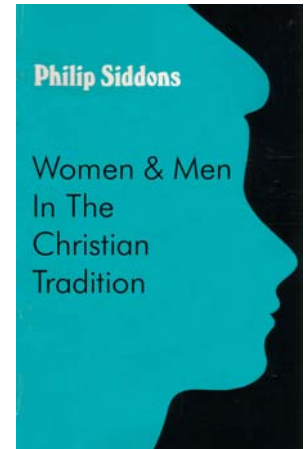


Women & Men In The Christian Tradition



By Philip Siddons

Chapters 1 & 2 Only

[About This e-Book](#)

This material was originally published with the title *Speaking Out for Women – A Biblical View* in 1980 by Judson Press ISBN 0-8170-0885-3. At the time, the author thought that the word “for” in “Speaking Out For Women” would be understood as “in favor of.” In time, however, it was realized that it may have been perceived of by potential readers to mean that the book was speaking “for women” as if women had to have someone to speak on their behalf. Obviously not good if that was the case. So the title is changed to reflect the original thinking of the author. Also, the book has undergone further edits, additions and end notes have been converted to footnotes to aid those engaged in scholastic projects. This new version was completed in August of 2001.

[Synopsis](#)

From the back cover . . .

As women have increasingly assumed leadership roles in the church and society, people have sooner or later noticed the changes in the roles and interactions between women and men. People with a high respect for the Biblical materials have gone back and reexamined previous interpretations in light of the tremendous contrast between the 1st Century Jewish Palestinian culture and ours today. This book has been written for those people.

To help clarify the issues, Philip Siddons examines the biblical passages referring to women’s status in society and the church as they relate to the whole of Scripture. Siddons traces the changing attitudes toward women through the first-century Jewish culture and the greatly changed early Christian church in the Hellenistic culture. He shows how Jesus and the church modeled a new equality and how the Spirit of God was moving people in a new direction – especially with regard to the status of women. *Speaking Out With Women* calls all who align their spiritual pilgrimage with the teachings and person of Christ to reexamine the example of Jesus who saw women as human beings with equal responsibility with men in personal growth and ministry. For everyone seeking to understand the emergence of women as equal partners in the home, society and in the church, this book sheds

new light on what Jesus meant when he proclaimed the purpose of his mission “to set free those who are downtrodden.” A very interesting group study with questions for each chapter.

Rev. Dr. Philip Siddons is a Presbyterian minister in Buffalo New York and his articles have appeared in *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today* and other prominent Christian journals.

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**To Linda,
who has taught me to dance to
the Creator's joyful tune called
life.**



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Preface

A Story

“We’ve argued about this long enough. We’ll do it my way; I’m the head of the house!” And with that as his final argument, forty-five year-old Robert Moyer stormed out of the house and off to work.

Judy flopped down on the couch and tried to convince herself that she was used to this kind of attitude and behavior. “This is the way all couples act,” she tried to tell herself. “If twenty-five years of marriage have accomplished anything, they have at least taught us to fight without raising our voices or using abusive language. After all,” Judy considered, “we are Christians, but . . .”

Through her years of church affiliation, Judy had heard that a husband is to have the last say. Only rarely was the verse about a husband loving his wife “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25) brought up in this context. That verse usually was used to indicate that husbands ‘should remember their wives with Valentine’s Day and anniversary gifts. “But isn’t there more to it than that?” Judy wondered.

Judy knew that husbands had *not* been appointed head of the house and that their gender had not granted them superior intelligence or greater emotional stability. She thought back to the time Bob had argued that women should find fulfillment only in the home. He had said that the emotional makeup of women kept them from handling the pressures and responsibilities out in the “real world,” as he put it. She laughed to herself because it had been Bob who had walked out of the conversation and slammed the door.

Judy got up from the couch, opened the front door to the quiet street, and yelled, “Life is real on both sides of this door!” She closed the door gently.

Judy knew that their argument was not the real issue. What was at stake was not a family decision; it had something to do with her personhood, her dignity, and her worth as a woman—a Christian woman, a married woman.

