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Review Article

ROMAN WIVES, ROMAN WIDOWS: THE APPEARANCE OF NEW WOMEN AND THE PAULINE COMMUNITIES

Bruce W. Winter

Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI., 2003. 244 pp £17.99

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Bruce Winter is the director of the Institute of Early Christianity in the Graeco-Roman World, based at Tyndale House, Cambridge. In his latest book, he uses literary and archaeological evidence to describe the emergence, in the first century AD, of a 'new' kind of woman appearing across the Roman empire. This sort of woman was distinguished by her provocative clothes and loose lifestyle. She was very different from the chaste and modest traditional Roman wife. Poets and other writers in the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire, Augustus in his marriage legislation, the Stoic and Neo-Pythagorean philosophical schools, and the letters to the Pauline communities all discuss the behaviour and appearance of the 'new woman' who was contrasted with the modest wife and widow.

Part One of the book presents evidence for the new customs that influenced the social activities of the 'new wife' or 'new widow' of the late Republic or early Empire. She typically pursued her own pleasure, social life, and extra-marital sexual liaisons at the expense of her own family and household. Such a shift from the 'traditional' behaviour of wives was linked with measures that gave women greater financial independence from their husbands. For example, their property was no longer automatically transferred to their husbands on marriage. Moreover, they could end the marriage and get back some or all of their dowry.

In reaction against this there arose a movement to promote 'Roman' values. These included the 'modesty' of matrons, which was to be expressed in dress and behaviour. In classical antiquity, 'you were what you wore'. Augustus skilfully packaged an 'image' of the chaste Roman matron by means of statues and coins. These functioned as 'advertising bill-boards' to promote modest hair styles and fashions, modelled in many cases by the Emperor's own wife.

Augustus also instituted a legislative programme (17BC/ 9AD), seeking to curb

the activities of ‘new women.’ It prescribed moral conduct. There were financial penalties for remaining single. There were rewards for having children. It laid down dress codes for wives and prostitutes. Marriage between certain social classes was forbidden. Husbands were penalised if they wilfully ignored their wives sexual liaisons.

Winter documents the response of the philosophers to the ‘new woman.’ For example, Seneca the Younger (4BC to AD65) wrote to his mother, commending her for her modesty and commitment to family. She rejected immorality, turned away from excessive gold and pearls, was not ashamed of bearing children (didn’t use contraceptives or abortion), and dressed modestly. Many philosophers expounded the traditional virtues of prudence, self-control, courage and righteousness in such a way as to condemn the ‘new woman’ and commend the virtuous wife.

Part 2 turns to the biblical texts which address women in the Pauline communities. The emergence of the ‘new woman’ helps us understand the setting of the text on veils in 1 Corinthians. Removal of the marriage veil sent a very strong message: indicating that a wife was adopting the social mores of the ‘new woman’ (i.e. promiscuity). The veil was the most obvious feature of the bride’s dress in Roman culture. Typical statues representing a modest Roman wife showed her with a long dress, with a large mantle drawn around her, covering the back of her head and forming a marriage veil. The large mantle drawn up over her head was the sign of her virtue and chastity. By contrast, *hetairai* (prostitutes) dressed ostentatiously, with expensive clothes, lots of gold ornaments, and transparent veils rather than the large mantle drawn up over the back of the head.

If a married woman removed her veil (the heavy mantle drawn up over the back of her head), she excluded herself from the rank of ‘matron’. Dress codes specified the clothes to be worn by respectable matrons and those to be worn by prostitutes (a plain toga). Officials were appointed to monitor women’s clothing, especially when they were engaged in religious processions.

When Christian women prayed with their heads uncovered, they were defying the imperial edict. Winter suggests that the phrase ‘because of the angels’, (1 Cor. 11:10) could be translated ‘because of the messengers’. This word was

used of those taking information away to others. Gatherings of Christians took place in the front part of homes that were semi-open to the public. Unbelievers could gain ready entry, so that reports of improperly covered women could leak out and be reported back to the officials who had responsibility for monitoring women's clothing. Removal of the marriage veil was commonly accepted as 'improper' for a respectable wife. Being 'contentious' (1 Cor. 11:16) about this and other matters of protocol was a commonly noticed attribute of the 'new woman'.

Turning to the dress code in 1 Timothy 2:9-15, the contrast there between the appearance of the virtuous wife and the ungodly woman is paralleled by the contrast drawn in contemporary literature between the chaste wife and the 'new woman'. Respectable' apparel took the form of a stola, a large, sleeveless overgarment with narrow shoulders, with woven strips to signify the matron's status. It was the symbol of female modesty, and woman's protection from unwanted attention. Also, a respectable wife would always wear the marriage veil in public; the heavy cloth drawn up over the back of her head. Hetairai, or prostitutes, by contrast wore immodest dresses, extravagant hairstyles (uncovered, so that they could be properly admired; or with transparent veils), and lavish jewellery of gold and pearls. For example, a tomb inscription for an admired wife reads: 'She did not admire fine clothes, nor gold while she lived.' (p. 100).

