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PART ONE

Women Under Paganism Before Christ

CLEOPATRA

Let us go back to women of recorded history before the time of Christ, to a country (or countries) of highest civilization of their day; to rich nations; to powerful nations, that had everything money could buy; to nations comparable to the U.S.A. of today. Let us go back and look at the women there who should have been the best favored, highest cultured, best educated women In the world at that time.

The quotation following is from *Beacon Lights of History* by John Lord Vol. II, Part 1.

In speaking of the world at this time - 69 B.C., we read:

The civilized world was then most emphatically Pagan in both spirit and forms. Religion as a controlling influence was dead. Only a very few among speculative philosophers believed in any god, except in a degrading sense, as a blind inexorable fate, or an impersonation or the powers of Nature. The future state was a most perplexing uncertainty. Epicurean self-indulgence and material prosperity were regarded as the greatest good, and as doubt of the darkest kind hung over the future, the body was necessarily regarded as of more value than the soul.

Into such a world Cleopatra was born in 69 B.C. Her father, a Ptolemy, rulers for 300 years, descended from one of Alexander's generals. He reigned in Alexandria, a city of schools, libraries, museums, temples, palaces and marts of commerce.

The 300 years of Grecian kings in Egypt made little change in idolatry. Although no purely Egyptian customs lingered in palaces of Alexandria; and the old "deities" of Isis and Osiris gave way to Jupiter, Minerva and Venus - they were only idols. The ancient Egyptian customs were confined to Memphis, Thebes, etc. up the Nile.

Let us take a look at Cleopatra, the daughter of the last of the Ptolemies, a Greek princess in line for the throne of Egypt.

She was essentially Greek in features, language and manners, not at all African in looks (the intermarriage with Ptolemies), not even Coptic. On ancient coins and medals, her features are severely classical.

At 14 years, when she first appears in history, she was a very beautiful and accomplished Greek princess who could speak several languages fluently, as precocious as Elizabeth of England, skilled in music, conversant with history, and surrounded with eminent teachers.

At 18 years she was left, by her father's will, joint heir to the Egyptian throne with her brother Ptolemy. She was soon expelled from the capital by him and his army generals because of her precocious activity in the government.

When she was 21 years of age, Caesar, victor of Pompey, made his winter home in Alexandria. Cleopatra went there to gain his favor for her own advancement. She must have been exceedingly refined, intellectual, cultured, and beautiful to attract Caesar - a man of 50, temperate, ambitious, refined, brilliant, loaded down with cares of government and bent on new conquests. He never completely succumbed to her charms though she followed him to Rome and remained there till he was assassinated. Then her hope to rule in a Roman province ended and she went back to Egypt.

At 26 years she first met Antony. Her beauty was "transcendent, irresistible, infinite." She was gracious, bright, witty, intellectual, tactful, good natured, passionate, enticing, luxurious, gifted with intellectual radiance and freshness.



Antony was one of three world rulers. At Caesar's death he was the most powerful man in the empire, greater than any king. He had great military experience; half of the Roman army was his. Utterly unscrupulous, unprincipled, a Roman libertine reared in army camps, greedy of honor, yet he did not indulge his appetite, and so was temperate. He came to a banquet at Cleopatra's request - the banquet beyond Roman equal. He was bewitched and enthralled - left duty, army, government to remain with her all winter even threw away public favor. He married Octavia for political reasons but deserted her for Cleopatra, losing his political ends by neglect, lost the battle of Actium, lost his kingdom. Cleopatra, losing her chance for throne, deceived him into suicide, failed in her attempt to allure Octavius, and ended a suicide also.

GREECE

Taken from *The Place, of Women in the Church* by C. C. Ryrie pp 2-7:

Greek women were accorded somewhat higher respect than women of other ancient pagan societies. Nevertheless, it is true that they were placed almost on the same level with the slave and were under the authority and control of their husbands both by custom and by law. Plato, of course, vigorously affirmed the equality of the sexes and the community of wives. He speaks of "the natural partnership of the sexes," and as a result of that belief holds that "women naturally share in all pursuits." However, Plato's views were exceptional. Actually, the truer representative of Greek thought was Aristotle, who regarded the inferiority of women as inherent in the sex.