As Robert drove to work, he, as well, was aware that the subject of their argument was unimportant. “But someone has to have the final say,” he mumbled to himself as he drove slowly through the rush-hour traffic. To Robert, running a family was like controlling a ‘city’s traffic flow. Someone had to take the leadership and work the lights or there would be accidents. But in the back of his mind lurked the realization that something was wrong with his neat and tidy view of human relationships.

“Where do you draw lines with this ‘loving your wife like Christ loved the church’?” he asked himself. “No matter what Ephesians says,” he continued to think, “the Bible still says something about women keeping silent and not teaching men.”

In recalling those teachings, Robert remembered a joke he had heard about women not being in heaven because of something in Revelation about silence but he didn’t laugh. Inside he wondered if he had missed something, if Christianity didn’t have more to say about marriage and male-female relationships in general. “Maybe I’m afraid to find out,” Robert thought to himself as he pulled into his reserved parking place just outside his office.

The Issue

Having worked in the business environments and as a minister, I have found in marriage and family counseling that many people have encountered similar experiences. Many Christians have begun to question prepackaged answers to human relationships. Men are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with traditional “male” molds. And women have led the way in questioning the apparent inconsistencies of the usual patterns of female-male relationships.

Unfortunately, many church leaders have selected passages of Scripture pertaining to women as the basis for doctrine or practice while completely ignoring the context of the passage and the directions of Scripture as a whole. In this book we will examine the key passages pertaining to women in light of their first-century context and historical background. We will follow a basic order of study, beginning by summarizing what life was like for women, first in ancient cultures and then in

Hellenistic Greece and Rome. This is important because these nations influenced the status of women in Judaism. Next we will compare the place of women in Judaism with the customs of these non-Jewish cultures. In light of this, we will examine the Gospel writers' witness to how Jesus treated women and what the Acts of the Apostles and some of the New Testament epistles say about women in the early church. Finally, we will examine the relevance of these teachings for today's church and society.

Introduction

In examining any topic that the Bible addresses, it is always important to keep in mind that God deals with people through history, speaking to them in light of their particular situations. As students of the Bible, it is our responsibility to notice the general; intent, as well as the specifics of these various witnesses to God's saving work through history. Whenever Christians look to the Bible for insight into particular concerns, such as the women's issue, it is necessary to establish how we understand and interpret the Bible, even before we begin to deal with its content.

First, from exploring the New Testament, we discover that it is a witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We consider the original writings of the New Testament authors to be witnesses to him, giving us varying proclamations of the foundational events of the Christian revelation. They tell us who Jesus was for them and how he was understood by the early church. Secondly, the Bible serves as a basis of faith and as a guide for the interpretation of faith. Because the Bible is considered as canon, a "measuring stick," regarding these matters, it is affirmed as the highest written authority for matters pertaining to our faith and the working out of our faith in our life-style. The Bible witnesses to God's dealings with people through history.

Like a symphony, the Bible has contrasting themes, varying tones, and yet overwhelming harmonies. Studying the Bible, then, is similar to studying a person. We can never exhaustively explore all the depths, yet generalizations can be made as to its character.

Although we affirm that the biblical materials have present relevance, we also realize that the original writings were intended to communicate to people living in a culture two to three thousand years removed from ours. While the synoptic gospels (or parallel-printed columns of the gospels) (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) serve as our major witness to Jesus' deeds and teachings, we do not have direct access to them. It would be a mistake to think of the Gospels as some sort of videotape rerun of historical events. The witness to Jesus first took the form of stories which were told and retold, shaped and reshaped by followers of Jesus. Oral traditions about

Jesus apparently were not committed to writing (in the form we now have it) until several decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. When these traditions were written down, the writers arranged the structure and content of their work to speak to the issues which touched on the life situations of the congregations they were addressing. It is our first task, then, to seek to understand passages in the New Testament in the settings of those who first read it. To do so, there are three concerns we need to consider to arrive at a fair meaning of any text.

Literary Concerns

First, we need to ask ourselves not only what the writer is talking about, but also how the subject is being discussed. This means that we examine the word meanings and grammatical analysis. It means that we study the sentence, the paragraph, and the chapter. It means that we investigate how the topic is discussed elsewhere in the author's writing and how the subject is addressed throughout the Bible. This involves the use of concordances and Bible dictionaries in our study.

