

Were 1st century Greek and Roman attitudes to women a hindrance to sisters?

THE CAUTION

'It is difficult to give an adequate analysis of societies which lasted for centuries and covered the area from Syria to Britain. Different customs existed, according to place and date.'¹

Despite this caution, Ian and Averil still provide a long list of quotes² (overwhelmingly negative³), which they consider relevant to identifying 1st century Greek and Roman attitudes affecting sisters.⁴ However, a number of them are anachronistic⁵, others say the same as Scripture⁶, some are positive towards women⁷, and some are

unrepresentative.⁸ Although Greek and Roman attitudes to women were typically far short of Christlike, there is no evidence such attitudes ever affected the role of 1st century sisters, contrary to Ian and Averil's claim.

THE FACTS: ANACHRONISTIC

Hesiod (800 BC),⁹ Semonides (7th century BC),¹⁰ Meno (attributed by Plato, 384 BC),¹¹ Pericles (about 440 BC),¹² and Demosthenes (4th century BC),¹³ are all quoted. They have little relevance to the general attitudes of 1st century Jews in Roman occupied Judea.¹⁴

NOT NECESSARILY NEGATIVE

'Aristotle (384-322 BC) considered it part of the natural order that **masters should rule over slaves, husbands over wives, fathers over children**; and his reasoning has been followed for much of the last 2,000 years.'¹⁵

Paul likewise exhorts servants to be subject to their masters,¹⁶ wives to be subject to their

husbands,¹⁷ and children to be subject to their parents,¹⁸ with model fathers expected to manage their children well.¹⁹

'Cato, for example, in denying women at Rome any right to have a say in public discussion or law making, said in 195 BC, "**Could not each have made the same request to her husband at home?**"'²⁰

Paul gives the same instruction as Cato, though in a different context.²¹

POSITIVE

Ian and Averil provide two 1st century quotes²² which are very positive in their attitudes towards women,²³ However, they do not mention the egalitarian views of the

Peter 2:18 'Slaves, **be subject to your masters** with all reverence'.

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:22, 24 '**Wives, submit to your husbands** as to the Lord', 'But as the church submits to Christ, **so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything**', 1 Peter 3:1 'In the same way, **wives, be subject to your own husbands**'.

¹⁸ Ephesians 6:1 'Children, **obey your parents in the Lord** for this is right.', Colossians 3:21 'Children, **obey your parents in everything**'.

¹⁹ 1 Timothy 3:4, 12 '**keep his children in control** without losing his dignity', '**good managers** of their children'.

²⁰ 'All One', p. 68 (March 2009).

²¹ 1 Corinthians 14:35 '**If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home**, because it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church'.

²² Though not necessarily representative, as they are from the Roman elite.

²³ 'Seneca, Stoic philosopher, tutor of Nero and brother of Gallio (Acts 18:12), **advocated chastity in marriage for both husband and wife**:', *ibid.*, p. 171.

¹ 'All One', p. 170 (March 2009).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 170-172.

³ It should be noted that Ian and Averil 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. There are few more attractive pictures of happily married life than that painted in the fictional account in the Odyssey, composed about 800 BC.', *ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴ '**the conventions of society** would still restrict them', 'All One', p. 25 (March 2009).

⁵ Relevant to earlier eras, but not demonstrably relevant to the 1st century.

⁶ Demonstrating they are not in themselves negative statements about women, contrary to Ian and Averil.

⁷ Therefore not supportive of the case Ian and Averil are attempting to make.

⁸ That is, they cannot be viewed as necessarily representative of general Greek and Roman attitudes towards women during the 1st century.

⁹ 'All One', p. 170 (March 2009).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁴ The earliest of these dates to at least 350 years before Christ, and all of them are quotes from members of the Greek elite, in Greece.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁶ Ephesians 6:5 'Slaves, **obey your human masters** with fear and trembling', Colossians 3:22 'Slaves, **obey your earthly masters** in every respect', Titus 2:9 'Slaves are to be **subject to their own masters** in everything', 1

1st century Stoics²⁴ whose views were widespread in Roman society, influential on Roman law,²⁵ and not merely restricted to the elite classes.