The rise of the City-State was an important factor which affected the status of women in Greece. Since the City-State was supreme, all individual wishes were subordinated to it. In Sparta, for instance, women were cultivated physically in order that they might be good mothers and produce sons who would be superior warriors. NO thought, however, was taken for women after their days of childbearing were over, with the result that standards became very lax. The marriage tie could be dissolved by the husband without any scruple, form, or legal process. This importance of breeding warriors for the State gave the women of Sparta full liberty to show themselves in public in the performance of bodily exercises.

However, it is necessary to emphasize again that this liberty "was not the result of a philosophic idea of equality of the two sexes, but was founded on the desire of producing strong children by means of strengthening the body of the female."

[Does this remind you of Russia today? Women work while the children are in communal groups, cared for by the government. They comply with this form for they must. But consider working mothers of America who follow much the same pattern because they seem to like that kind of "freedom" -and the money so earned.]

In Athens, likewise, the State was all important. All the citizens of Athens were connected by blood ties of some sort, and they took great pains to maintain this relationship. Consequently, careful distinction was made between citizens and strangers and between the offspring of each group. Citizen women, therefore, were forced to lead very secluded lives. There, existence was well described thus:

The life of married women, maidens, children while in the care of women, and of female slaves, passed in the gynaikonites (the part of the house reserved for domestic purposes), from which they issued only on rare occasions Our following remarks refer, of course, only to the better classes, the struggle for existence by the poor being the same in all ages. In the seclusion of the gynaikonites the maiden grew up in comparative ignorance. The care bestowed on domestic duties and on her dress was the only interest of her monotonous existence. Intellectual intercourse with the other sex was wanting entirely. Even where maidens appeared in public at religious ceremonies, they acted separately from the youths Even marriage did not change this state of things. The maiden only passed from the gynaikonites of her father into that of her husband. . . . She did not share the intellectual life of her husband It is true that the husband watched over her honor with jealousy, assisted by gynaikonomoi, sometimes even by means of lock and key . . . her position was only that of the mother of the family.

Although the Greeks were a race of great thinkers, poets, sculptors, painters, and architects, "not one Athenian woman ever attained to the slightest distinction in any one department of literature, art, or science." However, this seclusion did not mean inactivity, for the wife was in full charge of all domestic affairs of her household. She was absolute ruler in this realm, and in its own way it was a place of honor. But Pericles expresses the prevailing view concerning women: "If I am to speak also of womanly virtues . . . I will sum up all in a brief admonition: Great is your glory if you fall not below the standard which nature has set for your sex, and great also is hers, of whom there is least talk among men whether in praise or in blame" . . .

After the time of Alexander the Great, women began to have a relatively greater measure of freedom. From the courts of Macedonia came relative freedom to those women who desired emancipation. They could be educated, take part in club life, appear at the games, and in general enjoy freer relations with men. Nevertheless, "most of these things clearly relate only to a minority. Freedom was not automatic, but had to be grasped; education for the mass was rudimentary and even in the first century there were women, rich enough to own slaves who could neither read nor write. Greece suffered from the

sexes being on different levels of culture."

ROME

Under the Roman Empire women enjoyed a somewhat better standing than in Greece. Legally, however, the wife was still regarded merely as a piece of property completely under the control of the husband. Yet in practice the law was interpreted otherwise, and women enjoyed considerable freedom. Further, the wife was not kept in seclusion as in a Greek household; rather, "she shared her husband's life and set a standard of wifely and motherly virtues envied in a later age."

Any such freedom was not, of course, gained all at once. The laws of the Republic made every father and husband a despot, and because some husbands chose to act their legally constituted role, there were two waves of feminine reaction which took the form of mass poisoning of husbands in 331 B.C. and 180 B.C. In 215 B.C., a law proposed by Oppius at a time when state finances were low and expenditures had to be curbed provided that "no woman should be allowed to possess more than a half ounce of gold, to wear a parti-colored garment, to ride in a chariot within the city of Rome or a town occupied by Roman citizens, or within a mile of these places, except for religious purposes." When more prosperous days returned, Roman matrons, who had been chafing under this law, sought and won its repeal. One of the arguments against the repeal was this: "If they win in this, what will they not attempt? Review all the laws with which your forefathers restrained their license and made them subject to their husbands, even with all these bonds you can scarcely control them." These quotations show clearly both the restraint under which Roman women lived (subject to their husbands) and the freedom which they enjoyed (being at liberty to appear in public).