When we read the Bible, we need to avoid interpreting passages in ways that were originally unintended. For example, we recognize that there are figures of speech in Scripture. "Trees clapping their hands" (see Isaiah 55:12) and "when the sun rises" (Psalm 104:22) we recognize as not literal statements. Rather, they are simply a kind of visual description in common language. We also look for variances in writing style, e.g., poetry, prose. Above all, as regards the New Testament writings, we recognize that first-century ways of saying things are not necessarily identical with our contemporary way of speaking.

Historical Concerns

To understand the Bible, we also need to pay attention to historical concerns. First-century Jewish culture was quite different from our twentieth-century Western culture. After all, Jesus did not use taxicabs and skyscrapers in his parables. Even more important, the social and economic experiences of first-century Judaism were vastly different from those of today. Although people's basic needs probably have remained constant through history, everyday experiences have changed drastically in the past two thousand years.

Questions about first-century religious and political practices need to be raised in order to understand the influences operating on believers then. It is particularly important to compare Jesus' teachings and actions with what we know of other teachings and customs of his times. In short, we cannot rob the biblical characters of their place in history. Jesus lived in a specific Jewish society, at a particular time in history, in the midst of a particular political, cultural, and religious life. It is, therefore, our responsibility first to see what was being said to people in the contexts of the first century and then to ask about applying it to our circumstances today.

Theological Concerns

We arrive at an author's theological understanding first by striving to understand what the Scriptures are saying in their contexts. By comparing what the writer says in one place with what he says in other places, we often gain additional insights into an author's theology. In this way, we avoid ascribing a theological position to an author based only on an isolated fragment of the author's entire work.

When studying New Testament passages, we recognize that all writings were intended for specific church contexts. It is useful, however, to attempt to distinguish a statement of practical and specific advice to an individual or group for one of broader theological affirmation. For instance, there is a difference between the advice for men to pray "lifting holy hands" (I Timothy 2:8) or to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Corinthians 16:20) and the statement "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). In the first two instances the advice pertained to specific acts. The passage from Romans gives a broader theological truth, albeit in a letter to a specific congregation. At times the attempt to make this distinction is difficult, particularly in cases where we have little or no information about the original readers' life situation which precipitated the writing. We also understand that any given Scripture passage may never exhaust a subject, and on some subjects the Bible is silent. But the biblical witnesses do provide general guidelines for us as we grapple with issues that confront us now.

Chapter 1

The Issue of Women in Church and Society

The impact of the women's movement has caused many to reexamine their ideas about women in our culture. It has caused Christians everywhere to think differently about women in church and society.

Until the Industrial Revolution late in the last century society had been dependent on the physical strength required in manual labor. While some women were involved in heavy farming tasks prior to this time, women were generally relegated to the home, while men dominated the working world. It was rare to see a woman in leadership in the business world, whether in an office or a plant. The need, however, for physical strength, particularly in industry, largely has been met by technological improvements. There have been many changes in career opportunities for women, and the role expectancies for women have become considerably more diversified. Women today have vocational responsibilities that were formerly held by men only. Many of the old taboos prohibiting women from working outside of the home have disappeared. For instance, there is a woman in charge of an oil drilling rig off the coast of our country. There also are women in steel plants, operating cranes, and working in other positions that long have been sought after by men with seniority.

Another factor in the changing role of women in our society is education. In the this century there has been a dramatic change in educational opportunities for achievements by women. In the United States there is an almost universal equality for women in terms of higher educational options, particularly since World War II.¹ The old myths that say women are intellectually inferior are considered poor jokes at best. Hundreds of books are being published each year by and for women. Not only are textbook writers making their language inclusive of women, but also entire fields are opening up in women's studies. Psychology, sociology, religion, art, and

¹ Mary Crawford, "Climbing the Ivy-Covered Walls: How Colleges Deny Tenure to Women," *Ms.*, vol. 7, no. 5 (November, 1978), pp. 61-63, 92-94. Recent studies show, however, that women employed as educators find more difficulty than men in obtaining advancements.

business majors in colleges are including courses specifically designed to meet the needs of women in today's society.