The dress code in 1 Timothy exactly parallels the dress code of the respectable Roman wife. Gold, pearls, expensive attire: all were commonly used expressions of the extravagance and immodesty of the 'new woman'. The statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 ('yet she will be saved through childbearing - if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control') makes a lot of sense in the context of the 'new woman' who often endangered her life with contraceptives or abortions. The 'new woman' didn't want to spoil her figure with pregnancy, and she also despised the thought of nursing her own child. Instead, she would often employ a wet-nurse.

Winter discusses the exhortation that women 'learn quietly with all submissiveness', also placing that within the context of the education provided for virtuous and respectable girls within the home. The requirement that a woman not 'dominate' or 'exercise authority' is also placed within the context

of the domineering ‘new women’. They were criticised by contemporary sources for arrogantly dominating conversation at dinner parties, and correcting their husbands for grammatical and other errors. Such parties took place in homes, which was also the setting for the meetings of the early church. Perhaps the concern was that at the Lord’s supper or other worship, ‘liberated’ women might behave in a similar arrogant and unsubmitive way. Winter argues that 1 Timothy 2:9-15 is dealing with ‘wives’ not ‘women’ in general. But his case is based so narrowly on the parallels between dress codes for wives in first century culture and the biblical text, that the strong arguments from the context of the passage that point to a wider application (i.e. to women generally) are not sufficiently considered.

The instructions for young widows in 1 Timothy are also placed firmly within the first century context. There is an interesting section on the financial situation for widows. Normally a woman came to the marriage with a dowry. The husband was obliged to maintain his wife financially. If he died, the widow had some financial security because she would take shelter, with her dowry, in the home of her father, or her eldest son, as appropriate. A male relative would thus become ‘lord of the dowry’ and take responsibility for her financial support. If Christians failed in this duty, they were ‘worse than unbelievers’ (1 Tim. 5:8). The family was to take responsibility for widows (1 Tim. 5:4). Only in cases where a widow had no other means of support, was the church community to look after her, and then only if certain criteria were met.

Within the social context, a virtuous widow would work hard (spinning and weaving, for example) whereas a wanton widow would be idle, and perhaps immoral as well. Contemporary writers denounced widows who spent their time in lascivious gossip and silly meddling with the affairs of others. The Augustan law code gave incentives to widows to remarry and have children. Widows could mourn their dead husband for ten months, but then had to remarry. Evidently, in the church, some young widows had been ‘infected’ with the views of the ‘new woman’. They looked down on marriage, childbearing, and home management. This provided opponents of Christianity with a chance to discredit it. Thus the command for young widows to remarry, have children and manage their households.

The discussion of Cretan culture in the first century is fascinating. It highlights

the place of heavy drinking, which explains the exhortations against drunkenness. Virtuous women were praised for loving their husbands and children, and managing their homes well; in contrast with the 'new women' who ran off with younger men and neglected domestic responsibilities. Young Christian Cretan wives were evidently being influenced by the ideas current among the 'new women' of Crete. They were to be recalled to their proper responsibilities by the older women of the church, who were to provide a godly role model for them in terms of sobriety and self-control. These passages also contain strong injunctions for men to renounce promiscuity. The church was not to have a 'double standard' whereby men were allowed greater sexual freedom than women.

Part Three focuses on the possible contribution made by two named women (Phoebe and Junia) to the spread of early Christianity. Winter argues that such women were able to make a positive contribution, because legal and social changes had facilitated developments that facilitated such roles. He gives evidence that some women of status influenced commercial and civic affairs, especially within urban settings. This facilitated the contribution of Christian women to Gospel outreach. For example, some women were able to command independent wealth.

This book is based on careful study of literary and archaeological sources. It offers a convincing reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* of the Pauline texts. Because Winter's stated purpose is the location of New Testament texts on women in their first century setting, he does not go on to labour the obvious parallels between the first century 'new women' and the 'liberated' women of today. Nor does he set out to draw a firm conclusion vis-a-vis the complementarian versus egalitarian debate.

The main drawback of this work is that, in focussing on the first century context, it might be assumed that Paul's teaching regarding women only had relevance within his own culture. However the reference back to creation in 1 Timothy 2:13-14 points to a lasting principle. That proviso apart, the value of this book is that it makes available significant research which illuminates our understanding of first-century women, and our appreciation of the context of the New Testament. It is warmly recommended.

SHARON JAMES