Along with this partial emancipation came increased moral laxity. Women sought escape from the control of their husbands with the result that divorce became a more common thing In 549 A.D. Seneca asked, "Are there any women that blushes at divorce now that certain illustrious and noble ladies reckon their years, not by the number of consuls, but by the number of their husbands, and leave home in order to marry and marry in order to be divorced? "

Another has summarized the situation well: "With rare exceptions, they (the Romans) copied only the vices of the Greeks. The old frugal, industrious, and virtuous manner of life practiced by their ancestors was in too many instances exchanged for an idle, luxurious, and sensual existence Hand in hand with increasing wealth and outward prosperity came indolence and corruption, and the State whose citizens could boast that for five centuries no Roman had ever to divorce his wife, sank under the emperors to the pitch of moral degradation mirrored in the opening chapter of Paul's epistle. The fountains of life were poisoned. Although the position of women in Rome was for long a much more dignified one than in Greece, there was latterly a greatly diminished value set on marriage, a marked increase in divorces, a general casting off of moral restraint. In the last pre-Christian century almost every vice was rampant"

It is clear that women enjoyed greater practical, if not legal, freedom in Roman than in Greek society, and this aided the spread of Christianity because women participated

more freely in religious activities. It also resulted in the laxity and licentiousness against which Christianity spoke and from which it protected its women. Finally, we may conclude that the most important relation between Christianity and the Roman way of life is a relation of contrast, and almost all agree that Christian teaching concerning women stood in sharp contrast to anything found in the heathen world.

JUDAISM

Excerpts from *The Place of Women in the Church* by C.C. Ryrie. Pp. 7-13

A woman's position in Judaism seems to be a paradox. On the one hand there is the well-known saying of the synagogue service, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a woman." On the other hand there are the lofty words concerning womanhood in Proverbs the thirty first chapter.

The paradox can only be solved with a right understanding of women's sphere of service, for "according to Jewish ideas, the special and supreme sphere of women is the home. There her position has always been one of unchallenged dignity. Public affairs and public activities lie outside of the home, and therefore outside woman's special sphere." Even the prayer of the synagogue service quoted above supports this idea of a special sphere, for immediately following that prayer which is offered by the men is one offered by the women, who say, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made me according to thy will."

It is true, however, that Judaism did share the universal conception of the inferiority of women, however there was not the separation of the sexes so common among other peoples, for Hebrew women mixed more freely and often took a positive and influential part in both public and private affairs.¹

The distinctiveness and dignity of women are well illustrated in the private family life in Israel. Immediately there comes to mind outstanding women in Jewish history such as Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel (designated the "four mothers" by the Rabbis), as well as Manoah's wife, Hannah, Ruth, Naomi, and Esther, whose private lives played an important part in Israel's history.

Nevertheless, distinctiveness and inferiority were recognized at the birth of a female child, for the Jews required a double period of purification after the birth of a girl.² When it came time for the child to be educated, she would discover that the Rabbis disapproved of the same amount of instruction being given to her as to boys.' Certain branches of learning, such as legal studies, were entirely forbidden to women simply because the Rabbis felt that a woman's mind was incapable of grasping such investigations. Attendance at religious ceremonies further contributed to the education of girls, and it is evident from the New

¹ Luke 8:1-4.

² Leviticus 12:5-6.

Testament accounts of such women as Lois,³ Eunice,⁴ and Priscilla⁵ that some Hebrew women obtained a good religious education. But, in general, it is true that there was little recognition of the mental capacities of women.'

The paradoxical situation of subordination and dignity is further illustrated in matrimonial matters. Legally, the position of a Jewish woman was very low. One writer declares that, "it would be misleading to apply the term 'free-woman' to any Israelitess, except perhaps to a widow."

In reality, however, the Jewish woman occupied a more dignified position than her legal status would suggest. Although polygamy⁶ was permitted in Israel, there is no doubt that the monogamy of the patriarchs was held up as the example to be followed. Certainly the description of the virtuous woman in the Proverbs⁷ presupposes monogamy. However, the right of divorce was at the discretion of the husband, and all that the wife could expect was a bill of divorcement.⁸ In the days of Malachi, divorce was quite common,⁹ but by the time that Christ appeared on earth it was probably much less frequent, since in the first century B.C. it came to be required that the dowry had to be returned if the wife was divorced.