As greater numbers of women assume positions of leadership in society, people are discovering how antiquated and oppressive certain traditions have been for women. Christians now look for answers to the question of where the women's movement needs to go. The church has been addressing this subject, but there is confusion. Some reject outright the so-called "problem passages" of the New Testament. Others have retreated in frustration to the convenience of their lifelong beliefs. Unfortunately, even greater numbers have given up dealing with the issue. They have decided to wait until the culture at large decides for them.

By the seventh decade of the 21st century, most major Protestant denominations had elevated women to leadership positions in the church. Yet more traditional-minded churches still hesitate to accept the leadership of women. There are hundreds of churches that deny women leadership roles, whether as ministers, elders, or deacons. In view of their understanding of New Testament passages that appear to prohibit it, many in our churches feel reluctant to permit women's leadership.

But with the growing opportunities for women in most parts of society, many Christians are being forced to reconsider their biblical interpretations. The options appear to be this: if the Bible prohibits women's leadership and equality, then the egalitarianism in our society must be against Christianity. On the other hand, if the changes in society seem to be fight for human relationships, then one must reevaluate his or her interpretation of various biblical passages. This is the tension many in the pew are facing. But there is the danger of trying to make Scripture conform to one's experience. This need not be the case. If we examine the whole of Scripture, along with the passages relevant to the women's issues, we may arrive at fresh biblical understandings about how we view such issues.

The church is called to speak to issues related to manage, the family, child rearing, and being single. People are demanding a clear and decisive word about relationships between men and women. The struggle to pass the Equal Rights Amendment has reminded us that the women's movement has had a profound social impact in our country.

As Christians speak to the issue, they need to be prepared to address not only-the question of how women and men relate in the church but also in other areas. We need to be able to apply what Christianity says about women and men to literature, the media, art, music, and all other aspects of life. For how women and men respond to one another affects the homemaker, the business person, the gas station attendant, the president, the Laundromat attendant, the minister, and the worker on the assembly line. What has become known as the “women’s issue” is a most important issue because it affects everyone who lives on the earth.

As a minister I have opportunities to share in many happy relationships. I have seen the nervous but marvelously joyful faces of young couples repeating their wedding vows. When baptizing children and praying for God’s guidance of their parents, I often have become overcome with a sense of awe, hardly able to complete the prayer. But I have seen brokenness in relationships as well. I have seen parents sadly watch their son go to jail because of his irresponsibility: I have seen individuals live out their lives feeling worthless. I have sat with sobbing people who were waiting for the bodies of their husbands and wives to be taken away. But some of the most severe and hopeless problems I have seen have resulted from the domination of men over women.

It is one thing to have the person closest to you die. It may be worse to have a person treat you all your life as if you are less than an equal. Many women suffer intense oppression because they are sharing their lives with husbands who view them on a lower level and treat them with a standard different from their own. Women are often excluded from, or are limited in, decision making in and outside of the home.

There are women who are ordered around the house by their husbands as if they were slaves. Surprisingly, there are Christian husbands with so low a view of women that it is unthinkable for them to let their wives know about or have access to the money they earn. “After all,” they reason, “it’s my money, I earn it.” Because of the male domination in our society that has existed through the centuries, there are an astounding number of people who believe that women are in some ways unequal to men. It is to these conflicts that the church must now speak. 🙏

Study Questions For Chapter 1

We see change in the role of women in our society. List some of the changes you have experienced, and explain why you think they came about.

Your own denomination may have adopted changes in its understanding of women in the church, or it may have maintained a traditional stance. What is its stand, and what is the reasoning for its position?

Reread the short story in the Preface of the book. What are the conflicts and the issues involved in this situation?

As Christians we often face differing interpretations of biblical passages. In the event that two equally sincere groups of Christians disagree on a biblical issue, how can they study the problem together?

Do you feel that the principles for studying Scripture that are outlined in the Introduction (studying the literary, historical, and theological concerns of Scripture passages) are being used in your congregation's teaching situations?

