

Women in the New Testament

Women are also shown in a positive light in other passages of the NT: the prophetess Anna (Luke ch.2), most clearly in the resurrection accounts (e.g. Matthew ch.28, John ch.20), while in Acts (e.g. ch.1 and 12) women appear as full members of the Church, are encouraged to listen to the preaching (Lydia at Philippi ch.16, and many Greek women 'of high standing' at Berea ch.17), and are shown as being actively involved in the Church (Tabitha in Jaffa in ch.9, and Priscilla at Ephesus in ch.18). Some of the Letters also reveal the active involvement of several women in the early church e.g. Romans 16. It should also be noted that in this chapter St. Paul commends a woman called Phoebe whom he titles 'deaconess of the Church at Cenchreae':



'give her a welcome worthy of God's holy people .. she herself has come to the aid of many people, including myself'

On this basis, should women not perform the functions of deacon in the Church today, alongside men. Or can you think of any valid reasons why they should not?

However, despite all this positive evidence, overall there seems to be a tension between the impact that Jesus' death should have had on the role of women and their historic place under Jewish Law and custom. This tension is most strongly seen in the writings of St. Paul.

St. Paul, above all, knows the dramatic impact that Jesus' death has for all people: Jews are no longer under the Law alone (Romans ch.2-4). Everyone, Jew and non-Jew, is now equal in God's sight with no distinction between men and women :

'.. neither male nor female, all are one in Christ' (Gal. 3:28).

St. Paul knows that the inferior position of women was a result of Adam's actions in Genesis 3 but recognises, and indeed argues, that that Adam's curse no longer applies (Romans 5:15f).

Yet, at the same time, he argues elsewhere that certain customs concerning women should continue: they must cover their head when praying (1 Cor.11) and be silent in church (1 Cor.14). Much more crucially, he also still seems to place women in a subordinate role to men:

'the head of woman is man' and **'woman is the reflection of man's glory'** (1 Cor.11), and **'wives should be subject to husbands .. a husband is the head of his wife'** (Eph. 5:22 and Col. 3:18), and **'I give no permission for a woman to teach or have authority over a man'** (1 Timothy 2).

There is certainly no equality for women as we now understand that word.

But perhaps we are expecting too much. St. Paul is more concerned with *spiritual equality*, the type of equal opportunity that gives *equality in terms of salvation*. After all, he also stated that there was equality between slave and freeman (Galatians 3:28) yet did not preach for the abolishment of slavery even when writing to Philemon, rather seemed to accept its continuance by exhorting slaves to respect their owners (Col.3 and 1 Tim.6) ! Remember, even in our own country and era, progress in social equality for women only really took root with women's emancipation in the early 20th century, and even now it still has some way to go before it reaches the stage of no longer being an issue within our society.

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

19. A Revitalised Role for Women?

Examining the role played by women in the New Testament



Questions for

Reflection

1. Why did Jesus not have any women disciples?
2. Was the role of women in the early Church different from that of women in contemporary Palestinian society?
3. Why is so much being discussed today about Mary of Magdala (Magdalene)?
4. Did St. Paul not argue for the continued subjugation of women to men in society?

Women's Role in the Ancient World

In general, the position of women was very much inferior to that of men in the ancient world. Although there were exceptions e.g. where women were Queens or the wives of rulers, and for women of Roman citizenship where they had many rights and a position of high dignity as wives and mothers, there was certainly no equality with men, and women were excluded from power in many areas of society.

In the Ancient Near East (ANE) women were treated as possessions of the men although paradoxically great importance was given to fertility goddesses, recognising women as the source of life. However, fertility cults also over-emphasised sexual pleasure and, as a result, undue emphasis seems to have been applied to women as sexual objects. This may have been a factor in the lowering of a woman's dignity and position in society, and can be seen in the general acceptance of prostitution in ANE societies and the general lack of sexual restraint placed upon men, both aspects of which can be seen in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis ch.38.



