

# Was the role of sisters in 1<sup>st</sup> century ecclesias revolutionary or restricted?

## THE CLAIM

'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.'<sup>1</sup>

'In view of the general male leadership which existed in society in the first century, and in view of the problems in Crete which Paul was aiming to tackle, **it is not surprising if the elders there were all male**, for believers had to conduct themselves in a manner which was, as far as possible, **beyond reproach in the opinion of pagan society**.'<sup>2</sup>

## THE FACTS

Stoicism was widespread,<sup>3</sup> and even had an egalitarian influence on Roman law.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'All One', p. 30 (March 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Not merely restricted to the elite classes.

<sup>4</sup> '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).

The Stoics were the most egalitarian of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman philosophical groups.<sup>5 6 7 8 9</sup> Musonius Rufus is one 1<sup>st</sup> century example.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Paul, Musonius Rufus did not make any call for women to be subject,<sup>12</sup> opposed explicitly a range of misogynist prejudices,<sup>13</sup> and challenged the view of any form of

<sup>5</sup> '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).

<sup>6</sup> '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).

<sup>7</sup> '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).

<sup>8</sup> '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).

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

<sup>10</sup> 'Musonius is probably the most enlightened Stoic in his attitude to women, sex and marriage.', *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> '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.

<sup>12</sup> 'There is no demand on his part for **subordination of the woman**', *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> 'C. Musonius Rufus **challenged Roman prejudices about women head on**.' *ibid.*, p. 32.

gendered division of tasks,<sup>14</sup> with a statement which has no Biblical parallel.<sup>15</sup> Egalitarian views were also present in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish society; women enjoyed active religious participation,<sup>16 17</sup> and some even held leadership positions.<sup>18 19 20</sup> Among 1<sup>st</sup> century

<sup>14</sup> 'Musonius now **questions the reasonableness of a gender-based division of labour in the first place**, noting that, apart from the relatively insignificant differences in physical strength and personal bent, **no other rationale stands up to close scrutiny as a relevant basis for discrimination**', *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> '[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.

<sup>16</sup> Hove, 'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute', p. 91 (1999).

<sup>17</sup> '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).

<sup>18</sup> '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.

<sup>19</sup> 'The women called *πρεσβύτερα* **appear to have been members of a synagogue council of elders**.' 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).

<sup>20</sup> '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,

Jewish religious communities, the Essenes,<sup>21</sup>  
<sup>22</sup> and the Therapeutae<sup>23 24</sup> are considered  
groups with egalitarian values and practices.

## VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

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Contrary to the claims made by Ian and Averil,  
1<sup>st</sup> century ecclesial organization and roles  
were neither revolutionary nor restricted by  
social attitudes. Ecclesias developed and  
operated in the same way as the  
contemporary Roman 'voluntary  
associations'.<sup>25 26 27 28</sup> Even the very language

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'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender  
Dispute', p. 92 (1999).

<sup>21</sup> 'the Essenes and the Therapeutai show evidence of  
influence by Hellenistic utopian thinking (**including the  
egalitarian aspects of such thought**)', *Journal of  
Feminist Studies in Religion* (23.2), p. 46 (2007).

<sup>22</sup> Evans, 'Ancient texts for New Testament studies: a  
guide to the background literature', p. 86 (2005).

<sup>23</sup> '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).

<sup>24</sup> 'the division of labor between elders and juniors is  
**emphatically not along gender lines**', '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).

<sup>25</sup> Sometimes called 'private associations', known in  
Latin as *sodalitates*, or *collegia*.

<sup>26</sup> **'It is in this larger cultural context** that the early  
Christian associations emerge. The cultural readiness  
and modeling of individuals **gathering voluntarily to  
explore new identities and a sense of belonging within**

of ecclesial fellowship is borrowed from these  
groups,<sup>29</sup> within which social norms could be  
transgressed without penalty<sup>30</sup> (though  
acknowledging the norms<sup>31</sup>). Slave and free

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**a religious frame allowed the early Christian groups to  
form.** The larger context of voluntary associations  
**provided a cultural pattern in which nascent early  
Christian community could come into being.**', Nerney,  
Nerrny, & Taussig, 'Re-imagining life together in America:  
a new gospel of community', p. 13 (2002).

<sup>27</sup> 'In other words the notion of a diverse group coming  
together for the sake of a special sense and spirit of  
belonging **was already going on in many different ways.**  
That early Christians did this **fits the larger social  
momentum of the day.**', p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> **"Early Christian communities need to be seen then  
as a kind of voluntary association.** Their quick and  
strong development rides on the momentum of the  
larger Hellenistic momentum of the associations. **Their  
interest in social experimentation is in keeping with  
the way the associations developed.**', p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> 'When the Greek literature of this time refers to a  
**wide variety of voluntary associations**, the terms often  
used are, in fact, *koinoinia*, or *koinē*, meaning  
**"community," "that which is held in common,"  
"friendship," or "fellowship"**.' *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> 'Transgressive commensality, according to Donahue,  
is characterized by temporal, porous group boundaries  
in which there is "a relationship of exchange **between  
parties of a different social or economic status**"  
(2005:106).' Ascough, *Forms of Commensality in Greco-  
Roman Associations: draft paper for the SBL Greco-  
Roman Meals Consultation*, p. 7 (2008).

<sup>31</sup> 'According to Grignon (2001:30) transgressive  
commensality "plays upon oppositions between social  
groups and the borders which separate them." Such  
borders, while recognized, are **"temporarily and  
symbolically transgressed"** and thus establish, in the  
context of a meal, a relation of exchange. Nevertheless,  
"it is by transgressing them that it contributes to  
**recognizing and maintaining**" social distinctions  
(2001:31).' *ibid.*, p. 19.

mingled together,<sup>32</sup> and slaves could even be  
leaders.<sup>33</sup> Men and women fraternized  
without the restraints of social convention,<sup>34</sup>  
<sup>35</sup> and ethnic and family loyalties were set  
aside.<sup>36</sup> The ecclesias therefore could have  
appointed women as leaders and elders or  
provided them with authoritative speaking  
roles without fear of social reprisal. The  
culture of the day empowered them, rather  
than restricting them.<sup>37</sup>

## WHERE IS THE CONTROVERSY?

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Where is the evidence that the ecclesial roles  
of 1<sup>st</sup> century sisters were restricted or  
opposed by Jewish, Greek, or Roman  
attitudes? Why is no such controversy  
mentioned in the entire New Testament?

Jonathan Burke (2010)

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<sup>32</sup> 'The mix of slaves and free **in this protected  
environment was frequent.**' Nerney, Nerrny, & Taussig,  
'Re-imagining life together in America: a new gospel of  
community', p. 12 (2002).

<sup>33</sup> 'Slaves **could be leaders** in such groups.' *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> 'Similarly men and women associated in these  
settings **far more than in public.**' *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> 'Both the joy and stress around this new mix of  
people and traditions evident in the Hellenistic  
literature indicates that **the voluntary associations  
were places of social experimentation.**' *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> 'the general family and ethnic loyalties of former  
times were breached in the associations' acceptance of  
many different individuals.' *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> 'Whereas in the larger outside world, both Roman  
control and residual customs mitigated against mixing  
men and women, slave and free, foreign and religious  
practice; **in the voluntary associations** there was a lively  
atmosphere in which these mixes could be **tried out and  
experienced without threat of larger social catastrophe  
or consequences**,' *ibid.*, p. 12.