Chapter 2

Women in Pagan Cultures

The history of the Jewish people is ample with evidence of how God relates to humanity. Christians, as well as Jews, can discover much about God's dealings with people by a study of Jewish customs and traditions. However, the Jews throughout their history never have been totally isolated from their surrounding and sometimes governing nations. The customs and traditions of bordering countries have frequently influenced them, as can be seen by the repeated condemnations of Israel by the Old Testament prophets for duplicating the sins of its neighbors.

Archaeological studies have shown that the prominent deities of ancient Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt were female.² In Merlin Stone's impressive work, she argues that cultures preceding the Hebrew peoples by thousands of years worshiped Ashtoreth (or Astarte).³ The existence of the worship of female deities continued until about 500 C.E. when Christian emperors of Rome and Byzantium closed down the few remaining temples. According to Stone, worship of the female deity was widespread throughout the ancient world, and in some cultures women were considered superior politically and socially to the men. For instance, in Libya and Ethiopia fifty years before Christ, all authority supposedly was vested in women.⁴

A gradual change to a predominance of male deities occurred in the Middle East, however, as Indo-Europeans conquered the lands between 2400 and 1000 B.C.E. As the male deities gained supremacy, the divine right to thrones, which formerly went to women, was eventually shifted to men.⁵

² Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., Harvest Books, 1976), p. 3. This, according to Stone, is true also in Africa, Australia, and China.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9. She is also called Innin, Inanna, Nana, Nut, Anat, Anahita, Istar, Isis, Au Set, Ishara, Asherah, Ashtart, Attoret, Attar, and Hathor, dating back to cultures around 7,000 B.C.E. and even to Upper Paleolithic cultures about 25,000 B.C.E.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18, 31. *I*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63, 151, 152.

During biblical times, as it had been for thousands of years before in Sumer, Babylon, and Canaan, temple worship frequently involved women living in the temple complex, having sex with the area's men out of reverence for the goddesses.⁶ But reverence of the female deity was gradually destroyed by the Indo-European invaders and later by the Hebrews, as well as by the Greeks, the Romans, and the Christians.

Women in Greek Societies

In the classical Greek world prior to the Hellenistic period,⁷ women had a considerably lower place in society than men. Judging by the epic literature, law codes, public records* and art of the Greeks, women were thought to be fickle, inferior in all ways to men, and highly susceptible to immorality and foreign cultic practices.⁸ In classical Greek societies, women were considered by men to be things, not persons. Although the goddess Aphrodite and the goddess Athena were held in honor among the Greeks, throughout the early literature there is a pronounced bitterness against women in general. One writer said it this way: ““Get yourself first of all a house, a woman and a working ox. Buy the woman and do not marry her. Then you can make her follow the plough if necessary.”⁹ This may have been a reaction to the higher position of women in earlier times.

⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

⁷ The Hellenistic period began after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. It should be remembered, however, that those traditions existing as recently as the early third century B.C.E. were in existence for centuries prior to that time.

⁸ Euripides, *Stob.* 73, 1. “Terrible is the force of the waves of the sea, terrible the rush of river and the blasts of hot fire, terrible is poverty, and terrible are a thousand other things; but none is such a terrible evil as woman. No painter could adequately represent her; no language can describe her; but if she is the creation of any of the gods, let him know that he is a very great creator of evils and a foe to mortals.” Cited by James Donaldson, *Woman: Her Position and Influence in Ancient Greece and Rome, and Among the Early Christians* (1907; reprint ed., New York: Gordon Press, 1973), p. 10. See also the excellent article on women by Albrecht Oepke, “Gunē,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 9 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), vol. 1, pp. 776-789.

⁹ Hesiod's advice to men in *Works and Days*, 405-406: “Get yourself first of all a house, a woman and a working ox. Buy the woman and do not marry her. Then you can make her follow the plough if necessary.”

