-knit, loyal community in which even the *paterfamilias*, who was used to lording it over those under him, was now simply a “brother” (70). Lastly, Paul's women colleagues show that in his own life women were esteemed as valuable and equal co-laborers for the gospel. There are numerous examples that could be given, but a few must suffice. Phoebe is a “deacon” of the church in Cenchrea, Paul's benefactor, and commissioned with the important job of bringing Paul's letter to the Romans (16:1-2 TNIV). The wife and husband team, Priscilla and Aquila, he greets as his “co-workers in Christ Jesus” (16:3).<sup>3</sup> Finally, Paul lists Junia as a fellow Jew who is “outstanding among the apostles” (16:7, Keener 589).

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<sup>3</sup> Note that Priscilla is listed before her husband, Aquila, possibly because of her higher social status.

In both his life and teaching Paul showed himself to be progressive in viewing women as “sisters” and compatriots.

Philo bequeathed many valuable insights to both the church and Judaism. It was his method of allegorical interpretation that made Judaism palpable to the Greeks and which the Church found useful as a method for interpreting Scripture for centuries. As a philosopher he served a model to the likes of Augustine in his attempt to be a bridge between the intellectual elites of Greek culture and the Jews of Israel. However, when it came to women I must conclude that he largely adopted the prejudices and patriarchy of the larger Mediterranean culture. Paul, on the other hand, whether speaking about being male and female, salvation, sexuality, marriage, or life in the body of Christ shows himself to be following firmly in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in creating a non-patriarchal “society of siblings” in which women are empowered as co-laborers for the Gospel. Moreover, only when Paul is set alongside a contemporary like Philo do we see with clarity how radically he challenged the patriarchy of his day.

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