In the home, the Jewish woman's position was one of dignity and responsibility. She was her husband's conscience, charged with the task of encouraging him in all holiness. Children, who were a sign of the blessing of God on a home,¹⁰ were the special charge of the mother. It seems to have been the general practice that the mother named the children.¹¹ As the children grew older, it became the woman's holy vocation to assist their training, for the first teaching would naturally devolve on the mother. And yet in this training, she did not act alone, for the father joined her in a coordinate relationship and equal reverence to both parents was expected from the children. Thus, in this regard, at least, a Jewish mother fulfilling her responsibilities in the sphere of her home receives equal honor with the father. Further evidence of the influence of the mother in the lives of her children is the attention given to the naming of the mothers of the kings of Judah in the Old Testament. The mother of Zebedee's children, the mother of John Mark, women like Lois and Eunice also illustrate the influence of the mother. Judaism hallowed the home; both parents ministered to the congregation of children. In this, Christianity has drawn in large measure on its heritage in Judaism. Subordination, subjection, responsibility, and dignity

³ 2 Timothy 1:5.

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:5.

⁵ Acts 18:2, 18.

⁶ Herod the Great had 10 wives before he had them killed.

⁷ Proverbs 31:10-31,

⁸ Deuteronomy 24:1 ff.

⁹ Malachi 2:14-16.

¹⁰ Luke 1:25.

¹¹ Luke 1:60.

correctly describe the various aspects of the private life of a Hebrew woman, but in the sphere of the home, her place was beyond question a prominent one.

For a Jewish woman, public life is practically synonymous with religious life, and in this her role was neither passive nor one of leadership. "That which distinguishes the God of Israel from the gods of the nations is, among other traits, his condescension to the humble; he deigns to establish his covenant with the children, the women and the slaves." Because Judaism was a supernaturally given religious revelation from God, this point gains importance, for it guarantees women a standing before the true God which they did not have in any heathen religious relationship.

The Mosaic Law expected the presence of women at the sanctuary at the festal seasons, for daughters and maidservants were to join with the sons and menservants. Women were present in the congregation when the Law was read in the time of Nehemiah.¹² Likewise, they were at the feast which David made in honor of the recovering of the ark,¹³ and the daughters of Shiloh could be counted on to be present at the annual feast. Hannah and Penninah who went yearly to the gathering in Shiloh¹⁴ are examples of women participating in public prayer. Furthermore, women could take part in the sacrifices, for the fact that they were permitted to share in other offerings, and there is no question that they offered sacrifices for purification. Angels were not the experience of men only, for there are records of God, or the messenger of God, appearing to Eve,¹⁵ Hagar,¹⁶ Sarah,¹⁷ and the mother of Samson.¹⁸ In addition, rites of mourning were performed by men and women and for men and women alike. Although a prophetess was an exceptional thing, several outstanding ones appeared in Israel. Miriam, who is called a prophetess,¹⁹ shared eminence with her brothers, Moses and Aaron.²⁰ Deborah was a prophetess as well as a judge,²¹ and Huldah, the prophetess,²² was an authority in the days of Josiah whom the king and the high priest could consult in a matter of spiritual interpretation. Mention is also

¹² Nehemiah 8:2-3.

¹³ 2 Samuel 6:18-20.

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 1:2-11.

¹⁵ Genesis 3:13.

¹⁶ Genesis 16:7 ff.

¹⁷ Genesis 18:13 ff.

¹⁸ Judges 13:21.

¹⁹ Exodus 15:20.

²⁰ Micah 6:4.

²¹ Judges 4:4.

²² 2 Kings 22:14.

made of a prophetess in Isaiah,²³ of the prophetess Noadiah,²⁴ and the aged Anna²⁵ who was present at Jesus' circumcision.²⁶

Certainly they did not take a place of leadership as a general rule; rather, men dominated the public scene in Israel.

The major contribution of Jewish women was in their service in the home. Although their legal rights were practically nonexistent, they were accorded a place of honor in carrying out the privileges of motherhood. The general principle which applied to the status of women in Judaism was, "The King's daughter within the palace is all glorious (Psalm 45:12), but not outside of it."

(End of Ryrie)

SOCIETY IN GENERAL UNDER PAGANISM

In general immorality seemed to be no bar to social position. The most attractive, most sought after, were notoriously immoral. The women who with us are shunned and excluded from society were by them, most flattered and honored. No woman, if bright, witty and beautiful was avoided because she was immoral. The immoral women often aspired to highest culture.