Some Greek writers referred to women as the greatest evil that the gods ever created, a necessary evil, the specious curse to man. In Greek religions there was honor given to priestesses in certain religious cults, but women were deemed totally unfit to lead in any capacity, religious or otherwise. “A brainless woman is most of all to be desired, and a woman of keen wit most of all to be dreaded.”¹⁰

The leading philosophers of the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle, taught that women should be given access to philosophy and education, but they also insisted that too much freedom for women would be detrimental. Women were to be subject to men.¹¹

The assumption that women are intellectually and morally inferior to men pervades the early Greek law codes. Since a woman was valued only for propagation of the race and for satisfying the passions of a man, she was considered a man’s property under the law. While the husband was permitted to have concubines, the wife was expected to be faithful. In keeping with the ancient Hammurabi law code, the Greeks permitted a husband to divorce his wife for any reason, but a wife could never obtain a divorce.¹²

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods which followed, the status of women changed dramatically. While most women were excluded from participation in government, there were some exceptions. The Hellenistic queens generally had considerable influence in political affairs because of their position in the courts. Cleopatra in 51 B.C.E. inherited the throne of Egypt with her brother, Ptolemy

Cited by William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1973), p. 116. ‘Hippolytus, 616-644. Cited in Barclay, op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁰ Hippolytus, 616-644. Cited in Barclay, op. cit., p. 117.

¹¹ Donaldson, op. cit., p. 61. Socrates, however, was said to enjoy frequently the intellectual skills of Aspasia. Barclay, op. cit., p. 117. Plato and Aristotle envisioned commonwealths in which women would have much more freedom than the women of their time. But they still held to the common view that women were inferior to men. See also Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), pp. 18-19. We should keep in mind, however, that the thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, or any other individual writer do not provide us with an understanding of the majority of the culture.

¹² Swidler, op. cit., p. 5.

XIII. Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great, presided over the Macedonian court in his absence; and Arsinoe, ruling with her brother Ptolemy 11, was responsible for the expansion of Egyptian sea power.¹³

Legally, women in Greece had few rights. For instance, it was against the law for a woman alone to make any contracts. However, Hellenistic law was not uniform throughout the empire. For example, Greek women were always under a mate guardian;¹⁴ Egyptian women were not. The guardians would enable Greek women to control slaves, officially own land, and make contracts. Greek women could also purchase, sell, be lessors and lessees, borrow, and pay taxes.¹⁵ Women in Egypt could petition the government; yet they were not permitted to write a contract. Apparently throughout the Hellenized nations, a father could dissolve his daughter's marriage, even against her will.¹⁶

In the Greek cultures, women citizens were generally not educated other than in domestic things. There is evidence from signatures discovered on Egyptian papyri, however, that some women had learned to read and write.¹⁷ In Sparta, women mixed freely with men, and it was said that there women owned up to two-fifths of the land. Sappho stands out as one Spartan woman who was educated.¹⁸ But this lifestyle for Spartan women seemed to be the exception. Greek women were to seek respectability in motherhood. A woman's place was generally limited to the home. Historians show that Greek women of the higher classes lived in the "women's quarters" of the home. They ate meals with their husbands only if guests were not present. Respectable Greek women were discouraged from meeting men in public.

¹³ Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1975), pp. 122, 124.

¹⁴ Donaldson, op. cit., p. 11. Legally, Greek women were entirely under the rule of men.

¹⁵ Pomeroy, op. cit., p. 127

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 129. In later Roman Egypt, however, the wishes of the woman were supposedly taken into consideration.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 131, 137

¹⁸ Donaldson, op. cit., pp. 31-34.

Reasons for going out of the house were to participate in a festival, make purchases, or fulfill a religious duty. Even in these cases, however, the women were to be escorted by a male slave.¹⁹

Greek women in early Hellenistic times were kept mainly out of the public eye. They were frequently told that their chief duties were to stay in the home and obey their husbands.¹⁹ With these limitations, one would think it nearly impossible for women to grow intellectually or culturally. Because marriages were arranged by parents, the relationship between a husband and wife tended to be a matter of duty and custom rather than a mutually satisfying relationship based on love. Some historians think that the status of women and limitations confining women probably militated against any attempt to make marriage a relationship of fellowship and mutual growth.²⁰