Women's Role in the Old Testament

Although the position of Hebrew women is still very much subservient to that of men in the OT, it is better than in other ANE societies. Legally, a woman is shown as being inferior to a man and part of his property e.g. Lot was prepared to sacrifice his daughters at Sodom to save his two visitors (Genesis ch.19) and a similar story appears in Judges ch.19. It should also be noted that in one, earlier version of the Decalogue (Exodus ch.20) women are listed after a man's house as part of his property but, in a later version (Deut. ch.5), women are placed separately before other property. This indicates a degree of moral development in Hebrew society. However, the position of a woman as mother is shown as one of respect, with the commandment to honour both father and mother. Much can also be learnt about the respect given to women from the stories associated with the wives of the patriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, and the other women in the OT e.g. Deborah who has risen to the role of prophetess (Judges ch.4), Abigail who appears both wise and a faithful wife in trying to protect her reckless husband Nabal from the wrath of David (1 Samuel ch.25), the woman of Shunem 'a woman of high rank' who recognised the holiness of Elisha (2 Kings ch.4) and, of course, Ruth, Judith and Esther who bear OT books in their own name.

Counter to these positive aspects are some rather misogynist comments in the Wisdom literature regarding women e.g. in their stereotyped role of seducers and prostitutes (Proverbs ch.6 and ch.7)

'preserve you from the woman of bad character .. do not covet her beauty in your heart .. a prostitute can be bought for a loaf of bread .. a married woman aims to snare a precious life'

and

'a woman is coming dressed like a prostitute .. she catches hold of him and kisses him .. come on and make love till morning for my husband is not at home .. with persistent coaxing she overcomes him .. he follows her like an ox on its way to the slaughterhouse'

Other associated negative qualities are also highlighted (Ecclesiasticus 25 and 26):



'better any spite rather than the spite of a woman .. low spirits, gloomy face and stricken heart, such is a spiteful wife' and 'three things I dread and a fourth that terrifies me .. a woman jealous of a woman .. and all this is the scourge of the tongue'

However, it is also clearly accepted that a woman who has none of these negative things is a blessing and a good wife is the joy of her husband (Ecclesiasticus ch.26 and Proverbs ch.31):

'How blessed is the husband of a really good wife, the number of his days will be doubled .. a perfect wife is the joy of her husband' and 'the truly capable woman is far beyond the price of pearls .. when she opens her mouth she does so wisely .. her husband sings her praises'

You should note, though, that even in the giving of praise there is still sexism here. The wife is judged in terms of how much she pleases her husband. Her virtue seems dependent upon, or relative to, that criterion. It is also noticeable that in all the texts speaking about women there is a clear distinction made between the unmarried woman, who is pictured either with bad qualities or in terms of the dangers she poses to men, and the married woman who can be either equally burdensome or a blessing dependent on how she pleases her husband.



But it is Genesis ch.2 and 3 that have the most significant message about the relationship of men and woman. In these chapters it is clear that woman was originally meant to be man's equal as she is **'bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh'**, and man leaves his family for a woman and **'they become one flesh'** (Gen. ch.2). However, woman's subservient position **'he will dominate you'** has only come about because of her role in Man's demise that resulted in the expulsion from Eden.

Jesus' Attitude to Women

Although it is true that Jesus gives no specific teaching about the role of women, as in the OT, much can be learnt about his attitude from his actions to them. It is clear that he accepted women **followers** and that some travelled with him e.g. Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Susanna and many others who even funded his mission (Luke ch.8). Martha and Mary are mentioned several times (Luke ch.10 and John ch.11) and several women are mentioned as being present at the crucifixion (Mtt. 27, Mk.15, Lk.23, Jn.19) and, of course, have a major role at the resurrection in all four gospels. Whether such women can be called disciples depends on how that word is defined: they clearly did not have the fullness of the role of the Twelve in terms of missionary activity (Mtt.10, Mk.6, Lk.9) or even of the 72 (Lk.10), but should that be the prime criterion?

Jesus always treated women with dignity. He may sometimes seem abrupt, as with his own mother at Cana (John ch.2), with the mother of Zebedee's sons (Matthew ch.20), and with the Canaanite woman whose daughter was possessed (Matthew ch.15), but he always responds readily to their predicament. This can also be seen with how he reacts to the faith of the woman with a haemorrhage who touches his cloak (Matthew ch.9) and how he feels sorrow for the widow of Nain (Luke ch.7) and raises her son back to life. But it is with women in their role of social outcasts that his actions speak the loudest. He readily accepts the repentance of the prostitute who washes his feet (Luke ch.7), he forgives the adulteress (John ch.8) and even talks to a Samaritan woman (John ch.4).