UNREPRESENTATIVE

Ian and Averil acknowledge that views held among the upper classes did not necessarily apply to the majority of the population,²⁶ but still quote Pliny the Younger²⁷ (who belonged to the Roman elite²⁸), Philo²⁹ (an elite Jewish

philosopher living in Greek-influenced Alexandria in Egypt), and Plutarch³⁰ (an elite Greek historian). Historical evidence³¹ proves these views are unrepresentative of the experience of 1st century Jewish women,³² as does Scripture.³³ To support one claim,³⁴ quotes are provided from the 2nd century AD Roman grammarian Gellius,³⁵ and the 1st century BC Roman orator Cicero.³⁶

³⁰ 'Not only the arm, but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard, as at being stripped.... ... she should speak to, or through, her husband. (Plutarch, Advice to Bride and Groom 31-32)', *ibid.*, p. 86.

³¹ '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).

³² Bernadette J. Broton 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).

³³ Lydia and the other Jewish women praying publicly and involved in public discussions with Paul (Acts 16:13-14), were clearly unaffected by such attitudes.

³⁴ 'Husbands felt entitled to have sex in these three areas: mistresses, concubines and wives', *ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁵ If you were to take your wife in the act of adultery, you could freely kill her without a trial; whereas if you were to commit adultery ... she would not dare to lift a finger against you, nor would it be right. (Gellius 10.23)', *ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁶ 'Anyone who thought young men ought to be forbidden to visit prostitutes would certainly be the virtuous of the virtuous, that I cannot deny. But he would be out of step not only with this easy-going age

These attitudes of the elite are contradicted directly by the actual marriage contracts of ordinary people (requiring fidelity and good treatment from the husband^{37 38}), and by the views of other elite 1st century Romans such as Musonius Rufus^{39 40} and Seneca the Younger.⁴¹

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

but also our ancestors, who customarily made youth that concession.', *ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁷ '**It shall not be lawful for Philiscus to bring in another wife besides Apollonia**, nor keep a concubine or boy, **nor to have children by another woman while Apollonia lives**, nor to inhabit another house over which Apollonia is not mistress, **nor to eject or insult or ill-treat her, nor to alienate any of their property to the detriment of Apollonia**', marriage contract, 92 BC, Hunt & Edgar, 'Select Papyri I: Non-Literary Papyri, Private Affairs', p.7 (1956).

³⁸ 'Apollonius son of Ptolemaeus shall furnish to Thermion as his wedded wife all necessities and clothing in proportion to his means and **shall not ill-treat her nor cast her out nor insult her nor bring in another wife**, or he shall straightway forfeit the dowry increased by half', marriage contract, 13 BC, Hunt & Edgar, 'Select Papyri I: Non-Literary Papyri, Private Affairs', p.11 (1956).

³⁹ '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.', Hill, 'The First Wave of Feminism: Were the Stoics Feminists?', *History of Political Thought*, (22.1), p. 28 (2001).

⁴⁰ 'Musonius is probably the most enlightened Stoic in his attitude to women, sex and marriage.', *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴¹ "You know that a man does wrong **in requiring chastity of his wife while he himself is intriguing with the wives of other men.**", *ibid.*, p. 29; note that this statement is actually cited by Ian and Averil, 'All One', p. 171 (March 2009).

²⁴ '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), though Hill cautions 'despite the feminist potential of so much Stoic writing, subordinating and misogynistic tendencies are clearly present.', and 'Perhaps they are better understood as failed proto-liberal feminists', *ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁵ 'The overall development of **Roman equity** law was influenced by the Stoic natural law principle **of the equality of the sexes**', *ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁶ 'Public praise and activity was considered the role of men, activity in the home that of women, who were expected to be out of sight and out of mind. **This would apply, primarily, to the upper classes; the lower classes could not remain at home**: both men and women had to struggle to keep themselves fed and clothed, while slaves, male and female, had to do as their master or mistresses bade.', *ibid.*, p. 172.

²⁷ 'If I am giving a reading [of my poetry] she sits behind a curtain nearby and greedily drinks in every word of appreciation. (Pliny, Letters, IV, 19)', *ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁸ As Ian and Averil acknowledge, 'Pliny was a prominent Roman lawyer, landowner and government official.', *ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁹ 'It is suitable for women to stay indoors and to live in retirement, limited by the middle door (to the men's apartments) for young girls, and the outer door for married women. (Philo, De Spec. Leg. III, 169), *ibid.*, p. 172.