The homes of virtuous, domestic women were dull and wearisome, they were household slaves who saw little of "society." However, virtue was held in honor - there is no age, however corrupt, when virtue was not prized by some husbands and fathers. Virtuous women always shine at home and exert a healthful influence upon men, securing proud regard of husbands. But the drudgeries and slavery of domestic life among the Pagan ancients made women unattractive to the world. "For a woman to appear in public with braided, decorated hair and ostentatious dress, especially if she displayed any gifts of eloquence or culture was to proclaim herself one of the immoral, leisurely, educated, dissolute class."

Thus under Paganism the general influence of women was to pull men down rather than elevate, especially those attractive in society. Virtuous homemaking women were not educated, had no influence beyond home, socially were slaves; given in marriage without consent; restricted in conversation with men; confined to their homes; having few privileges - no books; ruled over by lords and masters, they grew to be noisy, garrulous women, quarrelsome drudges.

The Pagan home had none of the attractions and charms of Christian homes. What is a home where women are as slaves? Pagan women never were equal to men - if they ruled men it was by appealing to lower natures, resorting to arts subversive to all dignity of

²³ Isaiah 8:3.

²⁴ Nehemiah 6:14, but she was working against God's man Nehemiah.

²⁵ Luke 2:36.

²⁶ This is incorrect. Jesus was circumcised on the eight day of life, Luke 2:21. This trip that included Anna was required when he was 40 days old. Luke 2:22.

character. When physical beauty fled, their power left.

One of Paganism's worst sins was that it gave women no mental recourse to assist them in poverty, neglect, isolation. All writers, poets, and satirists spoke of the inferiority of women - paganism taught it and produced it. Paganism offered no consolation to the downtrodden, injured, neglected woman. No one offered thoughts of another higher, endless life; no encouragement to beauty, peace, serenity. No thought was given to immortality, God's forgiveness, God's love, or future joy. There could be no contentment among women endowed with equal reason of men, yet treated as animals.

Paganism did not recognize the immortal soul - it had regard to only the wants of the body. It had no fears of future life. So the frequent suicide (Antony and Cleopatra) because of disappointment, weariness, fear, poverty, and pain is understandable. Paganism disregarded men's highest aspirations, the spiritual; could not see the beauty of love, despised eternal blessedness, was indifferent to that which raised women highest. Its coldness froze her soul and made her callous to wrong and suffering; she could not rally from pain, labor or misfortune; it ignored the grandest and truest in women. What a fool a man is to make a woman a slave. There can be no lofty society where women do not preside and inspire and guide a home. Society is a Christian institution.

Hence women under Paganism had no hope of future joy, no recognition of their divine attributes, no scope for energy, no field of usefulness but a dreary house, no ennobling friendship, no high encouragement, no education, no lofty companionship; unappreciated, valued only as household slaves or victims of guilty pleasure, adorned with trinkets to show off the body alone, nothing to show an equal influence with men in mind or heart, no interest in what truly elevates society. What schools could they teach or visit? What hospitals enrich? What miseries relieve? What churches attend? What charities to assist? What social gatherings enliven? What was there for a woman to do with an unrecognized soul? So she girded herself with ornaments, did curiously braid her hair; searched shops for new cosmetics, new perfumes; reclined on luxurious couches; issued orders for slaves, joined in seductive dances; enticed by display of sensual charms. Her highest aspiration was to adorn a perishable body; vanity became the spring of life, to the favored few.

"Society" under paganism, was confined to men at banquets or "symposia," where women seldom entered, unless for amusement of men (Vashti),²⁷ never for improvement, and still less for their restraint. Pure, clean, high "society" is a Christian institution. It was not until Christianity permeated the old Pagan civilization and destroyed its idols, that men came to dignify human friendship and give fascination to gatherings of cultivated women and gifted men. There the seeds of "society" were sown. Then did physical beauty fade before the brilliance of the mind and radiance of the soul, at last recognized as the highest charm of women. Modern "society" was created by Christianity, since only Christianity recognizes what is most truly attractive and ennobling among women. It is a great advance over banquets of Imperial Rome and symposia of gifted Greeks. The soul craves

²⁷ Esther 1:11.

friendship, intellectual feasts and religious aspirations.

How grateful, then, should women be to that influence which has snatched them from the pollutions and heartless slaveries of Paganism and given dignity to their higher natures. How misguided, how ungrateful is that woman who would exchange the priceless blessings which Christianity has brought to her for those ornaments, those excitements, and those pleasures which ancient Paganism gave as the only solace for the loss and degradation of her immortal soul.