

Was Jesus more egalitarian than his contemporaries?

THE CLAIM

'In his attitudes and relationships with women, **Jesus was distinctly different from his contemporaries**, and he accorded them the respect and value which God intended "at the beginning".'¹

'That women were actively involved, and to a considerable extent, is shown repeatedly in the New Testament. To us in the twenty-first century this does not seem surprising, but within the context of the ancient world **it was a new and important development** which followed on from the example of Jesus himself.'²

THE FACTS: CONTEMPORARIES

Ian and Averil compare Jesus' attitudes towards women with selected negative comments from Greek and Roman sources,^{3 4} as well as from late Jewish sources.^{5 6 7}

¹ 'All One', p. 29 (March 2009).

² Ibid., p. 30.

³ Ibid., pp. 170-172.

⁴ Ian and Averil also very fairly note 'Some very positive descriptions of marriage have been handed down from antiquity, and these usefully provide a counter to the negative comments', *ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷ Though they also note 'On occasions the evidence leads in other directions. Rabbi Hilda is reported to have said, "Daughters are dearer to me than sons"

However, they do not mention egalitarian views held by Jesus' contemporaries.

THE STOICS

Ian and Averil do not tell readers of the Stoics, whose views were traditionally egalitarian,⁸ who condemned gender discrimination,⁹ and who have even been identified as having at least inclinations towards feminist views.¹⁰ Although not consistently egalitarian¹¹ and definitely not feminist,¹² and although misogyny can still be found in some of their writings,^{13 14} they still remain a useful point of

(Baba Bathra 141a). The anonymous Palestinian Jew described as Pseudo-Philo (first century AD) presents a favourable view of women; this is thought so unusual that the suggestion has been made that this anonymous writer is in fact a woman.', pp. 15-16.

⁸ 'That Stoicism is **fundamentally egalitarian** and universalistic **is well established**,' Hill, 'The First Wave of Feminism: Were the Stoics Feminists?', *History of Political Thought*, (22.1), p. 15 (2001).

⁹ 'The Stoics **condemned discrimination** against people based on class, **gender**, ethnicity or any other contingent facts about them.', *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ 'A cursory review of Stoic literature **certainly points to a Stoic feminism**', *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹ 'We have seen that the Stoics **fall short in achieving a systematic feminism**', *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹² 'feminism-**at least as that word is generally understood**-and Stoicism are fundamentally and essentially **incompatible**,' Engel, 'Women's Role in the Home and the State: Stoic Theory Reconsidered', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, (101), p. 268 (2003).

¹³ 'despite the **feminist potential** of so much Stoic writing, subordinating and misogynistic tendencies **are clearly present**,' Hill, 'The First Wave of Feminism: Were the Stoics Feminists?', *History of Political Thought*, (22.1), p. 40 (2001).

comparison when assessing the extent to which other literature can be described as egalitarian, as they were the most egalitarian of the 1st century Roman philosophical groups.^{15 16 17} This is significant since Stoicism was widespread,¹⁸ and even had an egalitarian influence on Roman law.¹⁹ Seneca the Younger's earlier reputation as a 'feminist' has not withstood academic scrutiny,²⁰ but he is still recognized as having

¹⁴ '**the late Stoics are not as wholly sympathetic to women as some scholars have asserted**, and it will become clear that they never advocated the political empowerment of women. Indeed, when given the opportunity to do so, **they explicitly rejected the suggestion**,' Engel, 'Women's Role in the Home and the State: Stoic Theory Reconsidered', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, (101), p. 273 (2003).

¹⁵ 'Perhaps they are better understood as failed proto-liberal feminists', Hill, 'The First Wave of Feminism: Were the Stoics Feminists?', *History of Political Thought*, (22.1), p. 40 (2001).

¹⁶ 'when compared with the attitudes toward women that prevailed in the days in which these arguments were put forward, **the arguments are, occasionally, downright astounding**,' Engel, 'Women's Role in the Home and the State: Stoic Theory Reconsidered', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, (101), p. 273 (2003).

¹⁷ 'Stoicism is the only ancient philosophy that provides a **sufficiently egalitarian concept of human beings** to suit a liberal ideology,' Long, 'Stoic Communitarianism And Normative Citizenship', *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation*, p. 242 (2007).

¹⁸ Not merely restricted to the elite classes.

¹⁹ 'The overall development of **Roman equity** law was influenced by the Stoic natural law principle of **the equality of the sexes**,' Hill, 'The First Wave of Feminism: Were the Stoics Feminists?', *History of Political Thought*, (22.1), p. 20 (2001).

²⁰ 'Seneca's feminist tendencies, in particular, seem to

expressed significant egalitarian views.^{21 22} Musonius Rufus is still regarded highly for his egalitarian attitude.^{23 24} Unlike Paul, Musonius Rufus did not make any call for women to be subject,²⁵ and opposed explicitly a range of misogynist prejudices.²⁶ He also challenged the view of any form of gendered division of tasks,²⁷ with a statement which has no Biblical parallel.²⁸

me to be vastly overrated', *ibid.*, p.23.