If a wife spent most of her time within the home and was denied access to education and society, it would not be surprising if she were unable to participate in an informed and stimulating conversation with her husband. Greek men were known to go elsewhere for their conversations as well as for their sexual fulfillment, and adultery was prevalent in Greek societies. Prostitution was incorporated into the worship rituals at the Greek temples that men frequented. One temple to Aphrodite in Corinth was said to have had a thousand prostitutes in its employ.²¹

The most well-known Greek women were the hetaerae (“companions”), prostitutes who were educated so that they could give men the cultured and intellectual companionship that their wives could not provide.²² As the Athenian Demosthenes said: “We have hetaerae for our pleasure, concubines for the daily needs of the

¹⁹ Barclay, op. cit., p. 119

²⁰ Barclay, op. cit., p. 119

²¹ Ibid p.123

²² Ibid p.124

body, and wives so we may have legitimate children and a faithful steward of our houses.”²³

Women In Roman Society

By 31 B.C.E. the Romans had gained full control over what had been the Greek world. Under Roman rule,²⁴ many of the previous laws regarding women’s status continued. At every age a woman was forced to live under the authority of a man, whether it was her father, brother, husband, adult son, or appointed male guardian. Roman women were not permitted to appear in courts.²⁵ First-century women were considered to be the property of their husbands under Roman law, and a Roman man had absolute authority over his wife.²⁶ If his wife were accused of a crime, he could punish her in any manner. A Roman could divorce his wife for infidelity, for stealing the keys to his wine, for going about with her face unveiled, or for going to the games without his permission.²⁷ A woman could not marry or sell property without the consent of her legal male guardian. Upon the death of a woman’s father, she was put in the custody of her nearest male relative, unless her father designated some other male in the will as her guardian.²⁸ Male supremacy was so extensively

²³ Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), p. 8. Reprinted by permission. Copyright © 1976 by Leonard Swidler.

²⁴ Usually the beginning of the Roman Empire is dated from the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. when Augustus became the ruler of the Roman world.

²⁵ Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ, The Story of Civilization*, 10 vols. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1944), vol. 3, p. 57.

²⁶ Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁷ Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 57. Also see Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 88. Plutarch, *Romulus* 22.3. Cited in Pomeroy, *op. cit.*, p. 154. First Century historian Plutarch says that according to the regulations of Romulus, if a man divorced his wife for any other reasons than adultery, murdering the children, or making spare keys, she would be awarded half of the property, and the other half was consecrated to the goddess Ceres.

²⁸ Pomeroy, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-t51. This practice continued up to the time of Diocletian, who reigned from 285-305 C.E. If a guardian withheld approval of a woman’s action, she could ask a magistrate to change the decision or ask him to appoint another guardian.

imbedded in the law that limitations were even placed on how much a woman could inherit from her husband's estate.²⁹

The only women legally free from their fathers were the vestal virgins who served in the various temples. Since women were limited in their participation in politics and society, religious cults, both national and imported oriental cults, attracted them. Some cults included Fortuna Primigenia (patroness of mothers and childbirth), Fortuna Muliebris (womanly fortune), Fortuna Virilis (cult of Venus, changer of hearts), Ceres (agricultural prosperity), Tellus (mother earth), and Isis (the nature divinity of Egypt whose popularity spread throughout the Mediterranean world). One-third of the Isis devotees named in inscriptions that were found in Italy are female.³⁰ In these popular cults, women would acquire leadership positions as priestesses, temple guardians, or cultic prostitutes. In the capital of Rome, vestal virgins figured prominently in all of the emperor's public festivities.

At the time the New Testament was written, women in Hellenistic societies were participating in religion more frequently than in previous times. Roman wives were in attendance with their husbands at the temple.

Socially, a first-century woman had to depend totally on her husband for her friends, her gods, and her cultural improvement. But there were advancements for women both inside and outside the home. Whereas Greek women lived in separate sections of their homes, Roman women in Christ's time were taking part in all activities of home life. A Roman woman was the mistress of the house and was in charge of the servants. She was responsible for the storehouses and often did the bookkeeping tasks.

²⁹ Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 99, 108. In 215 B.C.E. a law was passed that no woman was permitted to own more than half an ounce of gold, wear a multicolored garment or ride a chariot within Rome or a Roman town.

