

JESUS GAVE WOMEN FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

BY ALVIN J. SCHMIDT



What would the status of women be in the Western world today had God not entered the world in the flesh of his Son Jesus Christ? One way to answer this question is to look at the low status women still have in Islamic countries. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are not even permitted to drive automobiles and in the Qur'an a man is commanded to beat his wives physically if they are disobedient (Sura 4:34).

When one looks back in history before and at the time of Christ, women (similar to Islamic countries today) also had very little freedom and dignity. They were seen as evil, inferior, unclean, unequal and must be kept silent. Numerous statements in ancient literature attest to this biased cultural perception. I shall cite only a few examples.

Women as Evil

Reflecting Greek culture, Homer (8th century B.C.) wrote, "One cannot trust women" (*The Odyssey*). The Greek playwright Euripides (d. 406 B.C.) said, "Women were the best devisers of evil" (*Medea*). Tacitus, the first-century Roman, pictured women as dominating and cruel (*Annals*).

Women as Inferior

The Greek physician Hippocrates (d. 377 B.C.) argued, "The female is less perfect than the male." Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.) the philosopher asserted, "The female is as it were a deformed male" (*Generation of Animals*). Because woman was seen as inferior Roman culture placed her under the law of *patria potestas and manus*, which gave man total control over his daughters and wife.

During the rabbinic or oral law era (ca. 400 B.C.—200 A.D.), the Hebrew wife was obligated to wash her husband's face, hands and feet (*Kethuboth*). A Hebrew prayer declared, "Blessed [art Thou] who did not make me a woman" (*Menahot*).

Women as Unclean

The belief that women are unclean was present in virtually all cultures, for instance, among the Hindus of India, the Caribs of British Guiana, many North American Indian tribes, Eskimos and others. And it was also a common perception

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among the Greco-Romans and the Hebrews. Women's perceived uncleanness was the result of their monthly menses, which led to their being deprived of many freedoms and privileges.

Women as Unequal

Compared to men, ancient cultures gave very unequal treatment to women. Married men were commonly permitted to have extramarital-sexual relations, but not so for married women. This double standard was lamented by a Greek wife in one of Euripides' plays. She said, "If a man grows tired of the company at home, he can go out and find a cure for tediousness. We wives are forced to look to one man only" (*Medea*). The Roman law *Lex Julia* issued by Caesar Augustus (d. 14 A.D.) stated that a wife had no right to bring charges against her husband when he com-

mitted adultery. However, a wife who committed adultery was punishable under *patria potestas*, often resulting in her execution. Similarly, among the Hebrews adultery was defined in terms of woman's marital status, not a man's.

Women's unequal treatment was also evident in not having the right to speak in public. The rabbinic oral said it was "shameful" to hear a woman's voice in public (*Be-rakhoth*).

Homer had Telemachus rebuke his mother, Penelope, for speaking in public. He told her, "speech is only for men" (*The Odyssey*). The

Greek playwright Sophocles (d. 406 B.C.) wrote, "O woman, silence is an adornment to women" (*Ajax*).

In 215 B.C. the Roman men were upset when women gathered in the Roman Forum to ask that the *Oppian Law* be repealed. In response, Cato said, "Could you not have asked your husbands the same thing at home?" (Livy, *The Founding of the City*).

Jesus—Liberator of Women

One could cite many more examples of how women in the ancient world were denied freedom and dignity. This was the world that Jesus entered. And how did he respond? His interaction with women shows he rejected the ancient-prejudicial beliefs regarding women.

When a woman with an issue of blood touched his garment, he was not shocked; nor did he think he

had now become unclean. Instead, he told her, "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34, NKJV). He honored women when he taught them theology. He told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). He taught Mary (Luke 10), and he also taught theology to the Samaritan woman (John 4:9-29). As a result of this incident, his disciples "marveled that he talked with a woman." They knew Jesus had clearly violated the rabbinic oral law, which said, "Let the words of the Law be burned rather than committed to a woman..." (*Sotah*), and Hebrew men in Jesus' day were taught, "One is not as much as to greet a woman" (*Berakhoth*).