²¹ 'Seneca, well in advance of his time, is willing to grant women **equal opportunity at the banquet table, equal place at the feast of human endeavor**. She is, he would argue, **everyone's equal in capacity, and, if she exercise virtue, everyone's superior.**', Motto, 'Seneca on Women's Liberation', *The Classical World* (65.5), (1972).

²² "You know that a man does wrong **in requiring chastity of his wife while he himself is intriguing with the wives of other men.**", Hill, 'The First Wave of Feminism: Were the Stoics Feminists?', *History of Political Thought*, (22.1), p. 29 (2001); note that this statement is actually cited by Ian and Averil, 'All One', p. 171 (March 2009).

²³ 'Musonius is probably the most enlightened Stoic in his attitude to women, sex and marriage.', *ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁴ 'Musonius tells us that **husbands who commit adultery are just as culpable as wives**, and it is extremely objectionable for them to have sexual relations with their slave-girls.', *ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁵ 'There is no demand on his part for **subordination of the woman**', *ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ 'It was a common belief that an educated woman would become 'unpalatable', arrogant and neglectful of her household duties.¹²⁶ But the Stoics were bound to question social convention and, recognizing this duty, **C. Musonius Rufus challenged Roman prejudices about women head on.**', *ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ 'Musonius now **questions the reasonableness of a gender-based division of labour in the first place**, noting that, apart from the relatively insignificant

JEWISH SOCIETY

Women in 1st century Jewish society enjoyed active religious participation,^{29 30} and some even held leadership positions.^{31 32 33}

differences in physical strength and personal bent, **no other rationale stands up to close scrutiny as a relevant basis for discrimination**', *ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ '[A]ll human tasks', he says, 'are a common obligation and are common for men and women, **and none is necessarily appointed for either one exclusively.**', *ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁹ Hove, 'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute', p. 91 (1999).

³⁰ 'Jewish women in Rome **were active participants in the religious life of their communities, both at home and in the public religious life of the synagogue.**', Kraemer, 'Jewish Women in Rome and Egypt', in Juschka, 'Feminism in the study of religion: a reader', p. 227 (2001).

³¹ '**Other women more clearly singled out for their roles as leaders in the synagogues**, include Sara Oura, called *presbutis*, or elder... **Gaudentia is called hierisa, the feminine equivalent of the Greek word for priest.**', *ibid.*, p. 227.

³² 'As Brooten has argued, there is no reason to assume that these titles do not reflect **a leadership role for the women so designated**. ...The women called *πρεσβύτερα* **appear to have been members of a synagogue council of elders.**'²⁷, Crawford, 'Mothers, Sisters, and Elders: Titles for Women in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Communities', *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity: Papers from an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001*, p.184 (2003).

³³ 'Bernadette J. Brooten argues that **'the inscriptional evidence for Jewish women leaders** means that one **cannot declare it to be a departure from Judaism** that early Christian women held leadership positions.', Hove, 'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute', p. 92 (1999).

THE ESSENES & THERAPEUTAE

Both of them 1st century Jewish communities, the Essenes are believed by many scholars to have been egalitarian,^{34 35} and the Therapeutae are known for their egalitarian attitudes towards the division of labor.^{36 37}

WHO WAS MORE EGALITARIAN?

The non-Christian texts have no 'difficult passages'. Unlike Musonius Rufus and the Therapeutae, neither Paul nor Jesus opposed a gendered division of tasks. Unlike Jewish inscriptions, we find no sisters as elders or titled ecclesial leaders in the New Testament.

Jonathan Burke (2010)

³⁴ 'the Essenes and the Therapeutai show evidence of influence by Hellenistic utopian thinking (**including the egalitarian aspects of such thought**)', 'egalitarian features of actual ancient Jewish utopian movements (Essenes or Therapeutai)'. Beavis, 'Christian Origins, Egalitarianism, and Utopia', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (23.2), pp. 46, 48 (2007).

³⁵ Evans, 'Ancient texts for New Testament studies: a guide to the background literature', p. 86 (2005).

³⁶ 'No barriers can be placed around the women Therapeutae **that would exclude them from any functions in the community.**', Taylor, 'The Women "Priests" of Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa*; Reconstructing the Therapeutae', in 'On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza', p.118 (2003).

³⁷ 'It is striking that the division of labor between elders and juniors is **emphatically not along gender lines**', 'The membership of this community was **gender-inclusive, since women participated as both seniors and (implicitly) juniors**', Taylor & Davis, 'The So-Called Therapeutae of "De Vita Contemplativa": Identity and Character', *The Harvard Theological Review* (91.1), pp. 23, 24 (1998).