

Section 11 – Turning the Tide

The Legacy

The first centuries of Christianity offered women new opportunities, and many became leaders within the young religion. The Empress Flavia Iulia Helena Augusta, beatified as Saint Helen, (c. 250 to 330 CE) was one such. Helen was the consort of the emperor Constantius Chlorus and more importantly the mother of Constantine the Great. There is little doubt that her powerful religious influence was instrumental in Constantine's decision to adopt Christianity as the official Roman religion.¹

Awareness of the influence of such women has been suppressed for centuries by patriarchal clerics as well as academics. However, today, women are researching neglected and ignored texts. This has led to a new, more representative interpretation. Karen L. King notes that, according to scripture, women such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna accompanied Jesus during his ministry and supported him and the other apostles out of their private means.^{2, 3}

Mary Magdalene was a prominent disciple and a leader of one wing of the new faith. The Gospels tell us that she was a visionary leader of the early movement.⁴ At the time of his resurrection, Jesus gave her special teaching and instructed her to be an apostle to the apostles and tell them the good news. Nonetheless, once the patriarchy took over, her role was diminished and rewritten as that of a prostitute.⁵

The Gospels also tell us that Jesus met and taught women, and shared meals with them, even though this would have been forbidden within the strictly patriarchal Judaism of the era. The inclusion of these stories, whether or not the actual events occurred, shows that women were significant in early Christianity. Within the other parts of the New Testament scripture, women held leadership positions and had significant influence on the growth of the movement.

King elaborates:

¹ Helena made a pilgrimage to Palestine during which she claimed to have found the remains of the cross on which Jesus was executed. She is still venerated in the Catholic, Orthodox and Coptic traditions.

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³ Luke 8:1-3

⁴ Mark 16:1-9; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-10; John 20:1, 11-18; (Canonical) Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Philip (non-Canonical)

⁵ The Romans saw women in two categories. They could be the chaste, obedient and humble property of men, or they could be independent, which was considered equal to being without honour, lascivious and threatening, a prostitute.

‘Paul tells of women who were the leaders of such house churches (Apphia in *Philemon 2*; Prisca in *I Corinthians 16:19*). This practice is confirmed by other texts that also mention women who headed churches in their homes, such as Lydia of Thyatira (*Acts 16:15*) and Nympha of Laodicea (*Colossians 4:15*). Women held offices and played significant roles in group worship. Paul, for example, greets a deacon named Phoebe (*Romans 16:1*) and assumes that women are praying and prophesying during worship (*I Corinthians 11*). As prophets, women’s roles would have included not only ecstatic public speech, but preaching, teaching, leading prayer, and perhaps even performing the Eucharist meal.’⁶

However, once the prospect that women might regain power and influence became realistic, the patriarchy took action, as it had done in preceding cultures, to suppress them and put men in absolute control of the new religion. Women again slid into invisibility; they were admonished to ‘keep silent in church’ and were not even allowed to enter the holiest areas lest they accidentally befoul them with their menses. They were not allowed to worship during their periods or for some time after giving birth.

In North America and Western Europe, especially after the Reformation, women’s lot was hardly better than it had been in Assyria or Judah. In Catholic cultures, the presence of Mary at the centre of the cult had signalled some relief for women, but this was fought against by Catholic clerics as early as Tertullian, who latched onto the Hebrew condemnation of women, saying:

‘Each of you women is Eve...You are the Gate of Hell, you are the temptress of the forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law.’⁷

The reliance of the Protestant Reformers on the Old Testament, the Hebrew writings, only reinforced this. To distance themselves from Catholicism they suppressed Mary, especially in her roles as Queen of Heaven and Mother of God, and posited the Tertullian view of women as the descendants of Eve and the inheritors of her sin. For the next two thousand years, women remained second-class citizens. Women had few rights or privileges, and their ‘honour’ was found only in the service of the men who had property rights over them. Women who were not married were castigated.

By the time of the Plague, the start of the Inquisition and the Reformation, this level of abuse grew to such an extent that women who did not have significant defenders could be named as witches and burned at the stake. First they were tortured to extract a ‘confession’, had to pay the

⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/women.html>

⁷ Tertullian (c. 160-225 CE) was one of the most important and prolific early Christian writers, though he was never canonised by the Catholic Church. This was probably because he was a member of the Montanists, a sect within Christianity regarded by the Church as heretical. Nevertheless, many of his teachings were adopted into Catholicism after his death. Amongst other things, Montanists required unmarried women to wear the veil.

costs of their imprisonment and torture, and after they were killed whatever they owned became the property of the church and state. Men who were considered 'heretics' were similarly abused, but the victims were overwhelmingly women, particularly widows with property.⁸ After the end of the witch burnings, the terror subsided, but women's rights did not improve.

Religious laws and social taboos continued to restrict women's freedom. While they no longer had to wear head coverings or remain indoors, they did have to wear cumbersome clothing that restricted movement.⁹ Laws regarding inheritance, property ownership, employment and outcomes of divorce conspired to keep women from seeking independence. Marital abuses, including domestic rape and violence were not considered crimes and men had the legal right to 'discipline' their wives. Poverty ensured there were always women available to provide sexual services for a price. As in Roman times, using the services of such women did not dishonour the men and did not constitute adultery, although the women could be arrested for indecency.

⁸ Totalitarian regimes that depend on terror for their power do not need to exterminate large proportions of populations to maintain control. As examples in South America and elsewhere in the twentieth century demonstrate, the murders of a few thousands or tens of thousands are sufficient to keep millions subservient.

⁹ Deuteronomy 22:5: The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God.