All three Synoptic Gospels mention that women followed Jesus. Such behavior ran counter to the ancient practices concerning women, but Jesus did not chide them for their behavior. And just after Jesus rose from the dead he told the women who had come to the open tomb to go and tell his disciples he had risen from the dead (Matthew 28:10). John's Gospel tells us that Peter and John also came to the open tomb. So why did Jesus not tell them to go and tell the other disciples? Why did he choose the women to tell his male disciples? The answer is not hard to see, especially when

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one remembers that he so often came to the defense of the deprived and oppressed. In choosing the women to tell the disciples, he in effect brought to mind his own words, spoken on another occasion, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30, NKJV).

Jesus also rejected the ancient idea that adultery was determined by a woman's marital status when he said that whoever looks at a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery (Matthew 5:28). The marital status of a woman was irrelevant. Sex outside of marriage violated God's will—not a man's property, his wife.

Christianity Struggles With Jesus' View of Women

As apostolic Christianity spread, it gave women freedom and dignity unknown to the ancient world. It did this not only by baptizing and admitting women to the Lord's Supper—equal to men—but it also gave them leadership roles. St. Paul notes that Apphia "our sister" was a leader in a house church in Colossae (Philemon 2). In Laodicea there was Nympha who had "a church in her house" (Colossians 4:15), and in Ephesus, Priscilla was one of Paul's fellow workers (Romans 16:3). Phoebe was a key female leader in the church in Cenchreae, where she was a deacon (not deaconess) and a leading officer (Romans 16:1-2). Paul also said Euodia and Syntyche "labored with him in the gospel...and the rest of my fellow workers" (Philippians 4:2-3).

Christ's influence had numerous other effects that benefited women. Unlike the pagan Greco-Romans, the early Christians valued baby girls as much as boys. St. Paul commanded husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). Women obtained bridal freedom by being able to accept or reject male suitors. In 374 A.D., the Emperor Valentinian I (a Christ-

ian) repealed the old *patria potestas* law that gave the husband the power of life or death over his wife and family. And in time even the veiling of women ceased.

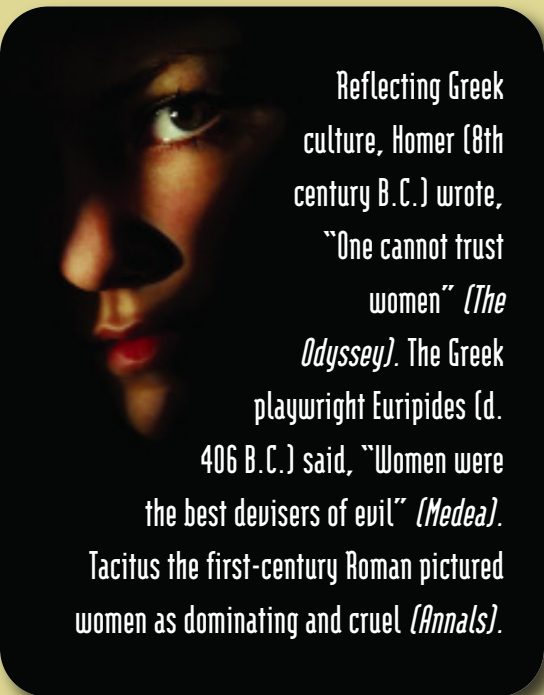
In India in 1829, the British, influenced by Christian values, outlawed *suttee* (widow burning), and in China, with the efforts of Christian missionaries, the cruel practice of binding the feet of young girls was outlawed in 1912.

With all these revolutionary changes for women, one is reminded of one scholar's poignant words, "The birth of Jesus was the turning point in the history of women." Another has noted, "Whatever else our Lord did, he immeasurably exalted womanhood." Yet neither Christ nor the early Christians ever preached a political revolution. Rather, it was Christ's example that his followers reflected in their relationships with women, establishing their dignity, freedom and rights to a level previously unknown in any culture.

To be sure, given the sinful nature of human beings, there were times that some erring Christians ignored or even violated the standards Christ and his apostles accorded women. But in time the freedom and dignity that Christ bestowed on women continued to unfold in the Western world. Thus, one can unequivocally state that women have attained the greatest amount of freedom and dignity where Christianity has had the greatest presence, and they have attained the least freedom and dignity where Christianity has had little or no presence. *Soli Deo Gloria.* □

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