³⁰ Pomeroy, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-223. Some cults included Fortuna Primigenia (patroness of mothers and childbirth), Fortuna Muliebris (womanly fortune), Fortuna Virilis (cult of Venus, changer of hearts), Ceres (agricultural prosperity), Tellus (mother earth), and Isis (the nature divinity of Egypt whose popularity spread throughout the Mediterranean world). One-third of the Isis devotees named in inscriptions that were found in Italy are female.

A Roman woman was permitted access to her husband's public life as well. The Roman matron received her husband's friends, accompanied her husband to banquets and games, and at times went with him to the senate.³¹

Women of the lower classes worked in wealthier homes as spinners, weavers, clothes makers, wet nurses, child nurses, and cooks. Some even had special training as secretaries, maids, hairdressers, masseuses, readers, entertainers, and midwives. Some freedwomen making up the Roman working class were shopkeepers, artisans, waitresses, and prostitutes.³²

Some of these improvements for women were a result of the teachings of the Roman Stoics. One Stoic philosopher, Musonius Rufus,³³ suggested that women should study religion and philosophy and have the same educational opportunities as men. He also recommended that women be permitted to work outside of the home. Marriage, according to Musonius, should be a relationship of companionship and mutual love. It should be noted that we do not have access to the norms of the entire culture. Musonius Rufus stressed equal education for women in numbers 3, 4, and 13 of his essays. There were cases in which some Roman women devoted themselves to philosophy and literature, of which the satire of Sulpicia is an example. On the other hand, we simply do not know how influential any particular writer was in his or her time.³⁴

³¹ Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 122. In response to the rise in the status of women, writers such as Juvenal responded in bitterness and mockery. Juvenal lived from 60-130 C.E. See examples of Juvenal's writings in L. Evans and W. Gifford, trans., *The Satires of Juvenal, Persius, Sulpicia, and Lucilus* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1872), pp. 46, 56, 134.

³² Pomeroy, *op. cit.*, pp. 191, 199-202.

³³ Musonius Rufus was born around 30 C.E. Stoicism was a highly moralistic religion based on one's duty, defined by the outworking of reason. Reason itself could supposedly be seen in the working out of the natural order of the universe.

³⁴ Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 136-137. See also Cora E. Lutz, *The Roman Socrates* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1947). Also in *Yale Classical Studies*, vol. 10, pp. 3-147.

Like Musonius Rufus, Plutarch had many positive suggestions for the advancement of women.³⁵ He urged wives to be jovial and humorous with their husbands and not to worry about being considered too forward. He also suggested that marriage could be commonality of mind and urged women to use every means at their disposal to grow as persons.³⁶ While many negative attitudes about women were held throughout the Greco-Roman world, it would be a mistake to infer that all males were women haters. The point is that the cultures surrounding and governing the Jews were dominated by men with definite attitudes, teachings, laws and customs that subordinated women to men. These societies considered women to be inferior to men and restricted them accordingly. These practices were observed by the Jews and probably affected their life-style as well. 🍷

[Study Questions for Chapter 2](#)

Since we are not under the domination of a foreign power, it is difficult for those who live in the United States to understand how one country influences the affairs of another. Look up: Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; Hosea 13:1-3. What practices from the surrounding countries had influenced the Jews to the extent that they became very much a part of the Jewish way of life?

³⁵ Plutarch was born around 50 C.E

³⁶ Lutz, *op. cit.*, pp. 3f. While Plutarch wrote of such ideas for women, he appeared unable to foresee the possible implications of full religious and social equality.

What would it be like today if women were not permitted to own material possessions, to have credit, to acquire an education and were considered to be the property of their fathers or husbands? What changes in your life would have to take place if this were the case today?

Even if women of those times knew no other way of life, do you suppose these rules and restrictions had a general effect on women as individuals? If you were a woman in those times, how would these things influence your thinking and growth as a person?

Much has changed for women since Greek and Roman times. Why have there been improvements for women since then?

It is certainly obvious that women in ancient times were conditioned to adjust to their culture's injustices. Today, if oppressed individuals were willing to tolerate injustices, what is one's responsibility in addressing an unjust situation?